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*
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