

Soviet Reforms

Stalin's iron fist and a centrally planned economy did much to transform the Soviet Union from a simple agrarian society to a modern industrial state. In the 30 years following Stalin's death in 1953, the soviet government continued to plan the economy centrally and spent lavishly on union's the military-industrial sector in order to maintain the soviet role as a global superpower. This led to the government's neglect of the consumer sector, however, and soviet citizens were forced to endure chronic food shortages, poor quality consumer goods, and crowded living conditions. By the 1980's, these consequences, along with a persistent national debt and an escalating arms race, convinced some soviet leaders to finally consider altering the path of socialism in the Soviet Union.

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet union and launched three ambitious and interlocking reforms known as *perestroika*, *glasnost*, and *demokratizatsia* with the economic reform *perestroika* (Russian for "restructuring"), Gorbachev hoped to stimulate the Soviet economy and raise citizens' standard of living. To do so, he attempted to reduce the pervasive control of the centralized planners in all areas of production and give industrial businesses more freedom in making their own production decisions, such as: What kind of materials do we need? Where should we buy them? What kind of goods should we sell? He also wanted to make businesses responsible for their own expenses so they would learn that the central government would not always make up their losses as it had in the past. Also, Gorbachev encouraged the operation of private business, eagerly sought foreign investment, and decreased military expenditures. While *perestroika* began as a means to "reform" socialism, it ended up being the first step to a full transition away from socialism and to a market economy.

To gain favor for his ambitious economic program, Grobachev recognized the need to permit people to speak openly and honestly about the Soviet Union's problems. With *glasnost* (Russian for "openness"), people were allowed to express their frustrations for the first time and offer their own suggestions for pulling the country out of its crisis. The media was allowed to criticize the government, previously banned books were made available to the public, and imprisoned politic dissidents (people who spoke out against the government) were freed. Glasnost also opened up Soviet society to Western influences, and western music, fashion, and culture began to pour into the Soviet Union. The open environment that glasnost inspired led Soviets to question their society- socialism, communism, the Communist party's monopoly on power, and the legitimacy of the country itself.

Demokratizatsia, or democratization, was the third of Gorbachev's reforms. Where as glasnost allowed people to express their opinions, demokratizasta actually enabled them to try to make changes by permitting wider access to the government. In the Soviet Union, elections had traditionally served to maintain authoritarian rule-most election only involved one candidate. In 1989, for the first time in soviet history, citizens were able to choose from ballots containing several candidates, including non-communists.

Demokratizatsia, like Gorbachev's two other reforms, eventually led to a weakening of his own power. In 1991 Boris Yeltsin was elected from a list of four candidates, to become the

first president of Russia. Later that year, Gorbachev resigned from his largely symbolic position of Soviet president.

Gorbachev initiated his reform of perestroika, glasnost, and demokratizatsia to restore the vitality of the Soviet Union. However, this proved to be an impossible task. As the reforms gained in speed and popularity, they encouraged Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe- and the Soviet republics themselves- to take their own path of the development and ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

REFORMS READING-GORBACHEV

1. What was the Gorbachev's intention when he instituted forms in the Soviet Union?
2. What was the goal of perestroika?
3. What was the goal of glosnost?
4. What was the goal of demokratizatsia?
5. What was the end result of these reforms?