

Famous Portraits Series

Mikhail Gorbachev

General Secretary of the Communist Party (1985-1991)

President of the U.S.S.R. (1990-1991)

Born: 2 March 1931 Died: 30 August 2022 (Aged 91)

Issue 9



1. Young Mikhail with his grandparents before the war (Aged around 5)



1. Mikhail as a young man (Aged around 23)



2. Mikhail with his wife Raisa whom he married in 1953 (Aged 22)



4. Gorbachev as Chairman of the Soviet Communist Party and Soviet President (Aged 54-60)



5. Gorbachev on a private visit in the USA one year after his resignation in 1992 (Aged 61)



Gorbachev in retirement in 2011 (Aged 80)

© History Department, Curriculum Centre Annexe, 2021 for Year 10 History (Option)

Image credits:

1. <https://capelino.com/mikhail-gorbachev-personal-life-wife-children/>
2. <https://capelino.com/mikhail-gorbachev-personal-life-wife-children/>
3. <https://capelino.com/mikhail-gorbachev-personal-life-wife-children/>
4. <https://www.gdfr.org/2019/03/march-11-1985-mikhail-gorbachev.html>
5. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Reagan_and_Gorbachev_in_western_hats_1992.jpg
6. <https://en.24smi.org/celebrity/photo/40595-mikhail-gorbachev/464688/>

Mikhail Gorbachev was born in Privolnoye, to a poor peasant family. Growing up under the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin, in his youth he worked in a collective farm before joining the Communist Party. While studying at Moscow State University, he married a fellow student Raisa Titarenko in 1953 and obtained a degree in law in 1955. After Stalin's death, he became a keen proponent of the de-Stalinization reforms of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. He was appointed First Party Secretary of the Stavropol Regional Committee in 1970, in which position he oversaw construction of the Stavropol Canal. In 1978 he returned to Moscow as Secretary of the Central Committee and in 1979 joined the Politburo. In 1985, the Politburo of the Communist Party elected him as General Secretary, the *de facto* head of government.

Although committed to preserving the Soviet state and its socialist ideals, Gorbachev believed that significant reform was necessary. He withdrew from the Soviet–Afghan War and embarked on summits with United States President Ronald Reagan to limit nuclear weapons and end the Cold War. Domestically, his policy of *glasnost* ('openness') allowed for more freedom of speech and the press, while *perestroika* ('restructuring') sought to decentralize economic decision making to improve efficiency. These democratization measures and the formation of an elected Congress of People's Deputies undermined the Communist one-party state since its foundation by Lenin in 1917.

Gorbachev declined to intervene militarily when various Eastern Bloc countries abandoned Communism in 1989–1990. Internally, growing nationalist sentiment threatened to break up the Soviet Union. In August 1991, a group of leading Marxist–Leninist hardliners launched the unsuccessful coup against Gorbachev. In the end he could not stop the Soviet Union from breaking up on 31 December 1991. He resigned and set up the Gorbachev Foundation, became a vocal critic of Russian Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, and campaigned in favour of Russia's social-democratic movement.

Widely considered one of the most influential statesmen of the second half of the 20th century, Gorbachev remains the subject of controversy. He received numerous awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize, and is widely praised for his pivotal role in ending the Cold War between the Superpowers, ending the Communist regimes in eastern and central Europe and acceded to the reunification of Germany. Conversely, he is often blamed in Russia for not stopping the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event which brought a decline in Russia's global influence and precipitated a post-communist economic crisis.

Further reading:

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Gorbachev
- https://www.ducksters.com/biography/world_leaders/mikhail_gorbachev.php
- <https://www.notablebiographies.com/Gi-He/Gorbachev-Mikhail.html>
- <https://www.biographyonline.net/politicians/russian/mikhail-gorbachev.html>

Questions

1. What was Mikhail Gorbachev's family background?
2. Which positions within the Communist Party did he hold before 1985?
3. How can one conclude that Gorbachev's political views were not Stalinist?
4. What were Gorbachev's political aims when he attained supreme political power in the Soviet Union from 1985 onwards?
5. Explain the meaning of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the context of the Soviet Union during Gorbachev's reforms?
6. Why was Gorbachev admired abroad but strongly criticized at home?
7. How did Gorbachev remain involved in politics for many years after his resignation on 31 December 1991?
8. Give THREE adjectives that best describe Gorbachev's character and personality and give reasons for your answer.