

On This Day in 1931 Mikhail Gorbachev Was Born

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Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the U.S.S.R., celebrates his 90th birthday today. The longest-living Soviet leader, he is best-known for his policy of reforming the Soviet political and economic system (“perestroika”), as well as for his expansions of freedom of speech and press (“glasnost”). Abroad, he is remembered for his efforts to withdraw the Soviet Union from its war in Afghanistan and to put an end to the Cold War.

He marked his 90th birthday in quarantine and like everyone else is "tired" of coronavirus restrictions, his spokesman said.

Gorbachev was born in 1931 in the Stavropol region of the North Caucasus. His family lived in relative poverty on a collective “kolkhoz” farm. Gorbachev’s early childhood was shaped by both rural hardship and the brutality of the Stalin regime. Several of his relatives died during the 1933 drought and subsequent famine, while others (including both of his grandfathers) were imprisoned during Stalin’s repressions. Hardship would strike again with the outbreak of World War II; young Gorbachev’s village was occupied by German forces for more than four months, and his father was injured while serving in the Red Army.

Despite the hardships of his upbringing, Gorbachev excelled in scholarship and leadership as a teenager, balancing schoolwork, Komsomol (the Soviet political youth organization) activities and farming duties. He finished school with an impeccable academic record and received the Order of the Red Banner of Labor for helping his father harvest over 800,000 kilograms of grain in 1948. These achievements allowed him to bypass the entrance exam and directly enroll in Moscow State University. In 1950, at age 19, Gorbachev would leave the Stavropol region for the first time, on a train bound for Moscow.

In Moscow, Gorbachev studied law, served as a Komsomol leader and met his wife Raisa. He graduated cum laude in 1955 and returned to the Stavropol region to work at the regional prosecutor's office. Soon after, he secured work as an assistant director of the local Komsomol. Over the following decade Gorbachev would rise through the ranks of local government, becoming First Secretary of the Stavropol region in 1970.

Gorbachev was a friend and ally of several leading Soviet political figures of the 1960s and 70s, including then-General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and KGB head Yuri Andropov. Upon Brezhnev's death in 1982, Andropov became General Secretary, although he would die just two years later. While Andropov had indicated his wish that Gorbachev succeed him as General Secretary, the position passed instead to Konstantin Chernenko due to Gorbachev's "youthful" age of 53. With Chernenko's health also failing, Gorbachev often stepped in to hold official proceedings in his stead, and upon Chernenko's death in 1985 Gorbachev was named General Secretary.

Gorbachev came into power at a time of economic decay and ideological weariness in the Soviet Union. His leadership was initially met with optimism, with hopes that his ambitious efforts to create a more open and international society (glasnost), a market-based economy, and a more democratic, bottom-up style of governance (perestroika) would save the country from its downward trajectory. He also promised a "radical restructuring" of foreign policy, pursuing nuclear reduction with U.S. President Ronald Reagan and withdrawing from the Soviet-Afghan War. In December 1987, he and Reagan signed the landmark Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF).

However, despite his peaceful and civic-minded intentions, Gorbachev's reforms would fail to stabilize the Soviet Union in the face of military conflict, diplomatic pressure, nuclear disaster and domestic unrest. Amid declarations of independence from satellite states and growing pressure from within the Kremlin, Gorbachev would step down from his post on Dec. 29, 1991. The Soviet Union ceased to exist two days later.

A mixed legacy

Since leaving office Gorbachev has been involved in a number of political and humanitarian pursuits, but has also prioritized spending time with his family.

Gorbachev remains a vocal advocate of global denuclearization and firmly stands in favor of Russia's cooperation with the West.

Most recently, the former Soviet leader has called on Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden to improve ties and push for deeper restrictions on nuclear weapons.

"The current condition of relations between Russia and the United States is of great concern," Gorbachev said in a January [interview](#) with the state-run TASS news agency.

"But this also means that something has to be done about it in order to normalize relations," he said. "We cannot fence ourselves off from each other."

Gorbachev urged the two leaders to "meet and negotiate," noting that it is "impossible" to solve the problem of avoiding a nuclear war for any one state alone.

"If the desire to achieve disarmament and to strengthen security prevails, so much can be accomplished," he [said](#) in another interview last week.

Gorbachev's own legacy as a leader, however, is mixed. Outside Russia, he is widely seen as a champion of diplomacy and progress, whereas within Russia he is widely criticized for his hand in the collapse of the Soviet Union. His place in history puts him at a crossroads; liberals denounce his reforms as too conservative to be effective, while the conservatives of his time said his agenda posed an immediate threat to the fundamental values of socialism.

Either way, as President Vladimir Putin noted in his congratulatory [telegram](#) to the former Soviet leader, Gorbachev remains one of the most influential figures of the late 20th century and a fascinating example of an individual caught up in an era of momentous change.

"You rightfully belong to the ranks of the brightest, most extraordinary people and the greatest state leaders of our time who impacted the course of [Russia's] national and world history," Putin wrote.

Other world leaders including British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and U.S. President Joe Biden sent birthday congratulations to Gorbachev.

AFP contributed reporting.

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