

Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?

Use evidence to explain several causes, including Ronald Reagan's role.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Part 1 - Read the timeline

Goal: Find evidence for more than one reason the Soviet Union collapsed. The Soviet Union was a group of republics governed by a Communist-led national government.

Source-checked timeline

Year	Documented event
1980s	President Ronald Reagan's administration modernized U.S. military forces and applied pressure to the Soviet government.
1985	Mikhail Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union and began reforms.
1987	Reagan and Gorbachev signed the INF Treaty, which reduced certain nuclear missiles.
1989	Communist governments in several Eastern European countries lost control.
August 1991	A coup attempt against Gorbachev failed.
December 1991	The Soviet Union dissolved. George H. W. Bush, not Reagan, was U.S. president.

Timeline credits: Classroom paraphrase based on Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "The Collapse of the Soviet Union," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/collapse-soviet-union>; Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, "Remarks on Signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty," December 8, 1987, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-signing-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-treaty>. Office of the Historian, "U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1981-1991," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1988/u.s.-soviet-relations>.

1. Underline two timeline events that happened inside the Soviet Union or its republics. Circle two events that show Reagan's role.

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Part 2 - Read the source cards

Read each card. A documented event tells what happened. A historical interpretation explains what the events may mean.

Card A - Documented information: Gorbachev began reforms in the Soviet Union. Political changes took place in Eastern Europe. Republics in the Soviet Union increasingly sought independence.

Classroom paraphrase of Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "The Collapse of the Soviet Union," n.d., <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/collapse-soviet-union>.

Card B - Documented information: During the 1980s, Reagan's administration modernized U.S. military forces and applied pressure to the Soviet government. Reagan also negotiated with Gorbachev. In 1987, they signed the INF Treaty, an arms-control agreement that reduced certain nuclear missiles.

Classroom paraphrase based on Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "The Collapse of the Soviet Union," n.d., <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/collapse-soviet-union>; and Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, "Remarks on Signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty," December 8, 1987, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-signing-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-treaty>. Office of the Historian, "U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1981-1991," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1988/u.s.-soviet-relations>.

Card C - Historical interpretation: Gorbachev's reforms, political changes in Eastern Europe, and republics seeking independence weakened central Communist control. Reagan's 1980s pressure and his arms-control diplomacy with Gorbachev were parts of changing U.S.-Soviet relations, but they do not by themselves explain why the Soviet Union ended. The failed coup also mattered.

Classroom interpretation based on Cards A and B and the timeline.

2. Put a D by each documented-information card and an I by the interpretation card: Card A ____
Card B ____ Card C ____

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Part 3 - Organize your evidence

Use the organizer. Write short notes from the evidence. Use two rows for internal Soviet developments. Use the last two rows for Reagan's 1980s pressure and his diplomacy.

Cause or development	Evidence from a card or timeline	How it mattered

Helpful reminder: A documented event tells what happened. An interpretation explains what the events may mean. Use both carefully in your explanation.

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3. Write a 5-7 sentence explanation of why the Soviet Union collapsed. Include:

- [illegible]

I used evidence ____ I included internal developments ____ I included pressure and diplomacy ____ I did not give all credit to one person ____

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Teaching notes and observation guide

Supplied materials: Student pages with a timeline, source cards, organizer, writing lines, and self-check.

Additionally needed: Pencils, highlighters or crayons, and an optional document camera.

Exact setup: Print and supply all student pages, keeping teacher-key pages separate. Place pencils and one highlighter or crayon at each seat. Display Part 1 - Read the timeline during the first read. Students work independently for the organizer and paragraph after a brief modeled read.

Teaching script: “Today we will explain a historical event using more than one cause. Read the labels carefully: Cards A and B give documented information. Card C is a historical interpretation - a conclusion based on evidence. Reagan's administration used pressure during the 1980s and also used arms-control diplomacy with Gorbachev. Those actions were part of changing U.S.-Soviet relations, but our evidence also shows important developments inside the Soviet Union. Do not write that one person caused the collapse.”

Read the timeline aloud. Then say, “Listen for evidence, not just names. In your paragraph, connect a cause to an event and explain how it mattered. Be sure to include both pressure and diplomacy when you describe Reagan's role.”

Observation method: As students work, use a roster. Mark E when a student records a specific event or card detail, M when the student includes multiple causes, R when the student includes both Reagan-related developments, and I when the student labels Card C as interpretation. Prompt only with: “Which detail supports that idea?” Record whether the student revises independently. Collect the paragraph for the rubric.

Source credits: Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, “The Collapse of the Soviet Union,” n.d., <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/collapse-soviet-union>. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, “Remarks on Signing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty,” December 8, 1987, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-signing-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-treaty>. Student source cards are classroom paraphrases; Card C is explicitly a classroom historical interpretation.

Office of the Historian, “U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1981-1991,” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1988/u.s.-soviet-relations>.

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Answer key and scoring guide

1. Timeline markings: Accept underlining 1985, when Gorbachev began reforms; August 1991, when the coup attempt against Gorbachev failed; and/or December 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved. These events occurred inside the Soviet Union or directly concerned its republics. The 1989 changes in Eastern Europe should not be accepted for the underlining task because Eastern European countries were not Soviet republics. Circle the 1980s entry about Reagan administration pressure and the 1987 INF Treaty entry.

2. Answers: Card A = D; Card B = D; Card C = I. Card C is an interpretation because it explains how documented developments may have affected central Communist control and weighs Reagan's pressure and diplomacy as parts of changing U.S.-Soviet relations.

Organizer - sample acceptable responses:

Row 1: Gorbachev's reforms; Card A or the 1985 timeline entry says he began reforms; this mattered because the reforms were part of changes that, according to Card C's interpretation, weakened central Communist control.

Row 2: Republics sought independence; Card A; this mattered because the Soviet Union could not remain united if republics left.

Row 3: Reagan's administration modernized U.S. military forces and applied pressure to the Soviet government in the 1980s; Card B or the timeline; this was one part of changing U.S.-Soviet relations, but it was not the only cause of the Soviet collapse.

Row 4: Reagan negotiated with Gorbachev and signed the INF Treaty in 1987; Card B or timeline; this arms-control diplomacy was another part of changing U.S.-Soviet relations. It did not by itself cause the Soviet collapse.

Accept a student who uses the failed August 1991 coup instead of one internal development and explains that it further weakened Gorbachev.

3. Sample response: "The Soviet Union collapsed because several problems weakened its government. Gorbachev's reforms and political changes in Eastern Europe were part of changes that weakened central Communist control. Republics also sought independence, so the Soviet Union began to break apart. Reagan's administration modernized U.S. military forces and applied pressure to the Soviet government during the 1980s. Reagan also negotiated with Gorbachev and signed the 1987 INF Treaty. Reagan's pressure and diplomacy were parts of changing U.S.-Soviet relations, but internal Soviet changes and independence movements also mattered. The failed coup in 1991 weakened Gorbachev further."

Paragraph rubric: 4 = accurate explanation using two or more internal developments, both Reagan-related developments, specific evidence, and a clear multiple-cause statement. 3 = includes internal developments and Reagan's role with relevant evidence but omits either pressure or diplomacy, or needs a clearer connection. 2 = mostly accurate but gives little evidence or treats one cause as nearly everything. 1 = inaccurate, unsupported, or a single-person account. Conference with students who confuse Reagan with President Bush in 1991.