



## Lesson Plan: Experiencing Perestroika

### OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will watch first-person accounts of what it was like to live in Moscow when Mikhail Gorbachev led the Soviet Union, including how the policies of perestroika and glasnost changed everyday life and what it was like to demonstrate against the August 1991 coup attempt by Communist hardliners. After discussing these events, students will consider what role the Internet might have played during this time and create social media samples with historically accurate details of the foiled August 1991 coup.

For background information on the Soviet Union, Gorbachev's reforms and the 1991 coup attempt, please see the [Related Resources](#) section of this lesson.

The clips used in this lesson are from the film **My Perestroika**, a documentary that tells the personal stories of five Russians who experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union and the constantly shifting political landscape of post-Soviet Russia. Please note that the film is in Russian with English subtitles. Also, a number of film subjects smoke and drink alcohol, and the filmmaker version of the film contains profanity. To avoid language issues, please use the video clips on this website or the broadcast version of the film.

POV documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from their initial broadcast. In addition, POV offers a lending library of DVDs and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Watch and discuss first-person accounts of those who experienced Soviet life under Gorbachev and demonstrated against the August 1991 coup attempt.
- Infer what role the Internet could have played in events leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- Create a blog post, tweet summary or series of Facebook status updates with comments from friends with historically accurate details of the foiled August 1991 coup.

### GRADE LEVELS

9-12

### SUBJECT AREAS

Geography, Social Studies, World History, Political Science, International Studies, Language Arts, Current Events

## **MATERIALS**

- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video and for students to conduct research
- Handout: [Key People and Ideas](#) (PDF)

## **ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED**

One 50-minute class period, plus time outside of class to complete a written assignment

## **FILM CLIPS**

Clip 1: “The Beginning of Perestroika” (length 6:32)

The clip begins at 34:08 with black and white footage of men lined up like soldiers. It ends at 40:40 with “...everything was by ration coupons.”

Clip 2: “Remembering the 1991 Coup That Failed” (length 2:25)

The clip begins at 53:35 with “I think I had the need to be surrounded...” It ends at 56:00 when Lyuba says, “...I concretely remember that pure feeling of freedom.”

## **ACTIVITY**

Note: This lesson assumes that students already have some background in the history of the Soviet Union. If students require a stronger foundation in this period of history, please see the Extensions and Adaptations section of this lesson plan for a recommended activity. You might also refer to the [POV Discussion Guide](#) for additional background information.

1. Tap existing student knowledge by displaying or distributing the Key People and Ideas sheet and asking students to match each item on the list with its definition. (Answers: C, D, B, E, A).
2. Point out that after Gorbachev rose to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, the reforms that he put into place dramatically changed the lives of Soviet citizens. Introduce a brief video clip (length 6:32) in which several Russians describe their experiences during that turbulent time. Explain that the clip begins with a man talking about what happened during his mandatory two years of military service. Focus student viewing by asking them to take notes as they watch on some of the ways that the Soviet Union changed during that period.
3. After watching the video clip, discuss some or all of the following questions:
  - What motivated Andrei (first man in the video) to join the Communist Party?
  - Do you think anything would have happened to Andrei if he had refused an invitation to join the Communist Party when a leader such as Stalin or Brezhnev was in power?
  - In your opinion, which of the new freedoms enjoyed by Russians was the most important? Why?
  - Why do you think one woman in the video called this period a “really confusing and difficult time for our country”?
4. Explain that as Soviets experienced new freedoms, many Soviet republics wanted independence from Moscow. In August 1991, Gorbachev was about to sign a New Union Treaty that would have transformed the Soviet Union into a federation of

independent republics with a common president, foreign policy and military. To prevent this from happening, a group of Communist hardliners attempted to remove Gorbachev from power. In response, tens of thousands of protestors gathered at the Russian White House. These mass demonstrations, combined with a lack of support from the military, helped to foil the coup and led to the official demise of the Soviet Union later that year. (See POV's **My Perestroika** [timeline](#) for more information.)

5. Tell students that they are going to watch a video clip (length 2:25) in which some of those who protested during the coup describe their thoughts as events unfolded. Ask students to determine why so many people might have participated in the demonstrations.

6. Discuss:

- Why did Lyuba (the first woman in the video) choose to demonstrate against the coup?
- What might have happened if Lyuba and others had not participated in the demonstrations?
- How does hearing eyewitness accounts of the coup differ from reading about the event in a textbook? What information do such accounts add to your historical knowledge? What is missing?

7. Point out that this coup attempt in 1991 took place just before the rise of the Internet. Ask students how access to information from around the world and the freedom to communicate with others could have made it difficult for Communist hardliners to re-establish the old system of the Soviet Union. If social media tools such as blogs, Twitter or Facebook had existed at the time, what role might they have played during the coup in organizing people for demonstrations or helping them share ideas or tell others what had happened?

8. Have students illustrate their ideas by developing historically-based blog posts, tweet summaries or series of Facebook status updates with comments from friends about the August 1991 coup. Students should write from the perspective of Russians in Moscow and conduct additional research as needed to ensure historical accuracy. Consider also sharing the following resources with students to stimulate ideas:

- [FRONTLINE. "Cairo: The Protest Diaries."](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/2011/02/cairo-the-protest-diaries.html)  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/2011/02/cairo-the-protest-diaries.html>  
This diary entry talks about the use of social media in the Egyptian revolution and can serve as a model for a blog post.
- [The Huffington Post. "Tweets From the Ground in Egypt."](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/28/tweets-egypt-twitter_n_815631.html#s232216&title=benwedeman)  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/28/tweets-egypt-twitter\\_n\\_815631.html#s232216&title=benwedeman](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/28/tweets-egypt-twitter_n_815631.html#s232216&title=benwedeman)  
The 31 tweets collected here describe what was happening in Cairo during the 2011 revolution.
- [MemoryArchive. "Moscow Coup August 1991."](http://www.memoryarchive.org/en/Moscow_Coup%2C_August_1991%2C_An_onymous)  
[http://www.memoryarchive.org/en/Moscow\\_Coup%2C\\_August\\_1991%2C\\_An\\_onymous](http://www.memoryarchive.org/en/Moscow_Coup%2C_August_1991%2C_An_onymous)  
This first-person account of the 1991 Moscow coup attempt resembles a blog post and provides additional information about circumstances during the coup.

## EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- Prepare for this lesson by helping students develop their knowledge of Soviet history and the demise of the USSR. Use a KWL chart (<http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/kwl.pdf>) to find out what students already know and what they want to find out. Help to identify knowledge gaps by asking the class questions, such as, “What do you already know about Soviet leaders like Stalin and Gorbachev?” or “What is your understanding of policies like glasnost and perestroika?” Once the first two columns of the chart are completed, assign topics in the “W” column to small student groups to research. POV’s **My Perestroika** timeline is a good starting point, but using a variety of resources is recommended. Ask each group to summarize what it learned in the “L” column of the chart and then explain its findings to the class. Have students also compare what they learned (column “L”) to their prior understanding of these topics (column “K”) and make corrections as needed.
- Compare various accounts of the events that led to the end of the Soviet Union. In small groups, have students read histories of this time period from textbooks, a variety of reports from news sources in the United States and other countries and the work of academic scholars and compare them with those of the Russian citizens featured in **My Perestroika**. Identify which are primary and which are secondary sources and talk about the strengths and limitations of each type of information. Then, discuss the similarities and differences that students notice between the accounts and use the concepts from POV’s Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php>) to help the class analyze what might account for any variations.
- Create a class video inspired by the film **My Perestroika**. Ask students to begin by identifying the key political events for their generation. Next, assign them to journal about their reactions to each event and how what happened has influenced their lives. Then, have students capture these ideas in video interviews with each other and edit highlights together to form one class video. Hold a screening of the final product and compare and contrast the student perspectives featured in the video.
- Help students connect historical events to the lives of their family members. Ask students to conduct interviews with parents or other relatives, asking them what they remember about the events that led to the end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Students can use POV’s **My Perestroika** timeline as a reference as they prepare for these interviews. Where were they when important events, such as the attempted coup in August 1991, happened? How closely did they follow what was happening during that time? What were their sources of information? What were their feelings about the end of the Cold War? Students should summarize these responses and discuss them with classmates in small groups.
- Explore POV films that feature republics from the former Soviet Union. Belarusian Waltz (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/belarusianwaltz/>) follows a lone performance artist as he stages protests against the dictator of Belarus. The English Surgeon (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/englishsurgeon/>) shows the limits of medical care in Ukraine

and how an English neurosurgeon has worked to improve conditions. Video, background information and educator resources are provided online for each film.

- Investigate further how social media tools have been used in more recent political events, such as those that have taken place in Arab nations. Show the class the *NewsHour* story, "Debate Continues Over Social Media's Role in Egyptian, Arab World Protests" ([http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/world/jan-june11/egypt1\\_02-14.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/world/jan-june11/egypt1_02-14.html)). Then, have students research and share with the class examples of how blogs, Twitter and Facebook have been used in other places to engage citizens in elections, social and political movements or local causes.
- Find out more about Russia's struggles with capitalism and democracy since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Watch the FRONTLINE/World stories, "Rich in Russia" (<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/moscow/>) and "Russia: Putin's Plan" (<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/russia703/>). Instruct students to write essays that break down the economic and political challenges Russia has faced since 1991 and analyze the benefits and limits of free markets and democracy in modern Russian society.

## RESOURCES

### ***American Experience*. "Mikhail Gorbachev."**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/reagan-gorbachev/>

This biography of Mikhail Gorbachev describes his humble beginnings, his rise to power and his reforms of the Soviet Union.

### **Goldman, Marshall I. "Perestroika." Library of Economics and Liberty.**

<http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/Perestroika.html>

This article, written in 1992 by Russian economics professor Marshall I. Goldman, provides some historical detail about Gorbachev's economic policies and their consequences.

### **History.com. "Cold War."**

<http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war>

This resource provides video, images, pictures and details of the Cold War.

### **Library of Congress. "Perestroika."**

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/pere.html>

This article provides a brief description of the impact made by Gorbachev's restructuring policies under perestroika.

### ***NewsHour*. "Eye on Russia."**

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/july-dec01/russia\\_8-20.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/july-dec01/russia_8-20.html)

This August 2001 report looks back at the 1991 coup attempt and recounts what happened.

### **POV. "USSR to Perestroika Timeline."**

This timeline provides highlights of Soviet and Russian history from the outbreak of World War I in 1914 to Medvedev becoming president of Russia in 2008. Interspersed with these entries are milestones in the lives of the **My Perestroika** film subjects.

**U.S. Department of State. "Russia."**

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3183.htm>

This country profile includes details on Russian history, government, the country's economy and more.

**STANDARDS**

**These standards are drawn from Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects**

[http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI\\_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

SL. 9-10, 11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grade-appropriate] topics, text and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

W.9-10, 11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

RH.9-10.9 Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, and technical processes.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

**These standards are drawn from “Content Knowledge,” a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning)**

<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>

Arts and Communication, Standard 4: Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication.

Behavioral Studies, Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity and behavior.

Geography, Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth’s cultural mosaics.

Geography, Standard 13: Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth’s surface.

Historical Understanding, Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

World History, Standard 43: Understands how post-World War II reconstruction occurred, new international power relations took shape and colonial empires broke up.

World History, Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability and peace in an interdependent world.

World History, Standard 45: Understands major global trends since World War II.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive’s director of education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource Web site (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.