Given the long history of adversarial relations between the United States and Russia/the Soviet Union, it is not surprising that the overall public opinion ratings of Russian leaders have usually been less than favorable. In 1950, just prior to start of the Korean War, 70% of Americans did not think the U.S. would be successful in coming to an agreement with Joseph Stalin, and when he died in 1953 almost half thought it would make relations easier (Gallup, Mar 1950 and NORC, Apr 1953). Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, was also met with a less than favorable response—when asked to rate Khrushchev’s likability on a scale of +5 to -5, in 1957 44% of Americans gave him a rating of -5, the lowest score possible. In 1963, several months after the U.S. and U.S.S.R. had nearly gone to war in the Cuban Missile Crisis, that number had risen to 74% (Nov 1957 and May 1963, Gallup). Khrushchev was succeeded by Leonid Brezhnev, and amid rising Cold War tensions with the Reagan administration he was also received poorly. In 1982, a poll conducted by Gallup found that 49% of Americans gave him a rating of between 0-30 on a 100 point thermometer scale.

Perhaps the most interesting case of public opinion about a Russian leader is that of Mikhail Gorbachev. In October 1985, only 39% of Americans gave Gorbachev a favorable approval rating, but following the fall of the Berlin Wall that number had jumped to 66% in 1991 (ABC/WP Oct 1985, Washington Post, Aug 1991). Gorbachev’s liberalization of the Soviet Union, as well as his constructive working relationship with the Western Hemisphere including the UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and U.S. President Ronald Reagan, were the likely causes of this increase. In a poll conducted 6 months before Gorbachev’s resignation and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Americans overwhelmingly supported Mikhail Gorbachev over Boris Yeltsin, who would later become Russia’s first president after the fall of the Iron Curtain. 63% of Americans familiar with the two leaders answered that they would rather see Gorbachev as the leader of the Soviet Union even though he planned to continue the Communist
regime in the U.S.S.R., whereas Yeltsin was a reformer (NBC/WSJ, June 1991). Unfamiliarity with Yeltsin was probably the major reason for these figures, whereas Gorbachev was a known quantity. With the U.S. and Russia enjoying good relations over the next few years, Yeltsin's approval had risen to 58% in 1993 and remained high at 47% in 1998 (Gallup/CNN/USA Today, March 1993 and Gallup, Dec 1998).

In 2002, with good relations between the two nations, 41% of Americans had a favorable view of Vladimir Putin as he became Russia's leader (Gallup, May 2002). After disagreements over the war in Iraq and several breakaway former Soviet republics, and particularly following Russia's ongoing dispute with Ukraine over the Crimea and other territories, Putin's ratings have sunk to only a 9% favorable opinion (Gallup, March 2014). With talk of a new Cold War between the once-again rivals (half of Americans believe one is coming), Putin's numbers will likely not improve any time soon (Gallup, CNN/ORC International, Quinnipiac, March 2014).

While the cases of Gorbachev and Yeltsin show that Americans can be favorably disposed toward a Russian leader, the ongoing political, diplomatic, and military rivalries and confrontations between the two nations have made most Russian leaders unpopular figures in U.S. public opinion.

These data are available at the public opinion archives at the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. The iPOLL database permits in-depth analysis of the American public in the aggregate.

To learn more about these resources, see membership benefits.

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Sources

- Roper Center iPOLL database

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