

## Reagan and the Soviet Union

Reagan's initial public view of Soviet communism reflected the 1950s' political rhetoric that it was an "evil empire" bent on global domination and the eradication of freedom, capitalism, and religion. However, much of Reagan's hubris would vanish after he began to follow in Richard Nixon's footsteps and attempt to normalize relations with the USSR. Nonetheless, the Californian's obsession with the threat of international communism was genuine and seemed to represent a global extension of his inner fears of government authority and social change, as well as his struggle to defend freedom and morality at home. Initially, in Reagan's eyes, the Soviet Union embodied the evils of overweening government, atheism, and a lack of moral standards. Like the Moral Majority and many other American conservatives, he saw anticomunism as "a crusade to restore traditional assumptions about God, family, and country to a central place in American life." Another goal was to thwart the perceived Soviet determination to export the totalitarian system to all parts of the world. Most of the president's national security and foreign policy advisers shared these attitudes. Secretary of State Alexander Haig, his successor George Shultz, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, National Security Adviser Richard Allen, and Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick all had an exaggerated fear of the power of the USSR.

Reagan and Haig adopted a firm anti-Communist line from the beginning of the new administration; they used tough language in referring to the Soviet Union and demonstrated a taste for confrontation. The president characterized Russian leaders as men who "reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, [and] to cheat." He insisted that the SALT II agreement would have to be revised before it could be ratified. He moved ahead to implement Carter's plans to base cruise and Pershing II missiles in Western Europe. Reagan emphasized, as he had during the campaign of 1980, the imperative need to expand American military forces to meet the Soviet challenge. Charging that the Carter administration had allowed the Soviet Union to gain strategic superiority over the United States, he recommended a military program that would cost \$136 billion in 1981-82 and more than a tril-

lion dollars over five years—about 8 percent of the GNP. This massive program would include the development of nuclear weapons, the expansion of the surface fleet and tactical airpower, the creation of a Rapid Deployment Force to defend the Persian Gulf and other Third World areas, and much more. Reagan ordered the controversial (and extremely expensive) B-1 bomber into production and announced his decision to push ahead with construction of the neutron bomb. Although military spending had begun to rise during the Carter years, increasing 5 percent after the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan, the buildup under Reagan was unprecedented in the post-World War II era. Congress agreed to virtually all of the president's defense proposals.

In practice, however, the Reagan administration discovered that it frequently had to bow to realities in dealing with the Soviet Union. Even while publicly criticizing SALT II, Reagan observed the limits it imposed, as did his Russian counterpart. American wheat surpluses encouraged the president to lift Carter's embargo on grain shipments to the Soviet Union, and in September 1983 the administration concluded a grain sale to Russia of historic proportions. Indeed, by 1985 Reagan had removed most of Carter's restrictions on the Soviet Union. When Soviet pressure in December 1981 caused Poland's Communist rulers to declare martial law, outlaw the independent trade union Solidarity, and imprison its leader, Lech Walesa, Reagan had to content himself with verbal attacks on the Russians. The American leader's harsh rhetoric was not appreciated by his Western European allies, who were still committed to detente between East and West. West Germany, an active trading partner of the Soviet Union, had negotiated a multibillion-dollar agreement to help the Soviets construct a 3,600-mile pipeline for the delivery of natural gas from Siberia to Western Europe. The United States objected to the arrangement and prohibited the sale of U.S. equipment for the project, but the Reagan administration abandoned this embargo in the face of strong protests by its European allies.

The intensifying arms race between the two superpowers encouraged the development of an antinuclear war movement in Europe and the

United States. A nationwide poll in the spring of 1982 showed that 57 percent of the respondents favored an immediate freeze on the production, testing, and deployment of nuclear weapons. A bipartisan resolution in Congress urging such a freeze gathered strong support. Reagan slowly began to respond to the pressure and commit himself to the goal of arms control. After the death of Leonid Brezhnev in November 1982, the president proposed an interim agreement limiting American and Soviet medium-range missiles in Europe to a fixed and equal number of warheads. This ploy was rejected by Yuri Andropov, the new Soviet leader, since it would have forced the destruction of existing Russian SS-20 missiles in exchange for proposed American ones.

Despite evidence from authoritative sources that the United States and the Soviet Union were roughly equal in their possession of land- and sea-based missile warheads and that the United States was ahead if one counted aircraft weapons, the Reagan administration pushed ahead with its military buildup. While the arms-limitation talks languished, the arms race continued. The president succeeded, after a long struggle, in getting congressional approval to begin production of the MX, an abbreviation for Missile-Experimental. The new MX missile, later called the Peacekeeper, was a MIRV capable of releasing ten re-entry missiles in its payload, each with a destructive force over twenty-five times more powerful than the atomic bomb detonated over Hiroshima. This new super weapon was strategically designed to intimidate the Soviets, whom Reagan placed at the center of his international diplomacy concerns. In the spring of 1983 Reagan, citing the continued growth of Soviet military power, called for a 10 percent increase in U.S. defense appropriations for 1984. In a televised address to the nation on March 23, 1983, he dramatically called for a "high-tech" weapons system that would destroy enemy missiles in space. This Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), controversial and incredibly expensive, became known as the "Star Wars" program. The United States soon launched a \$26-billion, five-year program for its development.

The administration wanted to improve relations with the People's Republic of China, in part to gain leverage with Russia, but that proved difficult, partly because of the president's strong sympathy for the Republic of China on Taiwan. Unlike the successful triangular diplomacy of Nixon and Kissinger, Reagan and his advisers exacerbated relations with both the PRC and the USSR, losing leverage with both

nations. Nevertheless, Reagan gradually moved from his early confrontational attitude to a position reflecting containment, "peace through strength," and greater interest in international dialogue and negotiation.

One of Reagan's most notable achievements was an important arms-control agreement with the Soviet Union late in his second administration. Ironically, it was a triumph that came with a remarkable shift in Reagan's approach to an adversary he had darkly characterized as an "evil empire," a shift from confrontation to negotiation and a return to détente. The American leader's attitude toward arms control had begun to change during his first term, in part, it appears, because of criticism his military buildup had provoked in Europe and the United States. In any event, the administration persisted in the arms-control talks, and in a conciliatory statement early in 1984 the president declared the United States was "in its strongest position in years to establish a constructive and realistic working relationship with the Soviet Union." Reagan was no doubt encouraged by the progress of his rearmament campaign, as well as his awareness of worsening problems in the USSR—increasing economic paralysis, a crisis of leadership, a military misadventure in Afghanistan, economic mismanagement in Poland, and declining influence in the Third World. Like many other Americans, he responded favorably to the new Russian leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who was elected general secretary of the Communist Party in March 1985. Gorbachev was young, well-educated, and politically skillful. His regime promised both internal reform and a more flexible and imaginative approach to relations with the United States and Western Europe.

The change in Russian leadership and the moderation of President Reagan's hard-line attitude toward the Soviet Union paved the way for a meeting in Geneva between Gorbachev and Reagan in November 1985. The two leaders got along well, signed several cultural and scientific agreements, and discussed the need for an arms-control accord. They were unable, however, to agree on arms limitation, given Reagan's refusal to accept any restriction on his SDI (Star Wars) program. Eager for a breakthrough that would strengthen his position in the Kremlin and facilitate his domestic reforms, Gorbachev pushed for a second summit, and one was held, on very short notice, in October 1986 at Reykjavik.

Iceland. Although the conference resulted in few tangible accomplishments, it was of great symbolic importance. The two superpower chiefs considered sweeping proposals for arms control, including the elimination of all nuclear weapons within ten years, and an older American offer, identified with Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard N. Perle, known as the "zero option" plan. That plan would require the Soviet Union to dismantle its SS-20 missiles in exchange for a commitment by the Americans and their European allies to remove (or promise not to deploy) their Pershing and cruise missiles.

Dramatic progress in halting the arms race came at a high-level conference in Washington, D.C., in December 1987, when Gorbachev and Reagan signed the Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty. The agreement eliminated all short- and medium-range missiles in Europe and provided for a system of independent, on-site verification and weapons inspection. The INF Treaty served as a prelude to a series of hopeful developments in the Cold War. In Afghanistan the Soviet Union began a phased withdrawal of its troops, while the United States scaled down its aid to the Afghan rebels. The two superpowers joined in a plan for the gradual removal of all foreign troops from Angola and a political effort to settle that country's drawn-out civil war. In the Middle East the Soviet Union and the United States supported a UN-initiated cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq War and the beginning of formal peace talks. Meanwhile, the process of dismantling missiles on both sides proceeded, Gorbachev permitted larger numbers of Soviet Jews to leave the USSR, and Reagan made a successful goodwill trip to Moscow in mid-1988.

Whatever the flaws and shortcomings of his foreign policy, Ronald Reagan restored American self-confidence, negotiated from a position of strength, and eventually encouraged Russian leaders to believe they could reach an accommodation with him that would prove mutually beneficial. Reagan's success in this respect was facilitated by the able stewardship of Secretary of State Shultz. However, Reagan, the fervent Cold Warrior, was a credible president who had first built up the U.S. military supremacy that it held over the U.S.S.R., which prompted the Soviets to enter into negotiations. Reagan, who had previously been viewed as overtly hawkish, in effect was transformed into a dove. That was one reason for the popularity he enjoyed at the end of his presidency.

Grantham, Dewey W. and Thomas Maxwell-Long. *Recent America: The United States Since 1945*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc. 2011.