

What were components of the global political and economic landscape during Ronald Reagan's presidency, and to what extent was it this landscape, versus Reagan's policies, that lead to détente between the United States and Russia?

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Abstract

The United States and Russia have a complicated relationship, informed by decades of diplomacy and conflict. As journalists and the public call President Trump's contacts with Russia into question, various investigations expose Russian meddling in the 2016 Presidential Election, and the complicated politics surrounding Russian foreign relations dominate the news, it is important to understand a key part of our shared history, the Cold War. This paper dives into the Reagan Administration's impact on the end of the Cold War, and how Reagan's policies aided Soviet leadership and political and economic conditions to bring about the end of the war. This research draws on a variety of scholarly articles discussing historical events and analyses of President Reagan's and General Secretary Gorbachev's policies. Many sources build the case that the economic and political conditions of the world were ripe for a rapprochement between the countries, and the leadership of the nations utilized these conditions to improve relations. Understanding the Cold War period allows us to interpret current politics through a historical lens, and this research reminds us to seek understanding and détente under belligerent political circumstances.

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Part I: Introduction

“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” These hopeful words echoed over the crowd gathered at Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin on June 12, 1987, delivered by United States President Ronald Reagan who was visiting Berlin to celebrate the city’s 750th birthday. Reagan’s call to the General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, came two years after the leaders held their first summit in Geneva, Switzerland, an unprecedented meeting between the two world superpowers. A few years before the end of the Cold War, the relationship between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was tenuous and ever-changing. Over the course of President Reagan’s eight years in office, from 1981 to 1989, American citizens witnessed Reagan’s dramatic shift away from anti-Soviet rhetoric towards conciliatory policies, and the Soviet Union’s fall from its status as an influential military superpower.

Today, the United States’ relationship with Russia is a topic of confusion for citizens, concern for scholars, and contention for politicians. Since Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential Election was first uncovered, US ties to Russia have come under scrutiny and President Trump’s connections with Russia have been the subject of investigations and criticism. Some Americans are glad to see cooperation between Washington and Moscow. Others say that we’re living through a second Cold War: “Their foreign policies cruise on ‘automatic Cold War pilot,’ said former Senator Sam Nunn, despite cooperation on nuclear security and Islamic terrorism” (Trani and Davis 16). Regardless of your political opinions, the United State’s relationship with Russia affects the future of democracy and the future of world peace: as we’ve seen recently, Russia is not afraid to interfere in American society. As we examine and try to understand our current

political climate, it's important to take into account the history of US-Russia relations, and how former social and economic circumstances affect present-day diplomacy and hostility. The Cold War was a crucial period for relations between the US and the USSR and the end of the Cold War signified a major shift in the global order. At the end of the Cold War, changing global politics and the crumbling economy of the Soviet Union, coupled with bold leadership on both sides, paved the way for the US and the USSR to repair relations.

Part II: Historical Context/Background Knowledge

The US's relationship with the USSR is shaped by tensions and political events stretching back to 1917—after more than 300 years of rule by the Romanov Dynasty, 1917 was a pivotal year for Russia. That March, Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown; then, that November, the provisional government in place since March was overthrown by the Bolsheviks, a group dedicated to the ideas of Vladimir Lenin (Bykova par. 1). Often called the October Revolution (Russia used the Julian calendar at the time, leading to the discrepancy), the event allowed Lenin and other new leaders of Russia to begin implementing socialism as informed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (Boettke 1).

The backdrop of world politics in 1917 was tumultuous: many countries were engaged in World War I, and the Russian Revolution meant that the new Bolshevik government would have to choose its loyalties. At first, the Bolsheviks seemed willing to affiliate with the Allied powers which included the US and some countries in Europe. This would have given the Allies another front to fight the advancing Central Powers, which were Germany, Austria-Hungary, the

Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria. However, the Allied Powers' indecision surrounding terms of a unification treaty led the Bolsheviks to unite with the Central Powers. Russia's abandonment of Western powers at this turning point initiated a negative attitude towards Russia.

WWI ended in 1918, and in 1922, The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) formed, uniting Russia and 14 surrounding nations. At this point, the USSR was the largest country in the world. Vladimir Lenin was the first General Secretary of the Union, and Joseph Stalin came to power when Lenin died in 1924. The General Secretary governed alongside an institution called the Politburo: "Stalin as the party's General Secretary was seen as the leader of the Politburo, and the Politburo comprised the leading political figures in the USSR, representing the most powerful party and state institutions, and the most important regional and republican interests" (Davies et al 1). The USSR exercised immense power over its member states and maintained a sphere of influence over nearby countries in Eastern Europe.

From the beginning, the Communist government was known for atrocious human rights violations. In a speech titled "Arms Control and Human Rights," Former director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Kenneth Adelman said, "We mistrust the Soviet leadership precisely because of their attitude towards human decency and human rights" (3). They did not provide adequate necessities, like food, for many citizens, but also upheld a practice of imprisoning and torturing anyone who dared to speak out against the communist system. A group called the KGB (In English, The Committee for State Security) carried out many of the horrible acts against Soviet citizens: "...no secret police in the world can compete in power,

ruthlessness, and thoroughness with the Soviet KGB. Little wonder that Anatoly Shcharansky, [a Soviet-Israeli human rights advocate,] calls the Soviet regime, ‘the most ruthless and despotic in the world today’” (Adelman 2).

Because of previous tensions and evidence of human rights abuses by the Soviet government, the United States began a policy of quarantine, refusing to recognize the Soviet state and engage in diplomatic/economic relations. Researchers Eugene P. Trani and Donald E. Davis from the Virginia Commonwealth University and Illinois State University, respectively, wrote about US opinions towards the Soviet Union in the 1920s: “Their refusal to recognize the Soviet Union came from a strong belief that its influence was harmful and would spread into Western Europe if not quarantined” (10). The United States generally practiced quarantine and nonrecognition until 1932, when Franklin D. Roosevelt decided to begin negotiating with Soviet leaders to establish conditions of recognition. We began recognizing the Soviet state in 1933, but continued Soviet human rights abuses and their violation of certain agreements with the US meant that the recognition didn’t do much to improve relations (“Recognition of the Soviet Union” par. 1).

World War II began in 1939, and the dubious relationship between the West and the USSR was further strained when the USSR entered into a nonaggression pact with Germany, effectively aligning the Soviets with the Axis Powers. However, that pact was broken when Nazi forces began invading the USSR in 1941. The Allied powers came to the aid of the Soviets, hoping to end the Second World War. After holding off Nazi forces in Russia and turning the tide on the war, President Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Churchill, and Soviet General Secretary Joseph

Stalin met in February 1945 for the Yalta Conference, where they decided how to divide Germany and deal with other European nations decimated by the war (“The Yalta Conference” par. 2, 3). It was determined that Stalin could have a sphere of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe in exchange for the USSR’s help in winning the war in the Pacific Theater, and the nations would split Germany into four zones with America, Britain, the USSR, and France each controlling a zone. They also split the German capital, Berlin, into four zones (this led to the creation of the Berlin Wall which became a symbol of oppressive communist rule). When the Allies won World War II, they held the Potsdam Conference in July of 1945. However, Churchill had lost his election and Roosevelt had passed away which changed the dynamics of the meeting. The conference built on the conditions determined at the Yalta Conference, but there were more open disagreements about territories and reparations in postwar Europe. Leaders walked away with plans to help rebuild Europe, but there was lingering contention (“The Potsdam Conference” par. 1).

As the world worked towards rebuilding Europe, relations between the US and the USSR disintegrated further. In the late 1940s, America was still suspicious of the communist regime, and Soviet expansion and intervention in Eastern Europe fed fears of overbearing Soviet power. The US and the USSR were competing world superpowers, and the US decided to resume its policy of containment, known in the 1920s as diplomatic quarantine, where we cut off most communications and trade with the communist state. The Cold War is said to have started in 1947, when the USSR’s influence over Eastern Europe was great and growing.

The Cold War lasted for more than 40 years and it comprised a variety of conflicts and points of escalation and de-escalation. Underscoring the whole tangle were disagreements on nuclear arms and human rights. While there was never direct fighting between the principal countries involved (the US and the USSR) the powers were involved in a number of proxy wars: the USSR backed communist leaders in foreign countries including several in South America and Vietnam, and Americans backed their capitalist rivals.

The beginning of the Cold War was marked by an arms race: both countries were testing atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs, trying to build their nuclear arsenals as quickly as possible. The efforts of the US and USSR then shifted towards “the space race,” where each country tried to outpace the other in developing technology to land a man on the moon. The space race also had the nuance that the winning country could, with the correct technology, position nuclear weapons in space, ready to destroy the other nation.

One of the driving factors of continued Cold War attitudes were the ideological differences between America’s democratic, capitalist society, and the Soviet communist society. The autocratic, anti-democratic regime of the USSR committed terrible acts of human rights abuse to stamp out dissent and retain power. The Soviet desire to expand the Union and spread communism around the world lead to imperialistic acts in Third World countries. Because of these behaviors, Americans viewed communism as an evil system.

President Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, 11 years before the Cold War was to end. Before his bid for the presidency, Reagan had been a radio host, then a prolific actor, acting in 53 films (“Ronald Reagan” par. 2, 5). Reagan dipped into the political sphere in 1964, when he gave a speech in support of Presidential Candidate Barry Goldwater. He was called “the great communicator” because of his empathy and clean vernacular. He became a well-known Republican speaker, and in 1966, was elected to be Governor of California. He served a successful first term, proving himself capable of working across the aisle. He was re-elected in 1970, and his popularity inspired him to run for President in 1972. However, his efforts were half-hearted and failed, in part because a section of his supporters wanted him to finish his second term as Governor before seeking the Presidency. He ran for President again in 1976, after finishing his second term, but was unsuccessful, by a small margin, in gaining the Republican nomination. Finally, in 1980, he was triumphant and became America’s 40th President (Cannon par. 9,11). He was re-elected for a second Presidential term in 1984.

Mikhail Gorbachev was the sixth and final Secretary General of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. As young as high school, he was recognized as a talented leader and scholar. A biography published by The Gorbachev Foundation, a nonprofit that Gorbachev founded after leaving the Soviet Union, characterizes his educational excellence: “Mikhail Gorbachev was doing extremely well at school. In those early school years he developed a passion for knowledge, an interest in everything new, and he kept those makings for the rest of his life” (“Biography” par. 6). He was also a dedicated member of the Young Communist League. Once he graduated from high school in 1950, he attended Moscow State University to get his law

degree. He returned to his hometown of Stavropol after graduation; from then on, he rose quickly through the ranks of the Stavropol communist party, demonstrating strong moral character and a reform-minded approach to improving Soviet society. In 1978, the Plenary Session of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Central Committee elected Gorbachev as Central Committee Secretary, and he moved to Moscow. The political elites in Moscow recognized his talents again: "Very soon Mikhail Gorbachev displayed himself as a responsible, efficient and principled political figure. Two years after he moved to Moscow he became a member of the CPSU Central Committee Politburo, the supreme body of the Soviet Communist Party. In March 1985 Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee." Gorbachev resigned on Christmas Day in 1991, a day before the Soviet Union would officially cease to exist.

Part III: Research and Analysis

There were two major factors that led to the end of the Cold War: the economic and social conditions of the Communist state and America, and the leaders' willingness to take action in the face of favorable circumstances. The presence of unsustainable Soviet economic policies led General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to seek various reforms, which set the stage for the United States' and Reagan's eventual willingness to meet with the Kremlin. Reagan's military buildup, to help the US negotiate from a place of greater power, and his initiation of a summit with Gorbachev were instrumental in improving dialogue and understanding between the nations.

Political Landscape and Economic Background: The Unsustainable Union

After more than 40 years of communism, the standard of living inside the Soviet Union was low. Citizens were often left without basic necessities and dissenters were funneled into forced labor camps, known as gulags, and tortured at the hands of the government. Former director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Kenneth Adelman characterized conditions for the prisoners:

[Some] prisoners are being persecuted for their religious practices or convictions...For the nameless thousands in the forced labor camps and the prisons, beatings, inadequate food, clothing and shelter, heavy manual labor, unsatisfactory medical care, isolation, extended interrogation, and threats against their families are part and parcel of their existence.

(Adelman 2)

Although it is difficult to know the number of citizens who were held at gulags because of a lack of documentation and transparency, several reports have placed the number on the magnitude of millions (Conquest 1).

The Soviet system was not sustainable for the life and well-being of Soviet citizens, but the Soviet economy and government were also proving to be untenable. The government was spending excessive time and money on expanding the military, especially because the Union was engaged in an arms race with the United States. In her article, Beth Fischer, assistant professor of political science at the University of Toronto, quotes former Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam to discuss outrageous military spending figures:

‘More than one third of all Soviet machinery output now goes to the military and about one half of all research and development expenditures are for military applications.’ This ‘military machine,’ as he called it, caused a deterioration in Soviet citizens’ quality of life by siphoning off resources which could have gone into the production of consumer goods. (10)

In addition to the means allocated to building the Soviet military, money was spent funding expensive adventurism around the globe. In their effort to spread communist ideology, the Soviet Union had annexed nearby countries, expanded their sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and started propping up Kremlin-friendly governments around the world. Deputy Secretary of State Dam commented on the extent of Soviet interventionism:

In recent years we have seen ... the Soviet Union's direct military intervention into Afghanistan; its strengthened economic and military involvement with such regional powers as Cuba and Vietnam and its active support for the occupation of Kampuchea; deployment of over 20,000 ... military personnel in more than 30 Third World countries... (qtd. in Fischer 9)

Soviet involvement in Afghanistan was one of the most controversial conflicts during the Cold War, and it played a large role in overextending the Soviet Union’s economy to the point of failure. In the early 1970s, a Soviet-backed leader and the former Prime Minister Mohammed

Daoud overthrew the Afghanistani monarch King Zahir and took power. Daoud was supported by a leading political party in Afghanistan, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). However, the party was split into two factions and only one supported Daoud. Eventually, one faction killed Daoud, throwing the country into chaos. On top of that, the country's Islamic rural regions which were still largely tribal-ruled began producing mujahideen—Islamic insurgents opposed to the rule of the PDPA (“The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan” par. 1, 2).

In 1979, Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev ordered some of the USSR's troops to enter Afghanistan because he was worried that the chaos and anti-communist sentiments would spread to neighboring communist states (“The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan” par. 5). Former Director of the Joint Intelligence Organisation of Australia Paul Dibb wrote about the Soviets' intentions: “The Soviet plan was to stabilise the situation, strengthen the Afghan army, and then withdraw the bulk of Soviet forces within three years. But that was not the case: instead, the Soviet army was cast into a bloody war that would last for 9 years, 1 month, and 18 days” (Dibb 2). The Soviets expected their high-tech troops to easily overwhelm rebel Afghani forces; however, the Soviets knew little about the culture and history of the region they were entering. They did not understand the politics of the region, so they easily toppled the central government to restore their favored leader but spent years fighting the mujahideen. They attempted to impose communism in a place where it was not culturally feasible.

Eventually, Soviet leadership began to recognize the hopelessness of the war in Afghanistan: “Despite overwhelming Soviet combat power, the mujahideen learned to dodge Soviet attacks, work around Soviet technology, and live to fight another day. In the end, the mujahideen national will was stronger than that of the Soviet leadership” (Dibb 5). Around 26,000 Soviet soldiers were dead, along with untold Afghani soldiers (Dibb 7). When reformist Mikhail Gorbachev became Secretary General, the futility of the USSR’s involvement in Afghanistan led him to explore options for withdrawing troops. After signing the Geneva Accords cementing an agreement with Pakistan, America, and Afghanistan in 1988, Soviet troops completed their withdrawal in February 1989.

The war in Afghanistan had a major impact on Soviet morale and policy moving forward: “More important, in many ways, [than the dead and missing people] was the corrosive impact of this failed war on Soviet society and the huge humiliation geopolitically of the defeat on the reputation of the USSR” (Dibb 3). The Soviets had poured innumerable resources into a war that was misguided and impossible to win. It stretched Soviet military capabilities, proved that the Union was not as powerful as it had seemed, and added strain to the declining economy.

While the Soviet Union was attempting to influence the war in Afghanistan, they were also experiencing crises within the Eastern Bloc. With the political oppression and terrible human rights conditions, Soviet member states were eager to leave the Union. This intensified demands on Soviet leadership as they attempted to maintain their power and the unity of Eastern Europe. One such rebellion was the Prague Spring.

In early 1968, reformist Alexander Dubcek became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and he introduced reforms that increased freedoms and liberalized Czech society. However, Czechoslovakia was under the Soviet sphere of influence and the Soviets preferred for the Czech government to uphold strict communist principles. The Office of the Historian of the State Department wrote about Soviet leaders' concerns:

...leaders in Moscow worried that if Czechoslovakia carried reforms too far, other satellite states in Eastern Europe might follow, leading to a widespread rebellion against Moscow's leadership of the Eastern Bloc. There was also a danger that the Soviet Republics in the East, such as the Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia might make their own demands for more liberal policies. ("Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia" par. 4)

In August 1968, troops from the USSR and several other Soviet-affiliated countries (through the Warsaw Pact) entered Czechoslovakia. After nearly 6 months, Soviet forces installed a new leader, replacing Dubcek, and succeeded in repressing Czechoslovakia's liberalization movement. The new, conservative government reversed reforms accomplished by Dubcek but was able to improve the economy, lessening citizens' discontent that had led to the political uprising in the first place ("Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia" par. 5). The event demonstrated Soviet military power and their strong ideological influence in Eastern Europe.

As time went on, however, the overextended military and suffering economy led to a decline in Soviet power. Nearly a decade in Afghanistan had only made the problems worse. When Poland's Solidarity movement came about in the 1980s, seeking to implement liberal reforms in Poland like those in Czechoslovakia two decades before, the movement was not quelled like previous uprisings and it further decreased communist influence in Europe.

In August of 1980, workers at Gdansk Shipyard in Poland went on strike to request greater freedoms, including the right to organize. One month later, Poland's communist government granted their demands and Solidarity became the first legal trade union in a Communist country. The union quickly gathered more than 9 million members. One of the key pillars of Solidarity was non-violence, and it led to a broader movement of anti-communism in Poland (Donovan par. 1, 9).

In a report on Solidarity, The International Center on Nonviolence and Conflict wrote about the Polish government's response to the growing influence of Solidarity: "Threatened by the scope and pace of the growing opposition and fearful of a possible Soviet military intervention (although to this day historians dispute whether such intervention was possible or likely) the leaders of the Polish military decided to impose martial law on December 13, 1981" (Bartkowski par. 3). Military leaders outlawed Solidarity and arrested most of its leaders. However, the movement flourished underground, even receiving support from The Pope and American trade unions. In 1989, Poland's unstable economic situation and immense pressure from citizens caused Polish Prime Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski to agree to engage in discussion with

Solidarity leaders. After two months of negotiations, they signed an agreement passing “sweeping political and economic reforms that officially recognized Solidarity” (Donovan par. 24). A few months later, Solidarity members won, in a democratic election, the maximum number of seats allowed, further weakening communist influence in Poland. The Poles had achieved independence from the USSR.

Solidarity signified a turning point in the power and authority of communism in the Communist Bloc of Eastern Europe. By that point, the USSR was so weak that scholars question whether or not it could have thwarted Solidarity’s rising popularity if it had wanted to (Bartkowski par. 4). The terrible human rights abuses, unsustainable Soviet economy, ever-expanding military adventures in foreign countries, dreadfully unsuccessful war in Afghanistan, and challenges in maintaining the unity of Eastern Bloc were amounting to a massive burden on the Soviet state. By the time Gorbachev and Reagan came to power, the conditions were ripe for reform.

Political Landscape and Economic Background: America’s Military Buildup

Shortly after President Reagan took office in 1981, he worked with Congress to dramatically increase the amount of money appropriated for the military. Throughout Reagan’s campaign, he frequently stated that America had become weak, that we were losing our status as a world power. To him, it was imperative that the US engage in a large-scale military buildup so that we could negotiate with the USSR on a level playing field and protect against the immense threat that the Soviets posed. In a “New York Times” article published in February 1982, former senior State and Defense Department official Leslie Gelb reports on the funding increase:

The philosophy behind [increased defense spending], according to senior Pentagon officials, is that the United States must not simply be able to respond to an attack by the Soviet Union wherever it occurs, but also be able to strike back at areas of Soviet weakness.” (Gelb par. 2)

Reagan initiated three strategies to rebuild the US military. The first strategy involved seeking extra funding for Congress: “In March 1981...the Reagan administration advocated spending \$222.8 billion on the American military in 1983, an increase of \$33.8 billion” (Fischer 7). This funding would be used for “strategic forces, combat readiness, force mobility, and general purpose forces” (Fischer 7). His second strategy was called the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also commonly known as “star wars.” Announced in 1983, SDI constituted a space-based missile defense system that would render Soviet missiles obsolete, if it ever came close to working, which it did not. Reagan’s third strategy was to “honor a 1979 NATO decision that called for the deployment of US nuclear missiles in Europe” (Fischer 7). By placing missiles within reach of the Soviet Union, we hoped to deter attacks and defend European allies.

Reagan’s initiatives for improving the US military were threatening to the Soviets. During a question-and-answer session with high school students in 1983, President Reagan addressed some of the military tensions between the US and USSR:

Our NATO allies have asked us to put nuclear weapons, intermediate-range weapons, as a deterrent to those that are there on the edge of Western Europe. And we have agreed to do that...Now, I think [the Soviets] came to the table and are willing to talk because they don't want us to put in that deterrent. (“Question and Answer Session” par. 8)

Even before defense systems were deployed in Europe, Reagan’s new policies were increasing American military power. On top of that, America’s expensive military buildup added even more strain to the struggling Soviet economy. A massive American-NATO initiative to improve our military capabilities threatened Soviet military power, so the Soviets attempted to keep pace by spending more money and time building their military. We invested a lot, and the Soviets could not keep up; this arms race initiated by Reagan was one component that helped bankrupt the Soviet Union.

Progressive Leadership: Gorbachev’s Policies

In 1985, after Reagan had begun his second term, Soviet General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko was on his deathbed. He only held the position for thirteen months and had failed to accomplish anything of substance. When Chernenko died on March 10th, Mikhail Gorbachev became the new Secretary General. Even before he was appointed to lead the USSR, Gorbachev was well-received by the international community. Norman Graebner, in his article “Ronald Reagan and the Russians” talks about the hopeful lens through which the world viewed Gorbachev:

By late 1984 Konstantin Chernenko...was too ill to travel. When Mikhail S. Gorbachev, with his wife Raisa, visited London in mid-December, Kremlin watchers marked him as Chernenko's successor. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Europe's senior statesman, was impressed. She detected in Gorbachev's elevation new opportunities in European diplomacy. With Chernenko's death in March 1985 European leaders generally recognized in Gorbachev the charm, intelligence, energy, confidence, and authority required to bring new initiatives to Soviet policy. (7)

Gorbachev lived up to the international community's assessments, and he recognized his leadership as an opportunity to shift the paradigm of life in the USSR. In the mid-1980s, Gorbachev introduced new policies of perestroika, "the restructuring of the Soviet economy" (Schifter 5) and glasnost, increasing openness and transparency of the government. These reforms were aimed at revamping Soviet society; Gorbachev acknowledged the failing Soviet economic system and attempted to improve the quality of life for citizens. While decades of Soviet leadership had sought power at the expense of the state, Gorbachev was willing to sacrifice power for a tangible improvement in the Soviet system. Many European nations and America had cited concerns about human rights in the USSR. Over the five years that Gorbachev was in power, individual freedoms were gradually improved, evidenced by the release of certain political prisoners and a loosening of control on what books and art could be published (Schifter 4). Fischer writes about the impact that Gorbachev's reforms had on foreign relations:

The milieu of East-West relations profoundly changed...largely because Mikhail Gorbachev changed the 'reality' of East-West relations by setting into motion fundamental reforms in the domestic structure of the Soviet Union and by introducing a radical reconceptualization of the Soviet approach to international relations. (1)

The Soviet Union was facing an impending disaster, but Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power offered hope. Gorbachev seemed to be more reasonable and reform-oriented than previous leaders. In his article "Glasnost — The Dawn of Freedom," former assistant secretary of state Richard Schifter wrote, "...the personality of the new general secretary offered hope of a better relationship" (3). Gorbachev began to seek a path towards the "end to the rulers' wild cravings and to their high handedness" ("Biography" par. 34). Reagan's willingness to meet with the Soviet leader seemed like the ideal opportunity to improve relations with the West, which could help ease militaristic pressures on the Soviet economy and bring broader peace and security to the world. Gorbachev's willingness to deviate from Kremlin tradition and work with the US to take advantage of the economic and political conditions was a significant step in improving relations and ending the Cold War.

Progressive Leadership: Summits Between Reagan and Gorbachev

When Gorbachev came to power, Reagan initiated the first summit with a Soviet leader since 1979. In turn, these diplomatic relations continued after Reagan's presidency, leading to the end of the Cold War.

On March 8th, 1983, during Reagan's first term, he gave a speech to British parliament about the Soviet Union, famously calling the USSR an 'evil empire.' From the outset of his presidency, Reagan followed the conventional conservative rhetoric, strictly opposing any reconciliation with the USSR due to their record of human rights abuses. However, Reagan's opinions gradually shifted as he recognized the threat of nuclear war, the futility of frozen relations, and the imminent collapse of the Soviet regime. In the periodical "Policy Review," Andrew Busch and Elizabeth Spalding wrote about Reagan's view towards the Soviets:

[President Reagan] saw clearly the central contradiction within the Kremlin policy that made the Soviet empire vulnerable: it was bankrupt economically, yet was engaging in renewed heights of external aggression. By 1980, still on a perpetual wartime footing because of their ideology, the Soviets invested more than two to three times what the United States did on military spending. (5)

The first summit between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev occurred in November of 1985, four years after Reagan had been in office and mere months after Gorbachev assumed power. Although US presidents had met Soviet Secretary Generals in the past, the most recent meeting had been between Jimmy Carter and Leonid Brezhnev in 1979 to sign the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, or SALT II. However, the treaty was not ratified and Reagan dismissed it, arguing that "the agreement bolstered the military imbalance" (qtd. in Fischer 8). Reagan wanted to give the US enough flexibility to reinvigorate its military, without the constraints of international treaties.

Breaking off the SALT II negotiations effectively eliminated any form of arms control, and there had not been contact between the nations' leaders since. After a US military buildup was underway, Reagan began to look towards Soviet leaders again to pursue arms control. Many American citizens harbored anxiety about the threat of nuclear war, as did Reagan himself. Reagan consistently called for conversations between the nations: "Throughout 1984 and 1985, the Reagan administration fervently pursued dialogue with the Kremlin" (Fischer 16).

Eventually, after Gorbachev became Secretary General, Reagan was successful in securing a summit in Geneva, Switzerland with his Soviet equivalent. At that point, relations had broken down so much between the countries that Reagan thought it important to simply talk to one another and seek understanding. Fischer writes, "Reagan spent more time talking with Gorbachev than he had with any other world leader" (18).

Even though it did not immediately result in a reduction of nuclear weapons, both leaders found the summit advantageous:

Although the Geneva summit produced little else in the way of specific accords, both sides portrayed the meeting to be a great success. Reagan officials described it as 'very worthwhile' and noted the 'friendly mood and good atmosphere.' The Soviets called the meeting a 'watershed.' 'Because of the Geneva summit,' Gorbachev declared, 'the world has become a more secure place.' (Fischer 19)

The Geneva Summit was only the beginning; the leaders would go on to meet three more times, eventually signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty at a summit in Washington D.C. The treaty eliminated mid-range missiles entirely, and it was controversial: critics said that it “in no way reduced the Soviet capacity to wage nuclear war,” and could harm our relationship with NATO allies in Europe, but proponents were glad to see some form of arms control and a sudden surge of détente (Graebner 8).

When Gorbachev came to power seeking to improve Soviet society, Reagan took this opportunity to negotiate about nuclear weapon stockpiles and begin repairing relations. The summits between the leaders built upon the economic and political circumstances to increase understanding between the nations, which paved the way for future peace talks and the end of the Cold War.

Part IV: Discussion and Conclusions

Some political science and history scholars will argue that Gorbachev’s unique personality and policies, coupled with USSR instability, were the true catalysts for the loss of Soviet influence around the world, marking the end of the Cold War; still other scholars argue that Reagan’s policies were all-important and that the Cold War could not have ended without him. Rather, Reagan and Gorbachev together utilized the fragmenting Soviet system as an opportunity to de-escalate tensions. Their progressive leadership and willingness to break historical precedent allowed them to take advantage of the conducive political and economic circumstances. The

United States and the Soviet Union each had a part to play in repairing relations between our nations. Thus, the economic and political landscape inside the Soviet Union was equally as important as Reagan's policies.

Present Applications and Lessons

President George H.W. Bush worked with Gorbachev to end the Cold War in 1991. That same year, the Soviet Union broke apart into its constituent countries and communism ceased to be the dominant political theory of Eastern Europe. Since that transition, the United States and Russia have upheld a relatively diplomatic relationship. Vladimir Putin, the current Russian President, came into the position when Boris Yeltsin resigned on New Year's Eve in 1999. Putin has proved to be difficult to work with; Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have all met with the Russian leader but found him manipulative and unfavorable. The global community still criticizes certain practices inside of Russia that limit individual freedoms and suppress dissent.

Putin's characteristics have proven to be more challenging to work with than Gorbachev's, but President Reagan pushed through the boundaries separating our countries to seek dialogue that would make the whole world safer. Perhaps Reagan's actions should be used as a model for current difficulties in relations with Russia; it's more important to talk to nations that we disagree with than to shut them out. However, it's also important to understand the political context of Putin's opinion on the fall of communism. He was in Germany when the Berlin Wall fell, marking the end of Soviet influence in Germany, and he viewed the events as a great

demonstration of weakness for Russia. He holds a lot of animosity towards the United States because of our influence in disbanding the Soviet Union (Kirk et al).

President Trump seems to enjoy a much more comfortable relationship with his Russian counterpart than his predecessors. While we are quick to discount the effectiveness and authenticity of such relationships, this was also how hardline conservatives viewed Reagan's conversations with Gorbachev. Conceivably, we could view Trump's connections through a more diplomatic lens and appreciate the strides he may be taking to improve the relationship between our nations.

Further Research and Awareness

While President Trump has been more collaborative with Vladimir Putin than previous presidents, it is also important to remember that Trump is currently under investigation *because* of his ties to Russia. In May of 2017, Special Counsel Robert Mueller began conducting an investigation into the Trump Campaign's dealings with Russia during the 2016 election and other Russian interference into the election. So far, Special Counsel Mueller has indicted more than 30 people in connection to the election, and he submitted his final report to the Justice Department on March 22nd, 2019. The full report has not been released to the public, but Attorney General William Barr reported some general conclusions to Congress on March 24th.

Democrats have begun calling for the release of the full report to the public, but it's unclear as to what actions Attorney General Barr will take. Whether the full report is available or not, the

public and legislators must pay careful attention to Mueller's findings. Because of our complicated history with Russia, Americans must stay informed and engaged in current politics with the nation. On top of that, we must continually call Trump's involvement with Russia into question. Are there conflicts of interest? Are their discussions productive in benefiting our nation as a whole? As information from the Mueller Report is released, we can begin to understand more about the US's complicated relationship with Russia in the present day.

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