

Berlin, 1990



Berlin's Brandenburg Gate,
3 October 1990. Crowds cele-
brate as Germany is re-united.

Media too were freed from state control. But the economy was a harder nut to crack; just the prospect of economic change threatened social chaos and caused immediate fear and distress. To go from a command economy, where everyone did what they were told by the centre, to one that operated without central planning and left prices to market forces was to travel a pathless route into unknown territory. Not many wanted to go that way; few knew how to arrive at the destination.

On 20 July a "500-day" economic programme to move the Soviet Union to a market economy was published. It proposed the sale of large numbers of state enterprises, the dissolution of state collective farms, currency reform, and a new banking system. But Gorbachev's nerve failed him. The reforms were not introduced. Things were bad; uncertainty made them worse. Appealed to for urgent financial and economic aid, the Bush administration steadfastly refused; any aid given would be a reward for implementing reform, not an inducement. The United States, concerned that Gorbachev might be deposed, also maintained a full state of military readiness.

Dramatic changes outside the USSR continued to make the headlines. In August the United States had begun to despatch land, sea, and air forces to Saudi Arabia in Operation Desert Shield, to discourage Iraq from a further invasion. The UN Security Council voted the first of a dozen resolutions demanding Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait. On 3 October, East and West Germany were joined; Germany was re-united. In November, NATO and Warsaw Pact leaders, meeting in Paris, signed a historic treaty to set reduced levels for conventional forces in the whole of Europe (CFE), from the Atlantic to the Urals. Gorbachev reassured Bush of his good faith: "We've been with you since Day One in the Gulf, and we'll continue to be with you." Already, in Helsinki in September, Bush had secretly agreed to an international conference on the Middle East when the crisis in the Persian Gulf was over, giving the Soviet Union what Kissinger had worked to deny it: a role in that region. On 29 November, the United Nations passed Security Council Resolution 678, authorizing the use of force in the Gulf if Iraq was not out of Kuwait by 15 January 1991.



Boris Pugo

As 1990 ended Gorbachev, under persistent conservative criticism, moved to the right. The USSR Supreme Soviet, which could not agree on an economic programme, had granted Gorbachev special powers to rule by decree during the transition to a market economy. Gorbachev fired a moderate interior minister and replaced him with a former KGB chief, Boris Pugo. "The country," said Gorbachev on 17 December, "needed firm executive rule to overcome the threat posed by the dark forces of nationalism." Television announced that the army, if attacked in the streets, would open fire. On 20 December, Shevardnadze resigned his post as foreign minister, warning that a hard-line dictatorship was near.

Shevardnadze had played a key role in advancing perestroika, glasnost, and the policies that were ending the Cold War. But he felt that Gorbachev had let him carry the blame alone for what they had done together that was most criticized, concessions in Eastern Europe and on Germany, and support for the

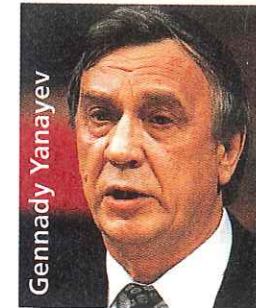


TOP: Berlin; the crowds and the flags say that Germany is re-united within the European Community. BOTTOM: Chancellor Kohl and his wife celebrate his finest hour. The economic cost of re-unification would come later.



The unkindest cut of all. Lithuanians portray Gorbachev, who would deny them national freedom, as a Nazi occupier with blood dripping from his knife blade.

United States in the Persian Gulf. He had been a scapegoat. Now, knowing that Gorbachev intended to kick him upstairs as vice president, he resigned and returned to his native Georgia. He was replaced as foreign minister by Alexander Bessmertnykh. On 26 December 1990 the Congress of People's Deputies approved new executive powers for the president of the USSR, Gorbachev. He now chose as his vice president a conservative, Gennady Yanayev, who assured the Congress he was a Communist "to the depths of my soul."



Gennady Yanayev

George Bush telephoned Mikhail Gorbachev on New Year's Day 1991. He was grateful to the ally who had stood by him in opposing Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. It was the greatest challenge of his presidency, putting together the international coalition to liberate Kuwait without imperilling Gorbachev's reforms. He understood what difficulties Gorbachev faced and did not, this time, warn against precipitate action in the Baltic republics, feeling that the United States had said enough. He did not want US objections to destroy the US-USSR alliance on the Gulf. Within weeks Bush would launch the air war against Iraq and shatter its military capability.

A Return to Cold War Rhetoric

On 2 January tensions in the Baltics escalated, as Moscow sent riot police to seize the state-owned buildings in Vilnius, Lithuania, and Riga, Latvia; on 7 January elite paratroopers were ordered to round up draft dodgers and deserters. The United States now cautioned against the use of force. The Soviet Union, slipping back into Cold War rhetoric, warned the United States not to interfere in its internal affairs. On Sunday, 13 January, in Vilnius, "Bloody Sunday," Soviet troops stormed the television tower and other public buildings. Fourteen Lithuanians, men and women, were killed. On 20 January in Riga, "Black Beret" Soviet troops stormed the Interior Ministry, killing five Latvians. The United States and world opinion were outraged; if these methods – the tactics of Tiananmen Square – were used against every republic seeking independence, bloodbath would succeed bloodbath.

The orders for the crackdown in Vilnius were said to come "from the very top," but Gorbachev, after the first killings, got cold feet and ordered a stop to the operation. Urged to go to Vilnius, Gorbachev was told his security there could not be guaranteed. He stayed in Moscow. Speaking to the Supreme Soviet, he defended what was done and refused to condemn the use of force. On 21 January, Gorbachev did condemn brutality, and promised to punish those responsible. He was walking a tightrope between hard-liners who wanted a nationwide crackdown on all forces opposed to the centre and reformists who were for change at whatever cost to the unity of the Soviet state. Meanwhile, Boris Yeltsin, as parliamentary leader of Russia, signed a mutual security pact with the Baltic states.

A summit meeting between Gorbachev and Bush, planned for February, was abandoned as East-West relations deteriorated. Gorbachev, conscious of Soviet ties to Iraq and of hard-line opposition to US gunboat diplomacy, even if the Soviet Union had voted with the United Nations to support the use of