Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev was the last leader of the Soviet Union, serving as General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1985 until 1991. He was born on March 2, 1931, in Privolnoye, a village in southern Russia. Gorbachev witnessed the brutalities of Soviet rural policies firsthand during his youth, including the devastating famine caused by Joseph Stalin's forced collectivization. Despite this, he joined the Communist Party and pursued a career in politics, eventually rising to the highest echelons of Soviet power. His experiences with the harsh realities of Soviet agricultural policy would later inform his attempts at reforming the Soviet system. Gorbachev introduced the policies of 'glasnost' (openness) and 'perestroika' (restructuring) to the Soviet Union, which were revolutionary in the context of Soviet governance. 'Glasnost' allowed for increased transparency in government institutions and freedom of information, leading to a more open discussion about the state's history and current problems. 'Perestroika' aimed to restructure the Soviet economy by introducing elements of market economics and reducing the government's control over production. These policies were groundbreaking because they marked a significant departure from the strict, centralized control that had characterized the Soviet government since its inception. Gorbachev's foreign policy was characterized by a reduction in tensions with the West, known as 'detente.' He worked to end the Cold War, notably through his meetings with U.S. President Ronald Reagan. The two leaders signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, which eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons. Gorbachev's willingness to engage with the West and reduce the nuclear threat was a significant shift from previous Soviet leaders' policies, and it played a key role in ending the four-decade-long Cold War. In 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev received the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in bringing the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion and for his efforts in democratizing his country. The Nobel Committee cited his leading role in the peace process which today characterizes important parts of the international community. However, at home, he faced increasing criticism and his popularity waned as the Soviet economy deteriorated and republics within the USSR demanded independence. Despite his global recognition, Gorbachev's position within the Soviet Union became increasingly precarious. Gorbachev's tenure saw the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which was a symbolic end to the division of Europe and the Cold War. Unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev did not intervene with military force in Eastern Bloc countries that sought independence from Soviet influence. This non-intervention policy was a stark departure from the Soviet Union's historical actions, such as the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968. Gorbachev's approach allowed for a relatively peaceful end to Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. Under Gorbachev, the Soviet Union experienced its first and only presidential election in 1990. Although the position was largely ceremonial and the real power still resided with the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Gorbachev was elected as the nation's first executive president. This move was part of his broader attempts to reform the political system, but it also served to consolidate his power as he faced growing opposition from both reformists and hardliners within the Party and the government. The August 1991 coup attempt against Gorbachev by hardline members of the Soviet government and KGB was a pivotal moment in his leadership and the history of the Soviet Union. While Gorbachev was vacationing in the Crimea, the coup plotters placed him under house arrest and attempted to take control of the government. The coup ultimately failed, largely due to the resistance led by Boris Yeltsin, the President of the Russian Republic. The event weakened Gorbachev's position and accelerated the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which formally ended in December 1991. Gorbachev's relationship with Boris Yeltsin, who emerged as the leader of the Russian Federation, was complex and often strained. Yeltsin was both a critic and a beneficiary of Gorbachev's reforms. As Gorbachev's power waned and the Soviet Union neared its end, Yeltsin's influence grew. After the failed coup, Yeltsin took a leading role in dismantling the Soviet Union and emerged as the preeminent leader of post-Soviet Russia, overshadowing Gorbachev's legacy. After leaving office, Gorbachev remained active in Russian and international affairs, although his influence in post-Soviet Russia was limited. He established the Gorbachev Foundation in 1992, which focused on global challenges such as disarmament, environmental issues, and poverty. He also became a vocal critic of his successors' policies, particularly the centralization of power under Vladimir Putin. Gorbachev's later years were marked by his advocacy for democracy and international cooperation, reflecting the ideals he promoted during his time in office. Mikhail Gorbachev's legacy is deeply complex; he is credited with helping to end the Cold War and introducing reforms that led to increased freedoms within the Soviet Union. However, he is also associated with the economic turmoil that followed his attempts at reform and the eventual collapse of the Soviet state. Internationally, he is often revered as a visionary leader who steered the world away from the brink of nuclear conflict, while domestically, opinions are mixed, with some Russians blaming him for the loss of Soviet power and prestige. Gorbachev's life and career encapsulate the dramatic changes that took place in the late 20th century and continue to influence global politics today.