

Key Issue

- How did the Soviet Union's economic problems affect the Cold War?

The Soviet economy was in a bad state when Gorbachev took over. Soviet leaders boasted that there was no inflation. In fact, there was – but no one knew how much. Official figures about the economy were false – but hardly anyone knew what the real ones were. The quality of consumer goods was very poor. Between 1982 and 1987, 18,000 Russian-made televisions exploded, killing 1000 people. In the West there were endless jokes about Soviet-made Lada motor cars:

- Q. 'Why do Ladas have heated rear windows?'
 A. 'To keep your hands warm when you're pushing them.'

Industrial production was falling and the military budget was out of control: no one really knew how much the armed forces cost. The communist system was corrupt – and no one knew how much that cost either.

There was really only one solution. As a leading communist pointed out, 'They had to drop out of the arms race'.

ARMS AGREEMENT (1987)

Gorbachev came to power in March 1985. In November, he met Reagan in Geneva. The two leaders agreed in principle to cut offensive weapons by 50 per cent. They would also try to limit medium-range missiles. 'The world has become a safer place,' Gorbachev told reporters afterwards.

It was a promising start. But the 1986 summit in Iceland broke down over Star Wars, which the USA refused to give up. However, Gorbachev confirmed that the USSR would withdraw from Afghanistan and promised that the USSR would not test any more nuclear weapons in the atmosphere unless the USA did so.

Success eventually came in December 1987 when the two leaders agreed to get rid of all medium- and short-range nuclear weapons. Reagan formally signed the INF (Intermediate Nuclear Forces) treaty on a visit to the Kremlin. It was an

amazing turnaround. He had been determined to stand up to the communists. Now, he signed the first agreement with them to reduce nuclear weapons. The dismantling of these weapons began at once.



US experts watching Soviet troops destroying nuclear weapons (1988).

GLASNOST AND PERESTROIKA

However, there had been arms agreements before and the Cold War had gone on. This time was different because Gorbachev had other plans. Arms cuts saved money but they did not solve the USSR's economic problems. And solving those, it turned out, was to end the Cold War in a dramatic fashion.

A Soviet report of 1983 had said that the Soviet economy was not working – and could not work without huge changes. There had to be more small businesses and co-operatives; people needed to be given greater freedom. The country needed to be more democratic.

It was a radical plan but Gorbachev used it as the basis for his new policies. He called these *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (renewal). He wanted Soviet people to speak more openly and he encouraged Soviet leaders to listen to criticism.

In 1985, Gorbachev believed these two policies would reform the Soviet system. If corruption could be stamped out and everyone did their job properly, communism could be made to work. He soon discovered that he was wrong (see Source A).

Gorbachev wanted *perestroika*: he wished to rebuild the Soviet state. He eventually realised that this meant radical reforms in the Communist Party, too. However, he may not have realised how many people wanted to go further and get rid of the Communist Party altogether.



Gorbachev and Reagan in Moscow's Red Square (1988).

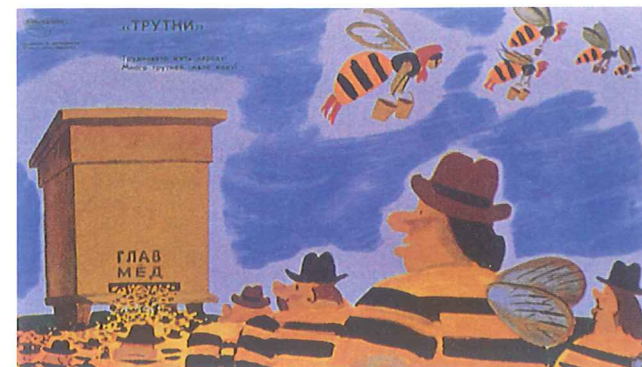
NO TANKS

This was especially true elsewhere in eastern Europe. The policy of *glasnost* encouraged people to criticise the system – the communist system. In the USSR's satellite countries, people deeply disliked both their own communist leaders and Soviet interference. In Hungary and Czechoslovakia, many people had bitter memories of how Soviet tanks had destroyed their attempts at freedom.

In March 1986, a crowd of 3000 marched through the streets of Budapest. They were celebrating Hungary's unofficial independence day. (The communists had stopped celebrating this after World War II.) They demanded more democracy (see Source B). At first, the police left them alone but, later, they used truncheons to beat up demonstrators.

There was, of course, another way to save communism: tanks. The USSR had used them in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The question in many people's minds was: would Gorbachev, too, use tanks to stop people gaining their freedom?

The answer, they discovered, was 'no' and Poland led the way in finding out.



This poster represents workers as bees, producing honey (money).

A SOURCE

Aleksandr Yakovlev was a key adviser to Gorbachev. In 1995, he said the following.

It seemed to us that all we had to do was remove some brakes, free it all up and it would all start working. There is a good engine there. It's got a bit old and rusty. It needs some oil. Just press the starter and it will set off down the track.

We went under this illusion for [up to] two years. But when we began to make radical changes in foreign policy we came up against the resistance of the system. That's when we began to understand that if we wanted radical reforms we would inevitably come up against the resistance of the system. From that moment it began to be said that the system is unreformable, the [Communist] Party is unreformable.

B SOURCE

One Young Communist League official was on the march. He said the following afterwards.

The only way to save socialism [communism] from the rubbish heap of history is to allow other groups in society, eventually other parties, to compete against the Party. Only if people choose it, is it worth having.

Questions

- What progress towards arms reduction did Reagan and Gorbachev make? [4 marks]
- Explain why the Soviet economy was in such a poor state when Gorbachev took over as leader. [6 marks]
- Explain how the following together contributed to détente between the Soviet Union and the United States in the later 1980s:
 - Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*
 - The cost of spending on weapons
 - The INF Treaty, 1987.
 [10 marks]