

Today, we look back to October 1 1988, when MIKHAIL GORBACHEV (pronounced 'Mick - hale Gor - ba - choff') became Head of State of the SOVIET UNION. I told you on June 15 how the Soviet Union was created, with the Communists taking over Russia in 1917 and renaming it the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev was born in 1931, when the Soviet Union was ruled by JOSEPH STALIN, a very cruel, wicked and stupid person. Just a year after Gorbachev was born, the Soviet Union experienced a terrible famine, where millions of people died because they didn't have enough food to eat. And there wasn't enough food to eat because all of the Soviet Union's farms were run by 'collectives' - groups of people who were given the job of farming, but not in order to make money for themselves, but in order to produce food for everyone in the Soviet Union. And when people aren't doing things for themselves, but for other people, they tend not to do them very well. So the farms weren't very well run, and didn't produce very much food. And Stalin ordered that whatever food had been produced should be shipped to the cities, to allow people working in factories to eat. So everyone in the countryside starved. And when millions of people started dying, Stalin didn't think to himself, 'This is my fault. Maybe communism isn't such a great system after all.' Instead, he said, 'Everything would have been perfect, but people on the farms have been deliberately ruining everything. Find out who the bad apples are who are making everything go wrong, and have them SHOT.' So not only did the people in the countryside have to deal with not having enough food - they also had Stalin's secret police descending on them, trying to find out who was deliberately sabotaging Stalin's wonderful plans for the Soviet Union. Both of Gorbachev's grandparents were arrested and tortured by the secret police to find out why the farms had not produced enough food - and Gorbachev never forgot what happened.



He became a member of the Communist party and started rising up to better and more powerful positions within the party.



Gorbachev's target was to become the leader of the Soviet Union, just like Stalin had been (Stalin died in 1953), and reform the communist system so that the sort of things that had happened under Stalin would never happen again. What Gorbachev wanted was communism - but communism 'with a human face'. It looked for a while like this might also have been the goal of Stalin's successor - NIKITA KHRUSCHEV (pronounced 'Nick - ee - tah Kroosh - chev'). One of Khrushchev's first acts after taking over as head of the Soviet Union was to give a secret speech on 25 February 1956 to the top

people in the Communist Party in Russia where he denounced Stalin, setting out all the crimes and blunders that he had committed. But the Communist party wasn't ready to face up to how terribly it had run the Soviet Union, and Khrushchev ended up being removed from office in 1964, and was replaced by LEONID BREZHNEV (pronounced 'Lay - oh - ned Brej - nev'). And the Soviet Union went through a long period of grey stagnation, where the Soviet Union got further and further behind the West. But anyone who said that the Communist Party was doing a terrible job of running the Soviet Union was arrested and either put in prison, or put in a hospital for people with mental



problems (the joke being that you had to be mentally ill to speak out against the Communist Party) and injected with loads of drugs (which is no joke at all). But all this while Gorbachev was rising up through the ranks, biding his time and waiting his chance to become the leader of the Soviet Union.

Brezhnev died in 1982, and was succeeded by YURI ANDROPOV, who was the head of the Soviet Union secret police (the KGB). But only two years into the job, Andropov died, in 1984. It looked like there was a chance for Gorbachev - who was then only 53 and way younger than all the other people at the top of the Communist Party - to get the top job. But those in charge of the Communist party hesitated to place their fortunes in the hands of such a spring chicken as Gorbachev. Instead, they opted for another very old, grey man to lead the Soviet Union - KONSTANTIN CHERNENKO (pronounced 'Kon - stan - tin Chur - nyenko'). But that old, grey man only lived for a year and in 1985, they had to do it all again in terms of deciding who would lead the Soviet Union. The very long serving Soviet Foreign Secretary ANDREI GROMYKO (pronounced 'And - dray Grow - mee - ko') said, 'I think it's time for Mikhail to take charge.' But other people still hesitated to give Mikhail Gorbachev the power of becoming the leader of the Soviet Union. So it was decided that Gromyko would become the Head of State of the Soviet Union - the equivalent of our Queen (but without a crown) - and Gorbachev would become the head of the Communist Party - the equivalent of our Prime Minister. But everyone knew that Gorbachev was now in charge, and everyone in the West was excited to see what he would do to reform the Soviet Union. MARGARET THATCHER, the British Prime Minister, went out of her way to signal her approval of Gorbachev, saying that he was 'a man you could do business with'.



Gorbachev set about trying to keep the Soviet Union as a communist state, but while treating people in a much more humane way than his grandfathers had been treated, or the 'dissidents' who had denounced the Communist Party and had been locked up for doing so. Dissent was now allowed - 'GLASNOST' (Russian for 'openness') was encouraged. And Gorbachev tried to rebuild the Soviet Union's decaying cities and factories - something he called 'PERESTROIKA' (Russian for 'rebuilding'). He also tried to get friendlier relationships with the West, and in 1986 he met the American President RONALD REAGAN (pronounced 'Ray - gun') in the Icelandic capital REYKJAVIK (pronounced 'Ray - kya - vik') where Bobby Fischer had won his world chess championship title from the Russians 14 years before (June 15). Gorbachev made a bold offer to Reagan - that they each give up and destroy all the nuclear weapons in their possession. Reagan was tempted (when Thatcher learned afterwards of Gorbachev's offer, she was horrified as she thought that nuclear weapons were essential to keeping world peace) because he was horrified at the thought of the terrible damage that nuclear weapons could do. But Gorbachev had one condition. Reagan was trying to protect the United States from the threat of nuclear weapons by developing a technology - nicknamed 'STAR WARS' - that would shoot down nuclear weapons in space if they were launched at

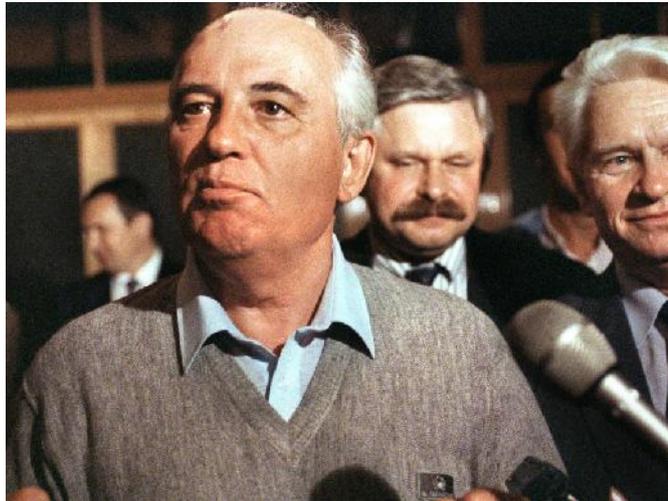
the United States. Gorbachev said, 'We are willing to give up all our nuclear weapons, if you do the same - and you give up trying to develop Star Wars.' Reagan refused - he wouldn't give up on the hope that one day Americans would never have to fear someone launching a nuclear attack against them. But the very fact that Gorbachev had been willing to make such an incredibly world-changing offer made everyone think that he could really make huge changes in the way the Soviet Union operated.



But in the end Gorbachev failed. He achieved his dream of becoming leader of the Soviet Union on 1 October 1988, when Gromyko stepped down. But his ultimate dream - of the Soviet Union living under 'communism with a human face' - was impossible to achieve. People simply did not want to live under a government that told them where to work and what to do, and where they couldn't run businesses and make money for themselves and their families. The fact that Gorbachev was a nice guy just encouraged the countries around the Soviet Union - countries like Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania - to try to break away from the control the Soviet Union had had over them since the end of WORLD WAR II, in 1945. When earlier attempts to rebel had been made - in Hungary in 1956, and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 - the Soviet Union had sent tanks into the rebelling country and arrested or killed the leaders of the rebellion. But Gorbachev would not do the same - despite threatening to do so when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania started demanding their independence from the Soviet Union. By 1989, the Soviet Union had lost control over all of these countries, and it started to lose control of regions within the Soviet Union as more and more people made a break for freedom.



In August 1991, an attempt was made to overthrow Gorbachev - just as had happened with Khrushchev 27 years before - but the people went out on the streets of the Soviet Union's capital, MOSCOW, demanding that the leaders of the coup (pronounced 'Koo') against Gorbachev stand down. Gorbachev was back in charge - but the fact that he had come close to being overthrown was not good for his image or his authority. Things unravelled very quickly, and the Soviet Union was officially dissolved at the end of 1991, and broken up into a number of different republics, with RUSSIA being the most important and central one. 74 years after the RUSSIAN REVOLUTION in 1917, Russia was back as a country - but much smaller



than the old Soviet Union had been. And Gorbachev was gone. He no longer commanded any support from anyone - and in any case the Communist Party that he led was dead and buried. So Gorbachev retired. He is still alive - the only one still alive of the three key figures (the others being Reagan and Thatcher) who changed the world by bringing down and dissolving the Soviet Union. But in Gorbachev's case, his greatest achievement is something he never wanted to accomplish - he wanted to make the Soviet Union work, not bury it. But that is what he will always be remembered for.

