In March 1985, at the young age of fifty-four, Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev rose to the office of General Secretary of the Soviet Union. Unlike his elderly predecessors, Gorbachev was full of vitality and grandiose ideas. He was determined to be a great reformer; putting the Soviet Union back on the trajectory he believed the venerated Vladimir Ilich Lenin had intended—a path toward a humane socialism. His policies of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) were the avenues by which he hoped to realize his dream. Indeed, these policies revolutionized the Soviet Union, but Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost ultimately became the catalyst for the dissolution of the USSR. Initially, for the Union’s youth, as well as the rest of society, Gorbachev and his reforms brought excitement and promises of a better life. Many Soviet people experienced an insatiable appetite for knowledge as glasnost allowed previously banned literature, discussion, and investigation to emerge. There were widespread notions of utopianism as perestroika promised to usher in a new age of wealth and prosperity; but the Soviet people eventually became disillusioned with the Communist Party and disenchanted with perestroika. It failed to bring the hoped for prosperity, but rather ushered in the chaos of the 1990s.

In order to begin to understand Gorbachev, his reforms, and their outcomes, it is imperative to discuss the origins of the USSR—beginning with the October Revolution of 1917. Russia found itself in a precarious state that year. It was the height of the First World War, and Russian citizens, especially the peasants and workers, were tired and hungry. The pitfalls of capitalism in the international order were on full display, and the circumstances provided a fertile environment for a revolution to be born.¹ Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and the Bolsheviks capitalized on the deep-seated unrest of their countrymen and women, and ultimately emerged victorious in overthrowing the Provisional Government in October 1917. However, several bloody years were to follow as a civil war raged between the Red Army and the White tsarist loyalists.² Once again the Bolsheviks prevailed, but were left with the task of legitimizing their rule and producing a foundational narrative of the October Revolution. To achieve their end, the new rulers utilized the power of propaganda and mass festivals, exerted control over the writing of history, and used intimidation to keep critics in line.

Emerging on the winning side of a revolution was a difficult venture, but maintaining power proved more cumbersome. In order to secure their footing, the Bolsheviks expertly manipulated well known symbols and commandeered holidays. “Within a short time, all the symbols of the dynasty and the bourgeoisie were forged into new symbols of Bolshevism.”iii One historian, Malte Rolfe, claims that the party had intentionally chosen “religious connotations for their concepts, symbols, and rituals in order to better convey their politics through symbolic practices.” For example, the red star representing the Red Army was “linked to Orthodox ideas of deliverance.” The Bolsheviks even “deliberately produced truckloads of pictures of Lenin to be hung in private homes, in place of traditional religious icons.” As a result, many Russians started to adopt Bolshevik practices which mirrored Orthodox practices.iv

Joseph Stalin further cemented Bolshevik rule in his first year in power at the All-Union Conference of Marxist Historians in 1928. The conference “made clear [that] Stalin’s consolidation of power gave him complete control over history.” And in 1934, the Communist Party Central Committee “issued a decree calling for a strict ideological version of history to become doctrine in all textbooks, schools, universities, and institutes.”v Stalin himself played an active role in the censorship of history, personally overseeing both the writing and publication of the infamous Short Course—a “determinist history with all events leading, necessarily, inexorably, to a glorious conclusion: the rightness and might of the present regime.”vi With this extreme propaganda and censorship, it became possible for the Bolsheviks to maintain complete control over the Soviet people. This is why perestroika and glasnost made such an enormous impact on the Soviet Union—they shocked the population into a new reality.

What was it, then, that made Mikhail Sergeeyevich Gorbachev so different from his predecessors, and have such high aspirations for reforming the Soviet system? Firstly, there was a full generational gap between Gorbachev and the last General Secretary. World War II had eliminated almost an entire generation of men from the Soviet Union, as the USSR remained the final stronghold of Allied power in Europe, responsible for beating back German advances as the soldiers adhered to Stalin’s “not a step backwards” policy.vii The Soviet Union suffered harrowing losses in the violent conflict and endured far more casualties than any other country in the war. Gorbachev was a mere fourteen years of age when World War II finally ended. He writes, “Our generation is the generation of wartime children. It has burned us, leaving its mark both on our characters and on our view of the world.”viii

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iv Rolfe, Mass Festivals, 35.
vi Remnick, Lenin’s Tomb, 38.
viii Gorbachev, Memoirs, 34.
Another momentous event experienced by Gorbachev and his contemporaries was the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953. At the time, his death was felt as a national tragedy, and the people of the Soviet Union, including many that had lost family members to Stalin’s purges, were deeply saddened by the news. Gorbachev’s own family had been victimized by Stalin’s regime. Both of his grandfathers had been taken—one subjected to extreme torture, and the other forced to work in a labor camp for two years. However, unlike so many others, both of Gorbachev’s grandfathers had the good fortune of returning home to their families to tell the tales of their captivity. One grandfather, Pantelei Yefimovich, allowed himself to depict the events of his captivity just once; yet, despite his torture and hardship, he remained convinced that “Stalin did not know about the misdeeds of the NKVD and he never blamed the Soviet regime for his misfortunes.” Therefore, when Stalin’s successor, Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, launched his de-Stalinization campaign, which began with a “secret speech” given at the Twentieth Party Congress illuminating Stalin’s crimes, it sent a shockwave through much of the Soviet Union. At the same time, Khrushchev’s “anti-Stalin campaign promised a fresh start on the path to [a] bright future.”

Gorbachev was a young man still at university when he read Khrushchev’s “secret speech” and felt the effects of the Khrushchev “thaw.” The thaw permitted a loosening of the “ideological reigns” of the party, and allowed for some tolerance of the “challenging [of] the ‘traditional’ interpretation of various historical events and even some aspects of contemporary political life.” Gorbachev remembers it as an exciting time, “where lectures were becoming more and more interesting and the seminars livelier. The same was true of the activities of student societies.” Khrushchev’s thaw ended with his removal from power in 1964, but not before it marked a generation—a generation led by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, with the pursuit of realizing the dream of a reformed socialism, a humane socialism.

As mentioned earlier, many people of the Soviet Union were full of excitement and hope as Gorbachev took office in 1985. This certainly holds true, across the board, for the selection of people interviewed for this paper. The interviewees come from different backgrounds, different countries, and are of different ages. Each one of them recalls seeing Mikhail Gorbachev on the television. He would walk among the people, interacting and conversing with them—many found him relatable. He identified with much of the Soviet population, having come from the peasantry. They were filled with hope, seeing such a healthy leader after being subjected to elderly General Secretaries in their seventies and eighties, ruling from their deathbeds. In an interview with Aleksandr Yuryevich Polunov, a professor of history at Moscow State University, he remembered being a postgraduate student and seeing a swift shift

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ix Gorbachev, Memoirs, 26.
xii Kotkin, Armageddon Averted, 29.
in student interests. His specialty was in the history of Imperial Russia, an unpopular area of study until the later 1980s and early 1990s. However, as the effects of perestroika and glasnost continued to develop, and Soviet people began to anticipate a reemergence into the European world, Russians expected to adopt many practices that had existed under the tsars. Professors began lecturing on new topics and their classrooms overflowed. Aleksandr Yuryevich recounted seeing students packed all the way outside the lecture hall into the corridor, anxious to glean any glimpse into the past. In particular, he recalled the lectures of one professor, who had the task of offering a class on the biographies of past tsars. The man, who was getting on in years and had always lectured on revolutionaries, found himself slipping back into old habits. For example, while speaking about the life of Aleksandr II, he would be sure to mention, “under Aleksandr II there were lots of revolutionaries.”

Aleksandr Yuryevich recalls the professor’s lectures being of poor quality, yet students hung on his every word in hopes of learning something new.

Before glasnost, the history of the 20th century was, in general, completely closed to investigation, Polunov stated. Formally you could investigate this period, but it was overburdened with ideological restrictions. This type of censorship made it extremely difficult, almost impossible, to do real scholarly research on the history of the 20th century. Aleksandr Yuryevich shared a story about an advisor that he found humorous. The woman, having finished her book on the abolition of serfdom of 1861, was required to submit it to censorship. The censor informed her that her book was not ideologically sound, because in the index, there was too much mention of Aleksandr II, and not enough mention of Vladimir Ilich Lenin. The woman argued, “But it was Aleksandr II who abolished serfdom, not Vladimir Ilich Lenin. Vladimir Ilich Lenin was not alive in 1861.” Nevertheless, she was told it did not stand up in an ideological sense, and she was made to revise her book, replacing the name of Aleksandr II with synonyms like tsar, emperor, monarch, and so on.

With the newfound freedom of investigation into the past, writers, journalists, and publishers wrote incessantly about Soviet history as well as conditions in the West. With the constant flow of new information, Aleksandr Yuryevich asserted that it was almost impossible to discern fact from fiction. For years the Soviet population had been bombarded with anti-Western propaganda that convincingly portrayed a poverty-stricken way of life. In the professor’s mind, every Western city was comparable to Harlem or the South Bronx. Then, with the freedom to publish without fear of consequence, the West often became depicted as an earthly paradise where every place was on par with the extravagance of Fifth Avenue. The flow of information allowed under the policy of glasnost had discredited Lenin, the Bolsheviks, and the Communist Party. More and more Soviets were looking for a new way of life, a life that would allow them to enter into the so-called European family.

xiii Aleksandr Yuryevich Polunov, interviewed by Katherine Lundell, Moscow State University, July 1, 2014.
xiv Aleksandr Yuryevich Polunov.
xv Aleksandr Yuryevich Polunov.
The second interviewee identified strongly with the desire to find an improved way of life that she was told awaited her westward. She is a young woman currently residing in Moscow named Tamara. Tamara was just a child living in Belarus when the Soviet Union began to break apart but remembers the time vividly. She recalled the exciting things, like the day her elementary school stopped requiring their students to wear uniforms. The Communist Party’s ideology had always privileged the collective over the individual, so to be able to express herself in a way that set her apart from her classmates was a momentous moment in her life. Tamara loved being able to explore fashion, and denim jeans were paramount. She also had the good fortune of living in Belarus, which neighbors Poland. Her father would travel to Poland to buy food and supplies that were unavailable to much of the Soviet Union. One day, he came home from Poland and presented his daughter with a brand new Barbie doll. She was ecstatic. Even as she talked about the memory as an adult, her face lit up. It immediately became her most prized possession. Each night, after playing with her doll, she would carefully put it back into its original packaging and return it to its shelf. With her father frequenting Poland, both of her parents decided that their children should emigrate from the Soviet Union, convinced that their daughters would lead better lives in the West. While Tamara lives in Moscow, her sister heeded their parents’ advice and now resides in Germany. Tamara’s parents’ push for their daughters to make lives for themselves abroad is a testament to the effects of Gorbachev’s reforms. When the initial excitement over the reforms dissipated, loyalty to the Party and the Soviet Union waned. To her parents, life within the Soviet Union would not benefit their daughters; life in the West was their best option.xvi

The final interviewee for this paper is a teacher of Russian and English languages named Igor Alenin. Alenin is a Moldovan man who was an adolescent during Gorbachev’s time in power. Like most of his peers, he was active in the Komsomol, a youth division of the Communist Party. Alenin estimated that 95 percent of students were active in the Komsomol, adding, “Only the good for nothings weren’t in it.” The members would meet together and be expected to give speeches, each one having been pre-written for them. One day, during a meeting, one of his peers decided to forego his assigned speech, and give his own opinion on the state of the USSR, declaring that maybe life in the USSR was not as wonderful as they had been led to believe. This type of deviation from the routine had not been done before. Alenin said the boy was like a hero to them that day. At one time, speaking out against the party and criticizing the state of the Soviet Union would have led to serious consequences. However, the policy of glasnost allowed the boy to stand up and speak his mind without even getting a slap on the wrist. It was this aspect of glasnost that allowed the Communist Party to be discredited and lose the loyalty of much of the Soviet Union, weakening its hold over the USSR.xvii

Once the Communist Party started losing its control over the Soviet Union, many fell on harder times. There were no more of the guarantees that

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xvi Tamara, interviewed by Katherine Lundell, Moscow, June 14, 2014.
xvii Igor Alenin, interviewed by Katherine Lundell, Moscow, June 30, 2014.
they had experienced under Communist rule, such as housing and jobs. As a result, corruption and violence began to rise. The pensions and savings that people had worked a lifetime for soon disappeared. Anything of worth that existed around them was immediately snatched up. To illustrate this, Alenin said that the streets in Moldova were void of manhole covers because the metal held value, and to have it lying on the streets was wasteful. Therefore, people decided to take them and sell them. Factories, too, were often picked clean. Times were hard, and people did what they deemed necessary to survive.

While Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost invigorated society and gave them cause to hope for an improved way of life at the onset, most Soviet citizens were disappointed at the effects caused by these reforms. By trying to bring about a reformed socialism through these policies, Gorbachev inadvertently set the stage for the people of the USSR to lose faith in the Communist government. The young, dedicated General Secretary ultimately sacrificed the Soviet Empire in his efforts to achieve a humane socialism, as perestroika and glasnost catalyzed the fall of the Soviet Union.
Bibliography