

Short-Term Success: The 1988 Reagan-Gorbachev Summit

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Abstract

The 1988 summit in Moscow was the fourth, and final, summit meeting between U.S. President, Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev. The principal issues addressed during the summit included human rights and arms control. This event was the first time that President Reagan visited the Soviet Union and thus took time to explore Moscow by visiting a monastery, Red Square, Arbat Street, and students at Moscow State University. The summit would be considered a success after its close, as the INF Treaty was ratified and further progress in the area of human rights in Soviet Union had been made, which ultimately contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The success of the summit in the long-term, however, is not as certain for U.S.-Russian relations would deteriorate in the years following, as seen in the in the eventual withdrawal from the INF Treaty by both parties in 2019.

Short-Term Success: The 1988 Reagan-Gorbachev Summit

President Ronald Reagan's Moscow Summit with Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev in the spring of 1988 proved to be one of many events that would contribute to the Soviet Union's demise. Many at the time considered Reagan's meeting with Gorbachev a success. Indeed, William E. Pemberton claims that "If he did not quite set off 'Ronnie mania' when he visited Moscow in May 1988, he was extremely well received in the Soviet capital and honored at home."¹ Additionally, the U.S. President believed that the Soviet Union, and the world as a whole, was headed towards more democracy and freedom, and indeed it was. Lasting freedom and true democracy, however, did not last in former Soviet Russia, and U.S.-Russian relations broke down in the years following the Soviet Union's collapse. The efforts at bettering U.S.-Soviet relations were abandoned; in other words, what was fought for and accomplished during the summit did not last. Ronald Reagan's trip to Moscow in the spring of 1988 was historic, but its long-term success is questionable.

The Meetings Before the Moscow Summit

There had been three other summit meetings between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev before the one in Moscow in 1988. The first being in Geneva, Switzerland in 1985, another in Reykjavik, Iceland in 1986, then in Washington, DC in 1987. The meeting in Geneva was a short one, lasting only two days from November 19th to the 20th, 1985. The talks mainly centered on nuclear arms reduction. Reagan used their first scheduled meeting to make clear to Gorbachev that what he wanted was both peace and an ending of the arms race.² Reagan

¹ William E. Pemberton, *Exit With Honor: The Life and Presidency of Ronald Reagan* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 196.

² Jack Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: how the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004), 155.

also used the Geneva summit as an opportunity to discuss the subject of human rights with Gorbachev. The initial conversation on the topic did not produce any concrete agreements, though, it did open the door for future conversations regarding human rights.

The equally short-lived Reykjavik summit occurred on October 11th to the 12th, 1986. Unlike Geneva, the Reykjavik summit did not include any group delegations but only private meetings between Gorbachev and Reagan, as well as meetings that also included the U.S. Secretary of State, George Shultz, and the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eduard Shevardnadze.³ The discussions centered on matters that were left unfinished from the Geneva summit, like the ABM Treaty, the INF Treaty, nuclear testing, and space arms.⁴ Progress was made in regard to both nuclear arms—with an agreement to reduce 50 percent all elements of the strategic forces, and INF—with an agreement to eliminate intermediate-range missiles in Europe if the Soviet's reduced their missile supply in Asia to 100. The talks began to break down when the two leaders began discussing the ABM Treaty and SDI; Gorbachev wanted to restrict SDI to research in laboratories and insisted that the U.S. refrain from withdrawing from the ABM Treaty for ten years. As the summit ended in a state of disagreement, the two leaders apologized to one another for the outcome and parted ways.

The Washington summit lasted from December 8th to December 9th, 1987. The end of this meeting was more positive than the one in Reykjavik as the two men signed an INF agreement on December 8th. Indeed, Jack Matlock, who was serving as the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union during this summit and the one in Moscow, says that “The INF Treaty they signed was the most significant step the United States and Soviet Union had ever taken to reverse the direction

³ Ibid., 218.

⁴ Ibid.

of the arms race.”⁵ Disputes regarding SDI and the ABM Treaty still lingered, however, the signing of the INF Treaty was still a significant step towards peace between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Major Issues of the Moscow Summit

Human rights was a major topic during the summit. The topic was emphasized in almost every aspect of the Moscow visit—in both the meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev, and in the speeches that the U.S. President gave. Leading up to the summit, Reagan began to discuss human rights in his speeches more often. He did this because, during the debates for the ratification of the INF Treaty, he wanted to emphasize that he was not marginalizing the issue in order to receive a supportive vote for the treaty.⁶ The U.S. President also became more vocal on the topic because Gorbachev had been slow in both allowing increased emigration and in releasing political prisoners.⁷ In addition to human rights, arms reduction played an important role in the Moscow visit, just as it had in the three previous summit meetings.

The START Treaty was also an important issue during the 1988 summit. The treaty was intended for the reduction of nuclear arms. Reagan and Gorbachev had both wanted to sign the treaty during the Moscow summit, but no concrete agreements regarding START could be made during the visit.⁸ The treaty was eventually signed in 1991 by Gorbachev and President George H.W. Bush, and it expired in 2009. In 2011, U.S. President Barak Obama signed START II with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

⁵ Ibid., 271.

⁶ Ibid., 290-291.

⁷ Ibid., 291.

⁸ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 705.

The INF Treaty was arguably one of the most important issues of the Moscow summit. The treaty was signed during the meeting in Washington, DC in 1987 and was ratified during the meeting in Moscow. The treaty reduced nuclear arms by banning the United States and the Soviet Union from producing, possessing, or testing ground-launched cruise missiles with a range of 500 to 5,500 kilometers.⁹ It also barred the two countries from producing or possessing launchers for those types of missiles.¹⁰ The treaty was significant as it “. . . was the first time in history that nations had agreed to destroy nuclear weapons rather than just slow down the arms race.”¹¹ The U.S. and Russia both pulled out of the treaty in 2019, effectively undoing the efforts of peace between the two countries.

Preparations for the Summit in Moscow

Ratification of the INF Treaty was a top priority for George Shultz. He had told Shevardnadze that there was support in the U.S. Senate for the treaty, but that there was still opposition coming from multiple sides.¹² One fear was that the treaty would result in the denuclearization of Europe, which would create a West that is vulnerable to attack by the Soviets.¹³ Another fear was that the President might try to alter the interpretation of INF from the one given to the Senate in the hearings for the treaty's ratification.¹⁴ Shultz was able to calm this fear with an authorized statement saying that the Senate Armed Services Committee will be

⁹ “NATO and the INF Treaty,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, August 2, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166100.htm.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pemberton, *Exit With Honor*, 196.

¹² George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 1081.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1082.

notified of any non-authoritative witness testimonies, and “. . .that the Reagan Administration will not depart from the INF Treaty as we are presenting it to the Senate.”¹⁵ After further debates with various Senators, and the Foreign Relations Committee, the Senate voted on May 27 to allow for the ratification of the INF Treaty.

Aside from working on the ratification of INF, in preparation for the Moscow visit, Shultz met with Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov in February of 1988. When asked by Shultz if the U.S. should participate in a conference on human rights in Moscow, Sakharov stated that the U.S. should do so only if they insist that the Soviet Union both withdraw from Afghanistan and set free the remaining political prisoners; this statement correlated to the views of human rights activists in the U.S.¹⁶ Sakharov, however, differed from the official views of the U.S. on issues such as arms control and human rights. In regard to arms control, Sakharov, while supporting the reduction of nuclear arms, believed that SDI was not well thought-out.¹⁷ Regarding human rights, Sakharov felt that, instead of pressing for emigration, it would be better to press for a change of the system as a whole.¹⁸ In the midst of the U.S. Secretary of State's preparations for the upcoming summit, President Reagan did something that inadvertently resulted in controversy.

In April 1988, Reagan gave a speech in Springfield, Massachusetts which caused Gorbachev to become agitated with the U.S. President. In the speech, Reagan discussed human rights in the Soviet Union and specifically focused on the country's need to settle regional

¹⁵ Ibid., 1083.

¹⁶ Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 291.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

problems in which they were involved indirectly.¹⁹ Reagan also focused on the necessity of opposing Soviet aggressions in Nicaragua and Ethiopia.²⁰ Additionally, regarding the Soviet Union's violations of the Helsinki Accords and the human rights of the Soviet people, he said that ". . . just as such a Soviet Union can never have truly normal relations with the United States and the rest of the free world. Neither can a Soviet Union that is always trying to push its way into other countries ever have a normal relationship with us."²¹ The U.S. President's remarks angered Gorbachev because parts of the ". . . speech seem to violate the still fragile pattern of consultation and hark back to evil-empire baiting."²² Gorbachev would, however, retake his peace.²³ This episode occurred when Shultz was in Moscow to finalize the plans for the upcoming summit.²⁴

In his meeting with Gorbachev, Shultz discussed with the Soviet General Secretary where U.S.-Soviet relations were at along with what their intentions were for the summit. Shultz avoided the topic of Reagan's most recent speech, which led Gorbachev to believe that the U.S. Secretary of State was embarrassed.²⁵ Shultz instead focused on making clear to Gorbachev the Reagan administration's committal to stronger relations with the Soviet Union and the progress in the various parts of the now common agenda.²⁶ Also during the meeting, the Soviet General

¹⁹ Ibid., 292.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Reagan Foundation, "President Reagan's Remarks to the World Affairs Council—4/21/88," June 2, 1988, 15:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0TsBjFX7Fk>.

²² Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 293.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 292.

²⁵ Ibid., 293.

²⁶ Ibid.

Secretary stated to the U.S. Secretary of State that, in regard to human rights, the U.S. and the Soviet Union had differing ways of life and differing opinions regarding human rights issues.²⁷ The Gorbachev-Shultz meeting led Reagan to be more cautious in his wording and he only continued to bring attention to existing problems between the two nations after he mentioned the positive change that was occurring.²⁸ Additionally, the Soviets also made their own preparations for the summit.

Gorbachev had clear intentions for the 1988 summit. As opposed to simply being a symbol of friendship, the General Secretary wanted the summit to serve as another sign of the Cold War's end.²⁹ This resulted in him feeling that it was of the utmost importance for a disarmament breakthrough to be achieved during the visit.³⁰ Gorbachev's ideal was to have an agreement worked out regarding cuts to strategic arms by the time that the U.S. President arrived in Moscow, which he believed to be reasonable since negotiations in this regard had yielded positive results.³¹ Aside from articulating specific desires for the summit, the Soviet Union prepared for Reagan's visit in other ways as well.

Leading up to the summit in May, the Soviet government had to address their affairs in Afghanistan. The conflict in Afghanistan began when the Soviet's invaded the country in 1979. During the conflict, the U.S. supplied Afghan insurgents with arms. By 1988, the occupation did

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 294.

²⁹ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, trans. Georges Peronansky and Tatjana Varsavsky (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1996), 450.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

not appear to be yielding any positive results for the Soviets and the situation became a major point of discussion in the months before the summit. The U.S. had said that they would stop supplying Afghan insurgents if the Soviets agreed to end their supplying of arms for the regime in Kabul.³² The issue became intertwined with INF ratification when some U.S. senators declared that the U.S. must take a strong position on “symmetry” in order for them to vote in support of the treaty.³³ On April 14, 1988, an agreement was signed by representatives from the U.S., the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and on May 15, 1988, the Soviets began their withdrawal from the Middle Eastern country.³⁴ The withdrawal from Afghanistan was not the only way in which the Soviet Union prepared for the U.S. President’s visit.

As part of their preparations, the Soviets worked to make the city of Moscow look well. Indeed, Bill Keller of *The New York Times* claims that “Along these lucky streets of Moscow, pavers are shoveling asphalt into potholes dating, to guess by appearances, from the Brezhnev era. Architectural eye sores are being dressed up and runaway shrubs are being groomed into submission in anticipation of the Presidential motorcade.”³⁵ When the preparations were completed, the time came for the summit to begin.

The Moscow Summit

Ronald and Nancy Reagan departed the United States for the summit on May 25, 1988. They flew first to Helsinki, Finland in order to adjust to the time difference. From there, they flew to Moscow and arrived on May 29. Upon their arrival, they were greeted by Andrei

³² Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 285.

³³ *Ibid.*, 286.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 287-288.

³⁵ Bill Keller, “Lucky Streets of Moscow Dressing for Reagan Visit: Moscow Streets Dress for Reagan Visit,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1988, 1.

Gromyko, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, and his wife, Lidia. Soon after that, the Reagans were taken to the Kremlin to meet with Gorbachev and his wife, Raisa.

Leading up to the trip, Reagan had intended on paying a visit to a Jewish refusenik couple, Yuri and Tatyana Ziman. The Reagans wanted to show support for the Zimans' struggle to emigrate from the Soviet Union; however, they were told that the visit could negatively impact the summit by embarrassing Gorbachev and, as a result, possibly make it more difficult for the couple to emigrate.³⁶ The Reagans ultimately decided not to visit the Zimans at their apartment, but instead invited them to a reception for other refuseniks and dissidents at the U.S. Ambassador's home, Spaso House.

The event at Spaso House was symbolic. Indeed, Shultz says that "The occasion delivered a message of our respect: we are on your side."³⁷ Some of the guests spoke of their difficult experiences, but they also gave attention to their hope for what is to come.³⁸ Shultz notes that all of the guests took a risk by coming to the event since government retaliation was always a possibility, but that Reagan and his team acknowledged their responsibility to keep watch on how the refuseniks and dissidents are treated.³⁹ The reception had a positive effect for the Ziemans as they were allowed to emigrate from the Soviet Union a few months after the summit concluded.

Reagan's visit to Moscow gave the refuseniks confidence to protest the treatment they had received from the Soviet government. This demonstration occurred the same day as the

³⁶ Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 296-297.

³⁷ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1102.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

reception at Spaso House.⁴⁰ This demonstration was particularly notable as the protesters were not hindered in their actions as they had been in the past.⁴¹ Those protesting, however, were watched closely by police officers and undercover KGB.⁴² The demonstrators were hopeful about the summit and supportive of Reagan's stance on human right thus far.⁴³ Despite this eventful start to the summit, the meetings between the Soviet General Secretary and the U.S. President during the visit were generally calm.

The summit's first meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev was cordial. The two men agreed to do their utmost at completing the START Treaty before Reagan left office—the START Treaty was not completed during the 1988 summit.⁴⁴ Reagan says in his autobiography that even while he made mention of his usual concerns over religious freedom and human rights, the Soviet General Secretary remained receptive to what he was saying, unlike past occurrences.⁴⁵ Gorbachev himself spoke on his desire for an increase of U.S.-Soviet trade.⁴⁶ This first meeting of the Moscow summit was therefore peaceful, as Reagan claims that "Despite our differences, it was not a contentious meeting."⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Scott Shane, "Reagan's Visit Brings Unusual Boon to Determined Moscow Demonstrators," *The Sun*, May 30, 1988, 7A.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Reagan, *An American Life*, 709.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 705.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 709.

In addition to the first meeting, the other meetings during the summit were generally peaceful with the two men reiterating what they had said in the three previous summits. The Soviet General Secretary and the U.S. President also began to profess shared goals on more problems, which allowed them to focus their attention on how to arrive at the goals as opposed to focusing on what the result should be.⁴⁸ Further, the Soviet General Secretary was also satisfied with his meetings with the U.S. President.

Gorbachev spoke favorably of the meetings during the summit. He, too, claimed that the meetings were not divisive. For instance, Gorbachev says that “. . .it appears to me that the significance of those first Moscow talks lay not so much in the subjects we discussed as in the friendly atmosphere and the mutual desire to strike a well-meaning, trustful tone from the start.”⁴⁹ In addition to this, in his work, *Memoirs*, Gorbachev maintained a respectful tone when referring to Reagan, just as the U.S. President had done while he was in Moscow.

Gorbachev and Reagan continued their discussion on the ABM Treaty and SDI during the Moscow summit. While neither party made concessions, they both felt that it was necessary to at least discuss the aforementioned issues.⁵⁰ Reagan stated to Gorbachev that an agreement to not withdraw from the ABM Treaty could accompany a strategic arms reduction if the Soviet Union came back into compliance with ABM for the U.S. viewed the Soviet's radar station, Krasnoyarsk, as a violation of the treaty.⁵¹ Since ABM and SDI were what caused the talks to break down during the summit in Reykjavik, it is not surprising that some tension began to build

⁴⁸ Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 298.

⁴⁹ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 453.

⁵⁰ Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 298.

⁵¹ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 454.

during this discussion. The tension, however, began to subside when Gorbachev made a joke after Reagan accidentally knocked over a glass of water.⁵² Aside from the formal meetings with the Soviet General Secretary, the U.S. President also took time to visit different areas of Moscow.

Exploring Moscow

During the visit, the U.S. President and his wife, Nancy, took a walk on Arbat Street. The street is well-known for its shopping as well as being a hub for artists. Reagan notes that while the city's citizens were respectful, the KGB were aggressive when handling the crowd.⁵³ Seeing the brutality of the KGB was a reminder to the U.S. President that, while positive changes were occurring in the Soviet Union, he was still in a Communist state.⁵⁴ In addition to this, Reagan visited another well-known area of the city while he was in Moscow.

Reagan's visit to Red Square also proved to be a memorable point in the trip. While in Red Square with Gorbachev, Reagan had the opportunity to interact with Moscow citizens; however, not all of the people whom Reagan interacted with were ordinary Moscow citizens; many of them were KGB. During this time, the U.S. President was asked by a reporter if he still thought he was in an "evil empire," to which Reagan responded by simply stating, "no."⁵⁵ His reply was welcomed excitedly by the Soviet people. It showed that "If Reagan believed the country was overcoming its past, then Gorbachev had to be doing something right, most Soviet

⁵² Ibid., 454-455.

⁵³ Reagan, *An American Life*, 709.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Reagan Library, "President Reagan Walking in Red Square with Mikhail Gorbachev, Moscow, May 31, 1988," June 2, 2016, 24:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZUu5WraroM>.

citizens reasoned.”⁵⁶ Since Secretary Shultz was the one who recommended to Reagan that the U.S. President should visit Red Square in the first place, he considered this event a “personal triumph.”⁵⁷ Shultz was not the only one who was satisfied with the walk in Red Square.

General Secretary Gorbachev was pleased by Reagan’s renunciation of labeling the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” Gorbachev wrote that when the U.S. President renounced his previous statement, he simply thought, “Right,” appearing to view Reagan’s words as common knowledge.⁵⁸ Later that day, a reporter asked Reagan why he had changed his mind and who has earned the recognition for the change occurring in the Soviet Union. The U.S. President responded by saying that the Soviet General Secretary has earned a majority of the credit since he is the country’s leader.⁵⁹ This comment touched Gorbachev, who later wrote, “For me, Ronald Reagan’s acknowledgement was one of the genuine achievements of his Moscow visit.”⁶⁰ While the U.S. President stating that he no longer believed the Soviet Union to be an “evil empire” was a notable aspect of his time in Red Square, this walk is also marked by theory.

Reagan’s time in Red Square led to a well-known picture of him shaking hands with a young boy. Standing next to the boy is a man with a camera who is rumored to have been Vladimir Putin. Putin was a member of the KGB at the time, and, on paper, was then in East Germany. Given that there was a large presence of KGB in the Square at that moment, and the Soviet Union’s history of secrecy, it might well have been Putin in the photo, however this is not

⁵⁶ Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 302.

⁵⁷ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1103.

⁵⁸ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 457.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

confirmed.⁶¹ Reagan's walk in Red Square was not his only memorable moment in Moscow as he later visited a monastery.

While in Moscow, Reagan visited the Danilov Monastery. The U.S. President had originally intended to visit with the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Pimen. The church leader, however, stated he would meet Reagan only if the U.S. President does not meet with other priests who had fallen out of the church bureaucracy's favor.⁶² This resulted in Reagan, instead of meeting with Patriarch Pimen, visiting Danilov and meeting the monks along with two metropolitans.⁶³ At the time of the Moscow summit, the monastery was in the process of restoration, which was being funded by the Soviet government.⁶⁴ This resulted in the planned visit being looked upon unfavorably by citizens of the Soviet Union who practiced other faiths.⁶⁵ Despite this, Reagan continued with his plans to visit the monastery. While at Danilov, Reagan gave a brief address praising the Soviet Union's important step toward religious freedom. The U.S. President continued his advocacy for freedom in a speech he gave to college students in the Soviet capital.

Reagan strongly advocated for economic freedom and democracy in his speech to students at Moscow State University. The speech took place in an auditorium at the university which contained a large bust of Vladimir Lenin and a mural of the Russian Revolution in the

⁶¹ Luke Harding, "The Mysterious Case of Vladimir Putin and Ronald Reagan," *The Guardian*, March 20, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/mar/20/vladimir-putin-mystery>.

⁶² Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 301.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ "Reagan to Raise Religion Issue: President Sticks with Plans to Visit Soviet Monastery," *The Washington Post*, May 4, 1988, A4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

background. Reagan's speech was optimistic of the future because of the democratic changes that were occurring around the world. He says that "We do not know what the conclusion will be of this journey, but we're hopeful that the promise of reform will be fulfilled."⁶⁶ Despite speaking on freedom and democracy, Reagan managed to remain respectful to his audience by making references to Russia's cultural history in quoting Russian authors such as Nikolai Gogol.⁶⁷

An article from *The New York Times* praising Reagan's speech was published one day after it was given. The article begins by stating that "It may have been Ronald Reagan's finest oratorical hour."⁶⁸ Along with praise, the writer also includes some of their own interpretations of the speech and the then-current position of U.S.-Soviet relations. The article concludes with an interesting prediction regarding how future generations will view significant events of the Cold War: "When people some day look back to the milestones of the cold war, they are likely to remember the day Ronald Reagan extolled freedom, while Lenin looked on."⁶⁹ This confident statement may not reflect what comes to mind to those who ponder major moments during the Cold War, but it does reflect what perhaps returns to memory those who ponder the Moscow summit.

Reagan's speech at Moscow State University became a major focal point of the 1988 summit in the years following. John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland claim that "It would prove to be one of Reagan's last major performances as chief executive and his last major opportunity

⁶⁶ Reagan Library, "President Reagan's Address and Q&A Session at Moscow State University, USSR, May 31, 1988," May 12, 2016, 29:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3q_T5yZV-U.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 28:49.

⁶⁸ "With Lenin Watching," *The New York Times*, June 1, 1988, A30.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

to win the war of ideas and end the Cold War with the Soviet Union.”⁷⁰ Ambassador Matlock also claims that “. . .his address to students and faculty at Moscow State University was the centerpiece of his trip.”⁷¹ Thus, the U.S. President’s speech at the university arguably earned its place as the focal point of the Moscow visit. Reagan’s well-balanced speech gave testament to the improving U.S.-Soviet relations.

Lingering Distrust

Despite these warming relations between the United States and Soviet Union, distrust remained between the two super-powers. An example of this can be seen in the way that both sides viewed each other. When in Moscow, Reagan referred to Gorbachev as a “friend” while at the same time, a U.S. official claimed that the two men were “anything but buddies.”⁷² In his memoir, Soviet interpreter, Pavel Palzhchenko, refers to the Americans somewhat facetiously and distrustfully when he utilizes the word “friends” in quotation marks.⁷³ Relations between the United States and Soviet Union were improving, but the process had not been complete, and what had been done would not be long lived.

Near the end of the summit, an instance of the still fragile relations between the U.S. and Soviet Union can be seen in an issue that arose between the Reagans and Gorbachevs at the Bolshoi Theatre. Reagan and his wife were scheduled to attend a ballet at the Bolshoi Theatre with Gorbachev and his wife after which the two couples were to have dinner at Gorbachev’s

⁷⁰ John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland, “Reagan at Moscow State University: Consubstantiality Underlying Conflict,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 80.

⁷¹ Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, 301-302.

⁷² Stephens Browning, “Reagan Appeals to Soviets: U.S., Soviets Deadlocked Over All Key Issues,” *The Sun*, June 1, 1988, 1A.

⁷³ Pavel Palazhchenko and Don Oberdorfer, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1997), 92.

dacha. The beginning of the performance was delayed, however, when the U.S. President's team became insistent on having extra security precautions taken by checking all the spectators on their own.⁷⁴ This angered not only the Soviet General Secretary, but also his wife and his chief security guard, Vladimir Medvedev, who all considered cancelling the dinner.⁷⁵ When Gorbachev asked Reagan about the security concern after coming into the theatre, the U.S. President said that he was not aware of any concern in that regard.⁷⁶ Gorbachev then received Reagan warmly, and the two couples carried on their plans for the dinner later that night.⁷⁷ Tensions rose again on the last day of the summit.

The last meeting between the two men and their respective entourages was tense for there was a dispute over wording in the joint statement. When the summit began, Gorbachev gave Reagan a piece of paper that contained lines he wanted to include in their joint statement. One of the lines, which mentioned "peaceful coexistence" between the two countries proved to be problematic. Reagan's team, specifically Secretary Shultz, believed the line implied that the Soviet Union be allowed to do as it pleased without American interference, thus taking U.S.-Soviet relations back to détente era policies.⁷⁸ The issue came to a head at the end of the summit when the Soviet General Secretary brought the matter to the U.S. President's attention. Reagan and his team refused to include the line in the joint statement, and after a heated discussion,

⁷⁴ Ibid., 92-93.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1105.

Gorbachev conceded. While U.S. concerns over the line regarding “peaceful coexistence” was legitimate, they were not entirely accurate.

Gorbachev, along with his team, viewed the “peaceful coexistence” line differently than Reagan and his team. For instance, when referring to the meaning of the statement, the Soviet General Secretary said that “. . . controversies could not and should not be resolved by military means. The nations of the world should live in peace, peaceful co-existence being a universal principle of international relations.”⁷⁹ Additionally, Gorbachev’s interpreter felt that Reagan and his team rejected the line because the U.S. “. . . did not believe Gorbachev meant it and that they thought in the usual geopolitical terms and could not imagine we would ever abandon Stalin’s ‘conquests’ in Europe.”⁸⁰ The dispute over this line is an example of how U.S.-Soviet relations were still fragile and in need of continued improvement. This improvement, however, would have its limits and relations between the two countries became more fragile in the years ahead.

The joint statement detailed the objectives of the Moscow summit along with the United States and Soviet Union’s hopes for the future. The disputed line from Gorbachev was not included in the statement. The main points that are addressed are arms control, humanitarian concerns and human rights, regional problems, bilateral affairs, and future meetings. Hope for the future is expressed in this document; for example, regarding the INF Treaty, “The leaders are determined to achieve the full implementation of all the provisions and understandings of the Treaty, viewing joint and successful work in this respect as an important precedent for future arms control efforts.”⁸¹ While the document mentions the many achievements that were made in

⁷⁹ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 453.

⁸⁰ Palazhchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze*, 92.

⁸¹ “Joint Statement Following the Soviet-United States Summit Meeting in Moscow,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, June 1, 1988, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/joint-statement-following-soviet-united-states-summit-meeting-moscow>.

bettering U.S.-Soviet relations during the summit, the joint statement's writers notes that "Serious differences remain on important issues; the frank dialogue which has developed between the two countries remains critical to surmounting these differences."⁸² After the issue over the joint statement was resolved, the two parties proceeded to sign the ratification documents for the INF Treaty.

Ending the Summit

The ratification of the INF Treaty became a major aspect of the success of the 1988 summit. The U.S. President and the Soviet General Secretary signed the treaty on June 1, and after signing it, the two men shook hands and smiled. Thereafter, Reagan and Gorbachev made their remarks regarding the treaty's ratification. Gorbachev stated that "The exchange, a few minutes ago, of the instruments of ratification means that the era of nuclear disarmament has begun."⁸³ Reagan, in his remarks, stated that "We have dared to hope, Mr. General Secretary, and we have been rewarded"⁸⁴ Both men appeared to be satisfied with the treaty and were hopeful about the future. U.S.-Soviet relations remained fragile, however, and the INF Treaty did not last. Despite the amount of uneasiness that continued to exist between the two countries, though, the summit was praised for its accomplishments.

An article published in *The Sun* at the end of the summit praised the President Reagan's achievements during his time in the Soviet capital. The article claimed that for Reagan, this summit ". . . was easily his best."⁸⁵ The writer of the article portrays the President both to have

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Reagan Library, "President Reagan's Remarks at the Exchange of Documents Ratifying the INF Treaty on June 1, 1988," March 7, 2018, 5:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS92i0Ev8Ac>.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 16:34.

⁸⁵ "Reagan's Best Summit," *The Sun*, June 2, 1988, 10A.

corrected previous mistakes and to have achieved a balance in his rhetoric.⁸⁶ The article also claims that Reagan's Moscow visit will be most remembered for the U.S. President's stance on human rights as well as his statement that he no longer believed the Soviet Union to be an "evil empire."⁸⁷ The praise for the summit did not end with the press.

President Reagan expressed satisfaction with the summit in the years following. He stated that, since this was the first time he was able to meet and shake the hands of regular Soviet citizens, he considered this meeting "...the most memorable" of the four meetings he had with Gorbachev.⁸⁸ Reagan also mentions a variety of "high points" during the visit; one he mentions is when he revisited Red Square, this time with Nancy, at midnight after having dinner at the General Secretary's dacha.⁸⁹ Another instance he mentions, despite the tensions surrounding it, was his time watching the Bolshoi Ballet with the Gorbachevs.⁹⁰ Additionally, upon his return to Washington, President Reagan sent Gorbachev a letter of thanks for his hospitality, and also showing his satisfaction on the progress of their relationship to which the Soviet General Secretary agreed.⁹¹ Just as satisfaction with the summit did not end with the press, it also did not come to an end with Reagan.

There was a great level of optimism for the future following the Moscow visit and eventual fall of the Soviet Union. For instance, Secretary Shultz said that, in regard to the United

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Reagan, *An American Life*, 705.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 711.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

States “winning” the Cold War, “Ours was the winning hand, and I felt we should play that hand with energy and with a vision in mind of the different and promising world of the future.”⁹² The changing political atmosphere in eastern Europe fueled this optimism. Reagan lists these changes which included the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the uprisings against the Communist government in Poland, and the eventual fall of the Berlin Wall.⁹³ He goes on to say that “All around the world, in a reverse of what people once called the domino theory, the forces of Communism were in retreat; the world was saying, to paraphrase a onetime traveler: ‘We have seen the future, and it doesn’t work.’”⁹⁴ Freedom and democracy appeared to be triumphant in the Soviet Union and the 1988 summit played no small role in this triumph.

After its close, the 1988 Reagan-Gorbachev summit was looked upon as a success. The INF Treaty had been ratified, and both Reagan and Gorbachev were, for the most part, able to end their last meeting in good spirits. In addition, the summit contributed to the warmer U.S.-Soviet relations and the spread of democracy throughout eastern Europe, which ultimately led to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. In those terms, the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in 1988 can be viewed as a success. The efforts of both sides for better communication appeared to have paid off. The summit was indeed a success, but a short-term success. While its contributions to warmer U.S.-Soviet relations and the growth of democracy in eastern Europe are important, those warmer relations quickly grew cold again and true democracy did not last long in post-Soviet Russia. In the long-term, therefore, the 1988 summit was not a success.

⁹² Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1108.

⁹³ Reagan, *An American Life*, 703.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Success of the Moscow Summit in the Long-Term

The growing protection of human rights in the Soviet Union that Reagan advocated for so strongly during the Moscow summit would not continue for long after the fall of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Russia experienced a severe decline in the protection of human rights within thirty years of the summit's end. For instance, in 2020, Aleksey Navalny, an anticorruption campaigner and opposition activist, was poisoned by officers of Russia's Federal Security Service.⁹⁵ In addition to this, counterterrorism legislation, the Yarovaya Law, that was passed in 2016 took away many Russians' personal privacy. One of the law's measures required citizens to keep for six months all communications data, along with three years for phone and texting records.⁹⁶ This same piece of legislation also restricted religious freedom in Russia.

The efforts at religious freedom during the Moscow summit was also targeted in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Save for places that are explicitly recognized religious institutions, the Yarovaya Law banned preaching, praying, and the distribution of religious materials.⁹⁷ President Reagan championed religious freedom during his visit to Moscow and praised Gorbachev for the improvements in this area. Those efforts were forgotten within thirty years of the summit, and effectively abandoned with the passage of the Yarovaya Law. Along with human rights abuses and the restrictions on religious freedom, U.S.-Russian

⁹⁵ "2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Russia," U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/russia/>.

⁹⁶ Lincoln Pigman, "Russia Allows Rare Protest of New Antiterrorism Laws," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2016, A3.

⁹⁷ "Russia: 'Big Brother' Law Harms Security, Rights Repeal Rushed Counterterrorism Legislation," Human Rights Watch, July 12, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/12/russia-big-brother-law-harms-security-rights>.

relations would also become strained in the years following the Moscow summit. This strained relationship is arguably best exemplified in the INF Treaty.

A major example of the 1988 summit's long-term failure can be seen in the demise of the INF Treaty. Beginning in 2013, the United States began accusing Russia of violating the treaty. Russia did confess to possessing SSC-8/9M729 missiles, but stated they are compliant with the treaty.⁹⁸ Tensions continued to rise until the U.S. in early 2019 decided to suspend their compliance with INF, and in August of that year decided to withdraw from the treaty. INF had been in place for just over thirty years.

The demise of the INF Treaty is a reminder of how far U.S.-Russian relations have deteriorated since the 1988 Moscow summit. Both President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev cared deeply about arms control and desired better relations between the two countries. Both sides worked hard at a constructive and respectful dialogue in order to achieve a lasting peace. According to Shultz, Gorbachev stated that "I hope no one will be able to wipe out what we have done together over the past three years to improve relations. Life demands that."⁹⁹ The Soviet General Secretary's hope was not fully realized and U.S.-Russian relations deteriorated to the point of abandoning hard-won efforts at peace after just thirty years.

Gorbachev himself was not pleased with the direction in which Russia was heading in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Regarding the positive changes that were taking place in the country in the 1990s, Gorbachev says that "The attempts at reform undertaken in the past two decades have not been seen through to the end."¹⁰⁰ He goes on to acknowledge

⁹⁸ "NATO and the INF Treaty," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, August 2, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166100.htm.

⁹⁹ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1100.

¹⁰⁰ Mikhail Gorbachev, *The New Russia*, trans. Arch Tait (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), ix.

the change that has occurred in the lives of Russian citizens, but maintains that the majority of Russians have not seen a true renewing of life and have been disappointed in their hopes.¹⁰¹

The former Soviet General Secretary did maintain a hope for the future. He was, after all, a self-proclaimed optimist.¹⁰² Gorbachev felt that what the world needed was a return to Perestroika, or “New Thinking,” as that is what he claimed aided in ending the Cold War.¹⁰³ In short, Gorbachev’s definition of “New Thinking” was this: “. . .New Thinking is modern humanism, its purpose to move us towards a more stable, safer, more just and humane society.”¹⁰⁴ The former Soviet General Secretary thus believed that New Thinking/Perestroika was needed because its goal is to help create a more peaceful society. Given the actions that Russia took in the years following Gorbachev writing this, and the actions of other nations, it does not appear that his suggestion was taken into serious consideration.

In conclusion, the 1988 Moscow summit was thus unsuccessful in the long-term because the things that were fought for did not yield long-lasting results. The two sides worked hard to improve relations between the Soviet Union and the United States as both Gorbachev and Reagan remained respectful in their dialogue toward one another during the visit. President Reagan took the opportunity to explore Moscow by visiting Arbat Street, Red Square, and Danilov Monastery, along with speaking to Moscow citizens. His speech at Moscow State University, in which he advocated strongly for human rights and freedom, is seen as the main highlight of the summit. Democracy and freedom was appearing to be triumphant in the Soviet Union. This was short-lived, however, as human rights abuses occurred in Russia in the years

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 410.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 293.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 295.

following the summit and the fall of the Soviet Union. In addition to this, U.S.-Russian relations also deteriorated in the succeeding years. This is exemplified in the demise of the INF Treaty after only thirty years in force. The 1988 Reagan-Gorbachev summit was a short-term success but a long-term failure since the reforms that it achieved did not stand the test of time.

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