

Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union

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On 11 March 1985, at the age of 54, Mikhail Sergeyeovich Gorbachev, an apparatchik of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), was appointed General Secretary of the CPSU by the Central Committee, 24 hours after the death of his predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko. He aimed to carry out a root-and-branch reform of the Soviet system, the bureaucratic inertia of which constituted an obstacle to economic reconstruction ('perestroika'), and, at the same time, to liberalise the regime and introduce transparency ('glasnost'), i.e. a certain freedom of expression and information.

In order to implement this ambitious policy successfully, Gorbachev had to limit the USSR's international commitments and reduce its military expenditure so as to curb the USSR's moral and economic decline. This resulted in a resumption of dialogue between the Americans and the Soviets concerning nuclear arms, with the signing of the three treaties: the Washington Treaty (8 December 1987), which provided for the destruction of all Soviet and American intermediate-range missiles based in Europe; the Paris Treaty (19 November 1990) on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, agreed between the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact countries; and the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), signed in Moscow (31 July 1991), which provided for the mutual reduction of strategic nuclear weapons. At the same time, Gorbachev terminated Soviet involvement in other parts of the world, withdrawing from Afghanistan, where the Russian army was bogged down, exerting pressure on the Vietnamese to withdraw from Cambodia and restoring Sino-Soviet relations, withdrawing Soviet support for the Mengistu regime in Ethiopia and for Cuban troops in Angola, ending economic aid to Cuba and withdrawing Soviet troops from the island, restoring diplomatic relations with Israel and condemning Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Gorbachev's policy of disengagement would be even more marked in Europe, with regard to the former satellite states of the USSR.

Although popular with the West, Gorbachev was far less so in his own country, where his reforms resulted in the disruption of the centralised planning system without the implementation of any real market mechanisms. This resulted in reduced production, shortages and social discontent, which led to strikes. This discontent could be all the more strongly expressed within the system of 'transparency'; all previously withheld information concerning the activities of the State and its administrative bodies might henceforth be disclosed and publicly debated. The lifting of the taboos imposed by the Communist regime, of which intellectuals and liberated dissidents took full advantage, allowed critical judgment to be passed on the history of the Soviet Union and on its political, economic and social structure.