

Optimised Study Guide — The Collapse of Communism & the End of the Cold War

Optimised, exam-focused study guide for the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War (Unit 4, Elective 1, Component C04-U4E1). Grounded in the 2020–2025 SCSA exams and marking keys, especially the 2021 Q13 evaluating the importance of Glasnost and Perestroika in ending the Cold War. Covers Gorbachev's reforms and their failures, the deeper structural causes (economic stagnation, the arms race, Afghanistan), the abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine, the events of 1989 and the 1991 dissolution of the USSR, and the historiographical debate over agency versus structural decay. Leads with exam priorities and marking-key expectations.

In 1985 the Soviet bloc looked permanent; by 1991 it was gone. The collapse of communism is one of the elective's biggest essay topics, and it turns on a classic historical question: *how much was Gorbachev's reforms, and how much was the deeper rot of the system?* Learn to weigh the catalyst against the underlying causes.

The marking-key steer. The 2021 essay — "*Evaluate the importance of the policies of Glasnost and Perestroika in bringing about the end of the Cold War*" — is an **evaluation**. The marking key explicitly says top answers treat Glasnost and Perestroika as more of a **catalyst** and weigh **other factors as more important**: above all the **economic stagnation** of the command economy (unable to match Western, especially Reagan-era, spending), plus the draining war in **Afghanistan**. Don't credit Gorbachev with everything.

How this content is examined

- **Essays.** The importance of Glasnost/Perestroika in ending the Cold War; the reasons for the collapse of communism; the events of 1989.
- **Source analysis.** Sources on Gorbachev's reforms, 1989 or the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine require precise knowledge of cause and effect.

Answer the verb. Evaluate the importance = judge how much a factor mattered, weighing it against alternatives. The marking key wants Glasnost/Perestroika positioned as catalyst, not sole cause.

1. Gorbachev's reforms

- **Glasnost ("openness"):** greater transparency and media freedom; scrutiny of government; exposure of Stalin's crimes; access to Western culture. This **emboldened dissidents** and fed the mass movements of 1989 — but it also unleashed criticism the regime couldn't control (the limits were exposed by the 1986 **Chernobyl** cover-up).
- **Perestroika ("restructuring"):** an attempt to reform the Communist Party and decentralise the stagnant command economy, allowing some market mechanisms and foreign investment. **It largely failed** to restart the economy — arguably making the crisis worse.

2. The deeper causes (often more important)

- **Economic stagnation:** the centrally planned economy could not match Western productivity or keep up with US military spending — especially under **Reagan** (the arms race, SDI/"Star Wars"). This is the factor the marking key calls "paramount."
- **Afghanistan:** the USSR's costly, unwinnable war (1979–89) drained resources and morale — the Soviet "Vietnam."
- **Loss of legitimacy:** decades of repression (see the Eastern Europe guide) had hollowed out belief in the system.

3. The decisive turn: abandoning the Brezhnev Doctrine

- Gorbachev signalled the USSR would **no longer intervene** to prop up Eastern European regimes.
- Once the threat of Soviet tanks was removed, the satellites fell in rapid succession in **1989** — Poland, Hungary, and then the **fall of the Berlin Wall (November 1989)**.
- The USSR itself dissolved in **1991**, ending the Cold War.

4. Historical perspectives (the examinable debate)

- **Gorbachev's agency:** did his reforms (and his restraint in 1989) cause the collapse — a great man changing history?
- **Structural decay:** or was the system doomed by economic failure regardless, with Gorbachev merely the trigger?
- **Western pressure:** how much credit goes to Reagan's arms race and the West's economic superiority?
- The strongest answers see Glasnost/Perestroika as the *catalyst* that released forces created by deeper structural failure.

5. Recurring exam question patterns & what high answers do

- **"Evaluate the importance of Glasnost and Perestroika in ending the Cold War."** High answers: explain the policies and their effects, then weigh them against economic stagnation, Afghanistan and Western pressure, concluding that they were the catalyst rather than the root cause.
- **"Analyse the reasons for the collapse of communism."** High answers: combine the reforms, structural decay, the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine and 1989.

Recall self-test. Can you:

- Define Glasnost and Perestroika and explain their effects — and their failures?
- Explain why economic stagnation and the arms race were so damaging?
- Explain the impact of the Afghanistan war?
- Explain why abandoning the Brezhnev Doctrine triggered the fall of the satellites in 1989?
- Sequence 1989 → the fall of the Wall → the 1991 dissolution of the USSR?
- Argue the "Gorbachev's agency," "structural decay" and "Western pressure" interpretations — and position the reforms as catalyst?