

The Collapse of the Soviet Union

The changes that took place in the Soviet Union, beginning in 1987, were revolutionary. The Soviet Union, a major world power, ceased to exist as a nation and as an empire.

A PRIMARY SOURCE

Mikhail Gorbachev

In 1987 Mikhail Gorbachev published a book entitled *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*. It outlined his ideas about restructuring Soviet society. In the segment below, Gorbachev summarizes the goal of *perestroika*.

We are often asked what we want of *perestroika*. What are our final goals? We can hardly give a detailed, exact answer. It's not our way to engage in prophesying [foretelling] and trying to predestinate [arrange in advance] all the architectural elements of the public building we will erect in the process of *perestroika*.

But in principle I can say that the end result of *perestroika* is clear to us. It is a thorough renewal of every aspect of Soviet life; it is giving socialism the most progressive forms of social organization; it is the fullest exposure of the humanist nature of our social system in its crucial aspects—economic, social, political and moral.

Source *Perestroika, New Thinking for Our Country and the World* by Mikhail Gorbachev

B PRIMARY SOURCE

George Mitchell

George J. Mitchell, a former U.S. senator from Maine, wrote a book about the fall of Communism. This excerpt from his book describes Gorbachev's situation after he had been in office a year.

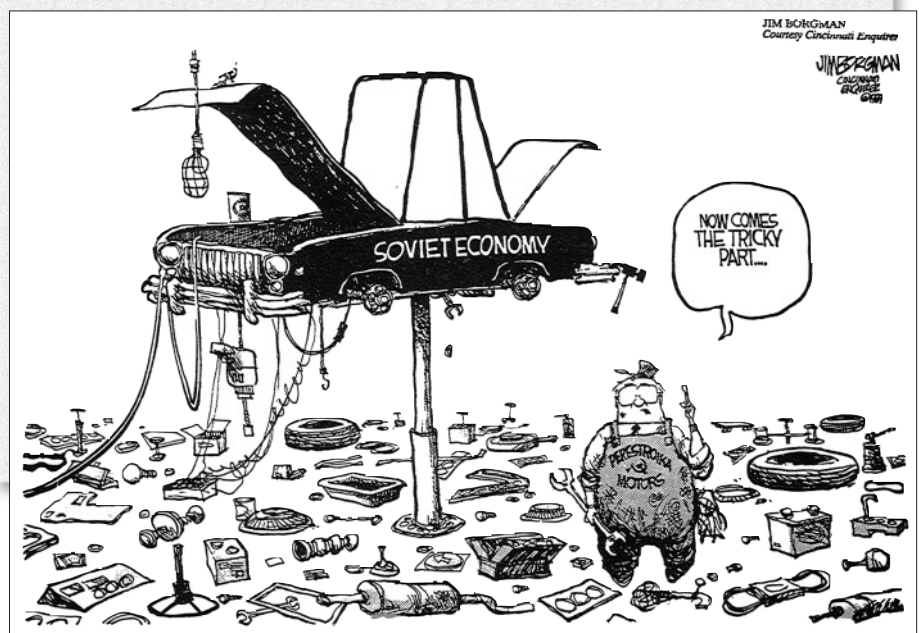
After a year in office, Gorbachev found that *perestroika* was barely making headway. Even small decisions were dying in the morass [swamp] of bureaucracy. He came to understand that if *perestroika* were to succeed, he must go over the heads of his party opposition to the people themselves—a tactic not within the Soviet experience. So a second great term was added to the vocabulary—in truth, resurrected, for the concept was as old as the tsars [Russian monarchs]. But it had a new meaning and was to become a stirring buzzword along with *perestroika*. This was *glasnost*, which, roughly translated, meant “openness.” Gorbachev did nothing less than turn Soviet society loose to say and think what it wished, and the media, so long enchained and controlled, to write what it pleased, investigate what it pleased, expose what it pleased.

Source *Not for America Alone, The Triumph of Democracy and the Fall of Communism* by George Mitchell

C PRIMARY SOURCE

Jim Borgman

In 1989, Jim Borgman of the Cincinnati Enquirer presented a view of Gorbachev's *perestroika*.



Source *Cincinnati Enquirer*

The Collapse of the Soviet Union (continued)

D PRIMARY SOURCE

Hedrick Smith

March 26, 1989, marked the first free election in the Soviet Union in 70 years. In the republic of Lithuania, the new political party Sajudis opposed the Communist party. Hedrick Smith, a journalist, writes this account of voting results in Lithuania.

When a *Sajudis* staff aide emerged to post the results of the election on a bulletin board, the crowd demanded that he call out the returns. And so, one by one, he read off the names of the Lithuanian government and [Communist] Party officials who had always been rubber-stamped in past elections:

“Chairman of the Supreme Soviet—defeated.”

The crowd let out a whoop.

“Chairman of the Council of Ministers—defeated.”

Cries of “Look at that!”

“Secretary of the Communist Party—defeated.”

More cheers.

“Another secretary of the Communist Party—defeated.”

Shouts of approval.

And so on down the line: deputy prime ministers, the head of the Lithuanian Gosplan, the Communist leader of Vilnius [the capital of Lithuania], a particularly unpopular Stalinist leader of one city district, the head of a pro-Russian movement opposing Sajudis—one big name after another, beaten by political newcomers.

In an incredible sweep, Sajudis, which had held its founding congress only five months earlier, in October, had won thirty-one of forty-two seats. . . .

Political upheaval in Lithuania was running ahead of what turned out to be the dramatic unraveling of Communist power in Eastern Europe that took place in the fall of 1989.

Source *The New Russians* by Hedrick Smith

E PRIMARY SOURCE

Adrian Karatnycky

In December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist as a nation. The author of this article is a representative of AFL-CIO [a federation of American labor unions]. He traveled to the area in 1991 to study the reasons for the breakup of the Soviet Union. In addition to the August coup, he found other causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Other crucial factors contributed, including the courage of the tens of thousands who took to the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev. A private detective agency provided security to the defenders of the Russian parliament. Managers of nearby hotels fed the heroic resisters. Farther away, strike committees and emerging free trade unions led resistance among coal miners in Russia and Ukraine, and pro-Yeltsin industrial workers in the Urals [a mountain range in Russia]. . . .

The events of August 19-21 destroyed the cohesion of the three pillars of the Soviet state—the Communist party, the KGB [the secret police], and the military. With the party now banned, its offices shut down, and its bank accounts frozen, the news media in Russia and Ukraine are daily revealing sensational details of illegal and wasteful Communist financial doing. The KGB, which formerly had a force of 488,000 workers, has been broken up along republic lines. The military, which too is fragmenting, is in no mood to intervene to preserve the old order.

The coup created a political vacuum that enabled, indeed encouraged, Boris Yeltsin and other republic leaders to press for independence.

Source “Minsk Meet,” by Adrian Karatnycky in *The Breakup of Communism; The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* edited by Matthew A. Kerljic.

“The Russians do not understand what is happening here [Lithuania].”

Arvydas Juozaitis, leader in the Lithuanian political party *Sajudis*.

Document-Based QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does Gorbachev (Document A) envision changes in Soviet life as a result of *perestroika*?
2. What reason does George Mitchell (Document B) give for the introduction of *glasnost*?
3. In what ways does Document C illustrate the ideas expressed in Document A?
4. How do Documents D and E show the consequences of the policies explained in Document B?