

History: The Cold War
Lesson 27 of 30

Worksheet:

How did Gorbachev's 'new thinking' reduce tensions between the superpowers?



Who was **Mikhail Gorbachev** and what was his 'new thinking'?

Mikhail Gorbachev came to **power in the USSR in 1985**. He was much younger than his predecessors and was also **prepared to adopt much more radical policies** to try and improve superpower relations. He knew that, if he did not improve this relationship and instead carried on the ruthless competition which had been dominating relations between the USA and the USSR since 1981, **the USSR would crumble**. **Gorbachev** was also realistic. **He recognised that the Soviet economy was incredibly inefficient**, particularly in comparison to the US economy. While it was not uncommon for a Moscow housewife to queue for five hours to simply buy bread, in the USA in the 1980s, Americans enjoyed an excellent standard of living. The comparable **shortage and frustrations of life in the Eastern bloc** caused many people living there to **begin to question Communism** and to lose faith in their leaders.



Consequently, **Gorbachev** understood that **drastic change needed to be introduced** – and fast. As a firm believer in Communism, **Gorbachev's** aim was **not to abandon Communism but to reform it**. He hoped that by **reforming the Communist Party in the USSR** and **modernising Soviet-style socialism**, he would be able to **improve the quality of life for people living in the USSR** and, in turn, would also **strengthen Communist governments in eastern Europe**, making them more popular. This led to the introduction of **three main policies** which came to form Gorbachev's 'new thinking':

1. ***Perestroika*** and ***Glasnost***
2. End of the **Brezhnev Doctrine**
3. End of the arms race



Perestroika and Glasnost

Gorbachev's first policy was a **sweeping reform of the Communist Party and Soviet system within the USSR** based upon the two ideas of '**perestroika**' and '**glasnost**'. **Perestroika** is Russian for **reconstruction** and was used by **Gorbachev** to explain how he would **reform the Soviet economy by introducing some practices that made capitalism successful**. **Glasnost** is Russian for '**openness**' and referred to **Gorbachev's** belief that **people should not fear expressing their opinions** and **should be allowed to challenge the government**. **Gorbachev** intended for a lot more openness to be introduced into the USSR whereby **people could see how the country was run** and have **the opportunity to question or challenge the government** – something which had certainly not been a feature of life in the USSR over the past sixty years.



End of the Brezhnev Doctrine

The second element of **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' was the ending of the **Brezhnev Doctrine**. This meant that the **USSR would no longer get involved in the affairs of eastern European satellite** states like Poland, Czechoslovakia and other Warsaw Pact states. **The Brezhnev Doctrine** had shaped the USSR's interactions with eastern Europe ever since the Prague Spring in 1968. Its abandonment signalled that the states of Eastern Europe were going to be given **more independence** and the **chance to run their own affairs**.

End of the arms race

Finally, **Gorbachev's** third policy was to **reduce spending on arms and defence, bringing the arms race with the USA to an end**. This led to the signing of lots of **arms reduction agreements** with the USA and a **gradual improvement** of superpower relations.



How did Soviet people react to Gorbachev's 'new thinking'?

As it began to be rolled out in the USSR, **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' proved very popular. Not only did **Gorbachev** appear as a leader who was **willing to listen to the Soviet people**, but his reforms seemed to be having a **good impact on the economy**. For instance, *perestroika* and *uskoreniye* (a Russian word meaning **'acceleration' of economic development**) did bring some **considerable improvements to the economy** and certain aspects of a free economy, not controlled by the state, were introduced. *Glasnost* also meant that people who had **formerly been imprisoned for speaking out against the Soviet regime were released** from jail, **banned books were published** and the Soviet people gradually came to learn about the **full extent of atrocities** that were committed under the rule of Stalin. At times this actually caused problems for **Gorbachev** – the **more freedom that people were given, the more freedom they wanted** and this actually made it increasingly difficult to maintain control, especially over countries in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, despite these dangers, it was clear that **most people supported Gorbachev** and his attempts to introduce greater democracy, openness and economic growth to the USSR. It was clear that, on the whole, his **'new thinking' was popular** and was well received by the Soviet people.



How did **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' affect the relationship between the superpowers?

Gorbachev's 'new thinking' was also **welcomed by the USA**, who saw **Gorbachev** coming to power as a real opportunity to **improve the deteriorating relations** and **seek an end to the Cold War**. This was because, while **Reagan** had promised to be **tough against Communism** when he became President in 1981, this policy seemed **a lot less necessary** when the USSR was being run by a leader who was **not looking to expand Communism** but instead wanted to reform it and who spoke **openly about his desires to improve relations with the USA**. As a result, between 1985 to 1989, there were a number of meetings and agreements between both countries that sought to reduce Cold War tensions and improve superpower relations.



Geneva Summit, November 1985

The first of these took place in **Geneva** in **November 1985**. While it became clear at the meeting that **Reagan would not give up his commitment** to the **Strategic Defence Initiative**, the two leaders **established a good working relationship**, agreed to speed up arms talks and left the meeting having **committed to making the world a 'safer place'**.

Reykjavik Summit, October 1986

In **October 1986**, the two leaders met again, this time in **Reykjavik in Iceland**. **Gorbachev** approached this meeting with **particular worries about the dangers that nuclear weapons** posed to the world. This had been revealed to the USSR only too clearly when large swathes of the Soviet Union were affected by the nuclear fallout from the **Chernobyl disaster** that had occurred in April 1986. Consequently, at the Reykjavik Summit, **Gorbachev** proposed that the **USSR would phase out its production of nuclear weapons if the Americans gave up their Strategic Defence programme**. However, **Reagan refused** to restrict the programme meaning that the summit once again ended **without any formal agreement**.



Washington Summit, December 1987

Nonetheless, the tide began to change the following year and, when the two leaders finally met again in **December 1987** at the **Washington Summit**, a **formal treaty was signed**. The **Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty** **eliminated nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500-5,500km** and, by the Treaty's deadline in 1991, the **USA had destroyed 846 of these weapons** and the **USSR had destroyed 1,846**. The leaders also committed to **more transparent procedures for checking that nuclear weapons had been destroyed** and proposed an even more radical agreement that each country would **halve its long-range nuclear weapons**. Although this part of the treaty was yet to be formalised, it showed how far the relationship had improved between the USA and the USSR. Interestingly, the **INF Treaty** was also able to be signed because **Gorbachev** was **willing to seek compromise**. Even in 1987, **Reagan** refused to drop his plans for the **Strategic Defence Initiative** but **Gorbachev** decided to compromise anyway because he realised that the **Soviet economy would never recover until it reduced spending on nuclear weapons** and that **disarmament was important if the USSR were to improve its reputation in the West**. This compromise showed just how far **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' had come to **influence and play a role in improving superpower relations**.



The **INF Treaty** was followed by **several further agreements** over the next few years. Most notably, **in December 1988, Gorbachev** travelled to the **United Nations** in the USA and delivered a speech where he announced a **reduction in Soviet troops in Warsaw Pact countries** and that **Soviet forces would finally leave Afghanistan**. It seemed as though **Gorbachev's** commitment to his 'new thinking' had remained **firmly intact** and **by 1989**, when he met with the newly elected President of the USA, **George Bush**, in Malta, it was clear that the **Cold War had come to an end**. Though many factors were involved in this process, over many years, it was clear that **Gorbachev's 'new thinking' had laid the foundations for increased cooperation** between the USA and the USSR. Ultimately, it provided the means through which, after nearly forty-five years of albeit fluctuating tension, **lasting agreements could be made**.



Glossary

Brezhnev Doctrine – Soviet foreign policy which called for military intervention by Warsaw Pact forces if another member of the Warsaw Pact tried to leave the Soviet sphere of influence or reform communism in their country too much.

Chernobyl Disaster – On 26th April 1986, an explosion occurred in one of four nuclear reactors in Chernobyl power station in the USSR. The blast released more than 100 times the radiation released by the atomic bomb that the USA dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 and has led to many people – as many as 93,000 by some estimates – dying from radiation related cancers in the area since. 31 people were killed at the time and the disaster revealed the dangers of nuclear technology.

Glasnost – Russian word meaning ‘openness’ which refers to Gorbachev’s policy in the USSR that encouraged free speech, and end to censorship and allowed people to question the government



Glossary

Uskoreniye – Russian word meaning ‘acceleration’ of economic development. This was used by Gorbachev to encourage the rapid improvement and growth of the Soviet economy in the 1980s.

Perestroika – Russian word for ‘reconstruction’ which refers to Gorbachev’s policy of re-organising and restructuring the Soviet state, particularly by allowing some elements of a free, capitalist economy to function within the USSR to improve the economy’s efficiency.

Strategic Defence Initiative – Reagan’s plan, developed in 1983, that America would place satellites into orbit that had lasers that could shoot down Soviet missiles aimed at the USA. The programme increased tension with the USSR.



Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Gorbachev believe that a new approach to running the USSR was needed in 1985?
2. What were the policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*?
3. What were the other two policies of Gorbachev's 'new thinking'?
4. What happened at the Washington Summit in 1987?
5. Challenge question: How did Gorbachev's 'new thinking' reduce tensions between the superpowers?

