

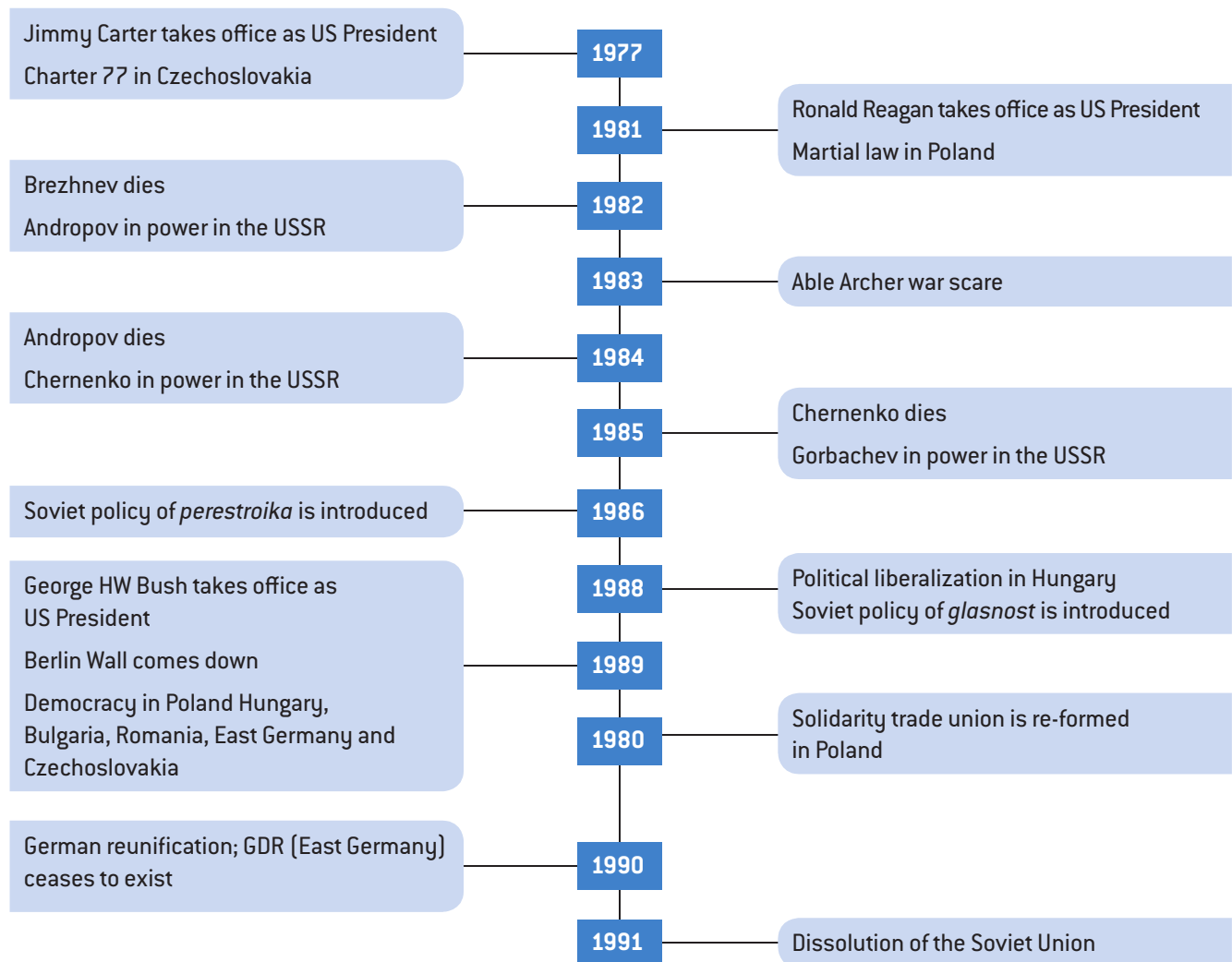
4 THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Global context

In 1985, Gorbachev came to power determined to keep the socialist sphere intact through reforms. No one was aware that his calls for change within the Soviet Union, designed largely to reinvigorate a failing economy and make the USSR competitive with the West, would lead to the end of communism in Europe. Unlike the party leadership in China, the Eastern Europeans were either unable or unwilling to engage in

economic reform while continuing as socialist states. Deng Xiaoping and the CPC leadership did not hesitate to use force against protestors; elsewhere this was not the case. In the end, China made economic reforms that allowed for material prosperity but authoritarianism continued; in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, economic and political reforms emboldened the public and communism ceased.

Timeline



4.1 Eastern European dissent

Conceptual understanding

Key question

→ What were the similarities and differences in the anti-government actions in Czechoslovakia and Poland in the Brezhnev era?

Key concepts

→ Change

→ Perspective

In the 1980s, in addition to the USSR, seven countries in Eastern Europe were members of the Warsaw Pact. Albania remained a member but had aligned itself more closely with China in the 1960s. Similarly, Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu pursued a more independent path, but remained part of the treaty alliance and did nothing to threaten Soviet security interests. After an initial phase of brutality Hungary pursued a policy of liberalization characterized by its leader, János Kádár, in the statement, “he who is not against us is with us”. Bulgaria remained on the fringes, pursuing policies that did not contradict Soviet policies but instead focused on ethnic unrest, especially among the Turkish community there. In Czechoslovakia and Poland, however, dissent arose against the communist parties, advocating for change through non-violent means.

Czechoslovakia: Dissidents, Charter 77 and Václav Havel

Despite the suppression of the Prague Spring, there were continuous agitations in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s; the best known was the result of the arrest of a Czechoslovak rock group. In the late 1960s, a Czechoslovak music group had formed that later became the catalyst for a new round of challenges from dissenters. The Plastic People of the Universe wanted to emulate their musical heroes – Velvet Underground and Frank Zappa – but they possessed more energy than talent. Nonetheless, they had a large following in a country where pop music was seen as subversive, and in 1973 they were prevented from performing in public. They could, however, perform at private parties, which they were doing on 15 March 1976 when they were arrested for disturbing the peace. They were later charged with alcoholism, drug addiction and antisocial behaviour, leading to imprisonment.

A number of intellectuals attended the trial of these musicians, and one of them, Václav Havel was motivated to write a manifesto to compel the release band members and call attention to human rights violations within Hungary. Charter 77, as it was called, used the Helsinki

Acts against the repressive measures of the Hungarian government, reminding the government that, as a signatory, it had agreed to respect the civil, social and cultural rights of its people. Initially there were 243 signatories, and Havel sent it to Deutsche Welle radio and West German television, knowing this would make it known in East Germany.

The repercussions for the signatories made their lives very difficult: they were dismissed from their jobs, their children were not given access to education, they were often forced into exile and lost their citizenship, or faced arrest, trial and imprisonment. To protest against these actions, in April 1978 another group established the Committee for Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted. Being public in nature, the leaders were arrested, found guilty of subversion and imprisoned for five years.

These actions were sufficient to keep the majority of the population from echoing the discontent of these intellectuals, plus Czechoslovaks seemed much better off than their Warsaw Pact allies. Consumer goods were available, the country was an exporter nation and in the 1970s the standard of living increased. Four out of ten households in Czechoslovakia had televisions – a much higher number than other Eastern European states. Thus, protest against the government remained in the hands of a few intellectuals who insisted on non-violence so that they could not be accused of revolution and would not provoke severe reprisals.

Havel was arrested in April 1979 and sentenced to four years hard labour for slandering the state. Upon his release in 1982 he wrote an essay called “The Power of the Powerless” in which he stated that the most important act that an individual could take was to behave as if he were truly free, through which he could then learn to become free. Havel was relatively affluent; the government did not confiscate the royalties he earned from foreign publications, and rather than go abroad, he chose to remain in Czechoslovakia, conducting his daily life as normally as possible even while the secret police had him under constant surveillance.

While the western world was encouraged by arms agreements and the peace movements that flourished in western Europe, Havel was critical of them. He argued that the rapprochement with the Soviet Union would leave Eastern Europe firmly under Soviet domination and that they would have no chance for political freedom in the given circumstances. This argument was largely unknown in the West and, with the exception of Poland and the Solidarity movement, much of the internal politics and opposition of Eastern European countries was ignored by all but country specialists.

Poland and the role of Solidarity

Although it came immediately after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the invocation of the Brezhnev Doctrine to justify it, the Polish reform movement of Solidarity marked the beginning of the end of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. Historically, Poland had led the push for reforms, and had done so more successfully than its neighbours due to decisions made by the Polish Communist Party leadership to



▲ Vaclav Havel circa 1976



▲ Mural of Pope John Paul II and Lech Walesa in Gdansk, Poland



respect the Warsaw Pact and remain within the Soviet sphere. In particular, in 1956 the Poles had been successful in gaining toleration for the Roman Catholic Church and a halt to Soviet-style collectivization. This time, however, the situation was different.

In the 1970s and early 1980s Eastern European countries in general were facing a crisis of communism in which people were openly questioning the Party control over the government and people's lives in communist countries. This dissent mirrored what was taking place in the USSR. The source for declining morale and criticism of communism was rooted in economic distress. The Eastern European states were still lacking in consumer goods, and the late 1970s saw an escalation of food prices resulting from crop failures. The Polish government had enormous foreign debt, which led to economic depression. This in turn led to strikes that began as early as June 1976 when workers went on strike in the city of Ursus. The government crackdown on this strike led to the formation of the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR), which aimed to provide assistance to jailed workers and their families. They, too, soon found themselves facing government repression yet continued to work underground, publishing a journal, forming a publishing company (with mimeograph machines as the mode of production) and creating the Flying University, an underground forum for student discussions of forbidden topics. The group is credited with the amnesty that the government granted to jailed workers in 1977 and provided a model for the future of Polish dissent.

On 16 October 1978, the first non-Italian pope in nearly five hundred years was elected by the College of Cardinals. Cardinal Karol Wojtyła had been watched since the 1950s and was seen as a Polish nationalist who delivered what were considered to be subversive sermons. Moreover, he was charismatic and possessed a strong intellect. When the 58-year-old became Pope John Paul II, he used his global pulpit to speak out against the communist oppression of religion and national and cultural movements. His return to his country as Pope in June 1979 was marked by masses that were attended by literally millions of his countrymen, and he became a powerful symbol of dissent and change.

In July 1980, Poland was facing serious economic problems that led the government to announce yet another increase in food prices while simultaneously deciding to put a moratorium on wage increases. Once again, this resulted in popular discontent, and strikes took place throughout the country in protest. The catalyst for even further dissent was the dismissal of a worker at the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk in August. Anna Walentynowicz was singled out because of her involvement in an illegal trade union and for editing and distributing its underground newsletter *Robotnik Wybrzeża* ('Coastal Worker' in English), even to her own bosses. By the following week, strikes had been organized to protest against her dismissal. Lech Walesa, an electrician and former employee at the shipyard, led the striking workers.

The protest was soon about more than just a fellow worker's dismissal or even food prices. Instead, Poles were galvanized and were engaged in a form of passive resistance against the communist government, demanding the legalization of non-government trade unions. Although

the government tried to prevent the growth of the strike through censorship and interrupted communication, all of Poland soon knew of the strike and it spread throughout the country into a national, popular movement. By 21 August, 200 factories and economic entities had joined the strike, and the economy was paralysed. Virtually the entire coastline had been shut down by strikes, interrupting trade and construction.

Given the dire situation, the government acceded to strikers' demands, signing the Gdansk Agreement, which among other things, allowed the creation of independent trade unions. This was the birth of Solidarity, the first national labour union created in a communist country. Much like Russia's soviets in the early 20th century, Solidarity quickly became more than a union – it became a legislative body for the proletariat, a social movement committed to liberalizing life in Poland, and an alternative to communist leadership in Poland. In September and October 1981 the union had its first Congress, and Lech Walesa was elected its president. It is estimated that 10 million of the 35 million Poles joined Solidarity and its sub-organizations.

Using its vast human resources, Solidarity pressured the government to make reforms through non-violent means so that the government would have no rationale for violent suppression of the movement. Even so, the government did react against strikers and severely beat a number of Solidarity members in Bydgoszcz in March 1981, prompting counteraction from Solidarity. On 27 March, the whole country was paralysed as 500 000 workers participated in a four-hour general strike. This forced the government to capitulate, and make a promise that it would investigate the beatings.

After months of half-hearted negotiations with Solidarity, Polish communists recognized that they needed to take decisive action against Solidarity or face a revolutionary situation. Alternatively, they faced the prospect of intervention from Moscow and other Warsaw Pact countries if they did not succeed in suppressing Solidarity themselves. The Communist Party leadership tacitly decided that any repression of the movement should come from within, rather than outside, Poland.

The Soviets were demanding a restoration of order, for fear that Solidarity's strength might encourage the masses elsewhere and be replicated within its bloc. However, what the Poles did not know was that the Kremlin did not want to take action in Poland unless absolutely necessary. The Soviet army was mired in the war in Afghanistan and even though the Soviets dispatched tanks to support the Polish communists they were wary of having to occupy another country to enforce the Brezhnev Doctrine.

In October Prime Minister General Wojciech Jaruzelski was made First Secretary of the Communist Party, a move meant to mollify Moscow as Jaruzelski had the reputation of a hardliner who was willing to act against Solidarity. On 13 December, he instituted martial law, put into place censorship laws and arrested approximately 5000 members of Solidarity, including most of its leadership that had sought shelter in factories in Gdansk. When workers once again went on strike to protest against government action, government forces were ordered to put



down the strike, resulting in nine deaths at the Wujek Coal Mine and the killing of a worker the next day in Gdansk. By the end of December, Solidarity strikes had ceased.

In 1982 non-government unions were once again made illegal and Solidarity was forced to disband. The Polish government faced international condemnation, and the USA put a trade embargo on Poland that would later provide leverage for reforms to take place in the country. Due to this international pressure, the Polish government released Walesa from prison in November 1982 but continued to observe Solidarity leaders and actively suppress the movement. In 1983 Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize but the government refused to issue him a passport so that he could travel to Oslo to accept it.



▲ Polish citizens marching in support of the Solidarity movement

TOK discussion

It is often said that literature can portray the emotional effects of events in a way that factual detail cannot. Ken Follett's novels are considered to be historically accurate. Below is an extract from *Edge of Eternity*, his Cold War novel. Here, a Soviet journalist witnesses the crackdown of Solidarity:

Tanya propped her door open with a chair and went out. The noise was coming from the next floor down. She looked over the bannisters and saw a group of men in the military camouflage uniform of the ZOMO, the notorious [Polish] security police. Wielding crowbars and hammers, they were breaking down the door of Tanya's friend Danuta Gorski.

... Two big policemen came out of the apartment dragging Danuta, her abundant hair in disarray, wearing a nightdress and a white candlewick dressing gown.

Tanya stood in front of them, blocking the staircase. She held up her press card. "I am a Soviet reporter!" she shouted.

"Then get ... out of the way," one replied. He lashed out with a crowbar he held in his left hand. It was not a calculated blow, for he was striving to control the struggling Danuta with the other hand ...

What can you learn from this extract that you might not in reading a typical textbook on the Solidarity movement in Poland? Do you agree that fiction can portray truth? Are there other novels that you feel accurately portray the way in which people reacted to a historical event better than your textbook?

4.2 Cold War crisis: the Able Archer crisis, 1983

Conceptual understanding

Key question

→ How did the Able Archer crisis affect relations between the US and USSR?

Key concept

→ Perspective

The election of Ronald Reagan and Soviet reaction

In 1980 Ronald Reagan was elected partially on a platform to return the USA to its former foreign policy with its strong stance against the Soviet Union. Like Nixon, he had made his political career in the McCarthy era as an anti-communist and he used that, along with serious economic problems, to defeat the sitting president, Jimmy Carter. His slogan “peace through strength”, convinced the Kremlin that the USA was once again considering the Soviets to be a nuclear threat and KGB agents supported this assertion. Thus, when Reagan approached Brezhnev to renew the arms discussion, KGB head Andropov convinced Brezhnev that the talks were pointless and thus the suggestion was ignored.

It was difficult to see Reagan as interested in arms talks as his first term was characterized by an expansion of arms that included the building and deployment of 700 new nuclear weapons and a defence budget that rose to \$1.4 trillion – an amount that was more than the cost of both the Korean and Vietnam wars. However, this was partly due to military expansions made by Carter at the end of his term due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution of 1979. The administration was largely opposed to summit talks and most Soviet intelligence emphasized the hawkish nature of his cabinet.

The Soviets were convinced that a nuclear attack was imminent, and convened a meeting of the Warsaw Pact countries to alert them to a change in US policy. In Washington, the Reagan administration was unaware of this, and thus, when Reagan gave a speech in March 1983 referring to the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” – making use of a popular cultural reference from the movie *Star Wars* to attract younger voters – Americans had no idea that Andropov (now leader of the USSR) took this as a statement of aggression, rather than the political rhetoric that it was. Further compounding the issue, the USA began naval exercises using nuclear submarines close to Soviet territorial waters to probe Soviet surveillance. This led to a series of counter-reactions from the Soviets in which they, too, began military exercises that could be perceived as defensive in nature.



The crux of the tension occurred on 1 September 1983 when the Soviets shot down Korean Airlines Flight 007 (KAL 007), killing all aboard. The Soviet Air Defence Force identified an unknown plane that had been flying in Soviet airspace for over an hour. An American reconnaissance plane had been spotted earlier that had permission to monitor a Soviet missile test but was expected to leave Soviet territory at 5 am. The Air Defence Force thought that the intruding plane was the American engaged in espionage, whereas in reality that plane crossed paths with KAL 007. The Korean pilot had put the plane on autopilot and was unaware that he had strayed off course and was nearly 300 miles into Soviet territory. Although the Soviet pilot fired warning cannons and flashed its lights, there was no response. At 6:21 am the pilot was ordered to shoot down the unresponsive intruder, and heat-seeking missiles were launched that destroyed the plane. It also destroyed the Soviet Union's reputation when the government refused to accept any responsibility for destroying a civilian plane and even blamed the USA for knowing that KAL 007 had strayed into Soviet airspace and had allowed it to happen to provoke the Soviets.

American aggression was further confirmed by its invasion of the Caribbean island of Grenada where a communist coup had taken place. The Soviets were convinced that Reagan was planning an attack.

Able Archer 83

On 2 November 1983, NATO launched a series of military exercises just as it often had in the past, but this time they culminated in the simulation of nuclear preparedness. These exercises were known as Able Archer 83 and were on a much larger scale than previous exercises and included NATO heads of state to test communications. In addition to Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl, Reagan was also expected to participate, but withdrew at the last moment – an action that prompted the Soviets to believe that this was more than a simulation.

The Soviets were convinced that this was preparation for an actual strike against the Soviet Union or one of the Warsaw Pact countries. The Soviet plan for nuclear weapons use involved the decoy of military exercises and thus the Soviets thought that NATO would initiate its own nuclear offensive in a similar manner.

Soviet forces were placed on maximum alert and planned to send nuclear submarines to the US coast. Warsaw Pact countries were also told to be prepared for military action. Initially the USA did not take these countermeasures seriously; since the Soviets had been informed that NATO was involved in military exercises, Washington thought the threat was overblown. Only when British intelligence briefed Thatcher, who then informed Reagan of the seriousness of Soviet actions, did NATO act to allay Soviet fears. The USA sent an envoy to Moscow to inform the Soviets that Able Archer was indeed nothing more than a simulation and that the USA and NATO had no plans to launch an attack on the Soviet Union then, or ever.



▲ A NATO soldier in a gas mask relaxing during the 1983 war games exercises

Results

The Soviets stood down from maximum alert but remained doubtful. Relations between the USA and Soviet Union seemed to reach a new low and, in December 1983, the Soviets walked out of disarmament talks in Geneva. Andropov remained suspicious of American motives, but he was nearing the end of his life and would soon be succeeded by Chernenko, whose tenure was even shorter. Political stagnation in the Soviet Union led to the same in foreign policy for the time being.

Able Archer stunned Reagan; he now realized that, despite the best of intentions, leaders could provoke nuclear war through misunderstanding. He became much more open to the idea of negotiations and sought a different route to disarmament. Unlike his predecessors, he did not see Mutual Assured Destruction and nuclear parity as a key to peace. He had two distinct ideas regarding relations with the Soviets. He expressed an interest in renewing summit diplomacy but complained that the Soviet leaders “kept dying” on him, making it impossible. But he also began to look for defence against nuclear weapons, and found it in a new plan called the Strategic Defense Initiative that would shoot down deployed nuclear weapons and place a nuclear shield around those countries under its umbrella. While the former strategy would eventually be successful, SDI, or “Star Wars” as it was named, led to problems in initiating summit diplomacy. The key to diplomacy and negotiations was finding a Soviet leader equally willing to engage, and Reagan found his counterpart in Mikhail Gorbachev.

Source skills

In their own words: Ronald Reagan

“So, in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride – the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.”

Ronald Reagan, the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, 8 March 1983

“Do you think Soviet leaders really fear us, or is all the huffing and puffing just part of their propaganda?” President Reagan asked his Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Arthur Hartman in early 1984, according to declassified talking points from the Reagan Presidential Library.

From “The 1983 War Scare: ‘The Last Paroxysm’ of the Cold War Part I”, National Security Archives, posted May 16 2013, edited by Nate Jones in www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB426/

Question

Compare and contrast the views expressed in the two sources above. Both feature statements made by Ronald Reagan. When considering the sources, also consider Reagan’s intended audience and how that might affect the content.

4.3 Gorbachev's policies

Conceptual understanding

Key question

→ Why is Gorbachev's commitment to communism sometimes questioned?

Key concept

→ Change

Domestic changes: *perestroika*, *glasnost* and *demokratizatsiya*

When Gorbachev came to power, he was the third successor in less than three years. The first four leaders of the USSR governed for over 60 years collectively; the final three would be in power for less than a decade. The Soviet state had been stagnant for too long and there was rising dissent in the country. Gorbachev, a member of the Soviet *nomenklatura*, recognized that it was time for much-needed reforms to try and get the USSR back to a level competitive with the West and an emerging China.

Marking a trend in the new Soviet leadership, Gorbachev was relatively young and began his career outside Moscow. Somewhat unusual for the time and place, Gorbachev was trained as a lawyer and then elected a Party member. He became a regional Party official in Stavropol (Caucasus) and in 1978 he was elected to the Central Committee and became the secretary responsible for agriculture. In 1980 Brezhnev made him a full Politburo member at the age of 49, in an organization where the average age was over 70.

He attracted the attention and support of Andropov who also had felt the need for changes in Soviet society but knew that they would not be put into place during his tenure. When Chernenko died, Soviet Foreign Minister Andre Gromyko nominated Gorbachev for the position of General Secretary, and he was duly elected by the Politburo, whose membership was in a period of transition. Gorbachev had a different leadership style from his predecessors and it was under him that the USSR saw a wave of reforms that are often collectively referred to as *perestroika*, *glasnost* and *demokratizatsiya*. Although he faced ethnic unrest and political opposition, the main problem in Soviet society still seemed to be the economy, and Gorbachev felt that it was in need of a complete reorganization. This was not quite as new an idea as people generally thought; ideas for economic restructuring had been proposed as early as the 1960s but were blocked by Party hardliners who feared any moves away from central planning would mean a shift towards capitalism. When viewing Gorbachev's policies it must be remembered that Gorbachev was a true communist – he was not a capitalist who wanted to end communism in the Soviet Union; he was seeking to repair an ailing system.

nomenklatura

Elite class of Soviets that held top government and Communist Party positions.

perestroika

Usually translated as restructuring, this term refers to economic reforms and, ultimately, political changes that Gorbachev made in the USSR.

glasnost

The policy of more open consultative government and wider dissemination of information, initiated by leader Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985.

The first major reform of the Gorbachev era targeted alcohol. Like Andropov, Gorbachev was trying to target individual productivity and absenteeism, in addition to the tremendous social problem of alcoholism. With all this in mind, prices were raised on wine, beer and vodka and the places and times for selling alcohol were restricted. There were arrests for public drunkenness and for being intoxicated at work. One clearly stated goal was to decrease vodka production by 10% in five years, yet this was completed by 1986. In the end it did not have the desired effect and in fact it cost the Soviet state almost 100 billion rubles in taxes lost due to a drop in official consumption. It actually caused economic distress as official vineyards and distilleries were forced to close. Unofficially, of course, alcohol remained readily available through the black market.

In the Soviet Union, 1986 proved to be a watershed for a number of reasons. First, the policy of *perestroika* or economic restructuring was announced. The government decided that it was time to decentralize planning and end price controls by the state. Many were very nervous about these changes on an ideological level as they seemed to put the Soviet state on the road to capitalism. However, the state wanted to allow some degree of self-management but did not want to lose ownership of the factories and other business enterprises that it saw as necessary for state security. Pragmatically, the removal of price controls would lead to an increase in prices and discomfort among the population. Soviet citizens benefited from a system that allowed them to purchase most goods at below the cost of production due to government subsidies. The policy of subsidising goods for both Soviet citizens and foreign governments was extremely costly. Previously the USSR was reluctant to cut off foreign subsidies for fear of losing its sphere of influence but now the country was facing bankruptcy and sought the means to avoid this.

The Chernobyl disaster

In April, the weaknesses of the system were further highlighted by the explosion of the nuclear facility in Chernobyl, Ukraine. The nuclear power plant, which had been opened in 1978 and had six reactors, was considered a model facility in the USSR. On 26 April, a test of one of the reactor's cooling systems began at 1 am. Almost immediately, the emergency shutdown failed and the reactor exploded. Firefighters responded to the explosion, unaware that it had released toxic levels of radiation into the air. Although the inhabitants of the nearby town of Pripyat were aware of the fire, they had no idea of the danger it posed and continued about their daily activities. The Soviet government did not issue any warnings or notify the public of the disaster, although on 27 April Pripyat was evacuated.

It was only when Sweden made it known to the world community that high levels of radiation had reached its borders and located its source in the Ukraine that the Soviet government made the accident public. The Soviet news agency TASS reported that there had been an accident at the Chernobyl nuclear facility and that an investigation would be forthcoming. It was announced that there were casualties, but the numbers were not released. Further evacuations were also announced, expanding the evacuation area to a 30-kilometre zone around the reactor.



The reactor continued to burn until 4 May and in the meantime, helicopters dropped approximately 5000 tons of materials on the fire in an attempt to extinguish it. It was thought that the reactor had ceased emitting radiation on 6 May and the situation started to relax, but evidently the reactor had not been fully extinguished and new fires began on 15 and 16 May.

The investigation reported that the disaster was a result of human error and equipment failure. There were a number of inexperienced staff working that weekend and there was inattention to safety procedures. Additionally the Soviet attitude of downplaying disasters for fear of repercussions certainly exacerbated the situation and slowed the rate of evacuation from the affected areas. The Soviet government refused assistance that was offered from foreign sources, perhaps in an attempt to avoid international criticism, although that had already been voiced.

In the official report, the death toll from the disaster never went above 31. The plant operators were found responsible for the explosion and were sentenced to hard labour. The reality was somewhat different and can be seen in Ukrainian attitudes and statements regarding the accident after the collapse of the USSR. The ability to keep information within the Soviet state was not possible in the face of an international incident, and with changing Soviet policies criticism came from its citizenry, not just from the international community.

Treatment of opposition

In December 1986 Gorbachev announced the release of the dissident Andrei Sakharov from his exile in Gorky. Sakharov, a physicist by training who became the most open opponent of the Soviet government, began to travel at home and abroad, presenting information on the repression of USSR citizens and explaining conditions in **Gulags**. He did this until his death, and although his was the public face for Soviet dissent abroad, his appeal within the USSR was limited. Nonetheless, Sakharov's notoriety led to further expressions against the government, and open criticism of the past.

The official recognition and acceptance of this came in 1988 when Gorbachev announced *glasnost*: This policy, translated as openness, led to a re-examination of Soviet history and an open debate on past government actions such as forced collectivization and party purges. Former enemies of the state, especially those purged and executed by Stalin, were rehabilitated in this time period. Gorbachev's government was free to do this as most of the participants – and supporters – of such Stalinist policies were now dead, and the criticisms would not cause serious divisions within the Party.

This led to a further questioning of socialist economic policies, and especially a criticism of central planning. In rejecting and criticizing forced collectivization, the government paved the way for agricultural reform and eventually, wider economic changes. The Gorbachev era saw an end to collectivization and a transition to privatization where farmers were granted long-term leases in an attempt to improve productivity.

Gulags

The gulag was the government agency that oversaw labour camps but came to mean, colloquially, the labour camps themselves where the convicted were sent.

In a nod to the New Economic Policy (NEP) the state still remained the owner of the land, but farmers paid for their leases and were taxed on their product. It did not take much for nascent entrepreneurs to begin to make similar demands for change regarding industrial and consumer goods.

Foreign policy

Initially Gorbachev's route did not deviate much from that of his predecessors. In 1985 he renewed the Warsaw Pact and he continued the support of leftist revolutions, particularly that of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Unlike Brezhnev, however, he sought an end to the costly war in Afghanistan, and began to announce troop reductions, negotiating an agreement with the Afghans in 1988 that led to Soviet withdrawal by 1989. However, military expenses continued to cripple the national economy and Gorbachev needed to cut costs, even if it was at the expense of the Soviet empire.

The costliness of Soviet subsidies to its satellite states in itself forced a re-examination of the role of the USSR in foreign affairs. The USSR provided goods to its allies at reduced or subsidized prices and this was costing the state tremendous sums of money and leaving the Soviet Union indebted to western powers. When the cost of oil dropped, the trade imbalance worsened.

Brezhnev had made relations with satellite states in Eastern Europe a priority but Gorbachev sought to distance the USSR from these countries. In a series of speeches beginning in 1987, he encouraged the states to follow their own paths and be less reliant on the USSR. He made it very clear that the USSR would engage in a policy of non-intervention in the Warsaw Pact countries, which was a complete negation of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Henceforth, satellite states would pursue their own paths to achieving socialism and Gorbachev encouraged reform abroad.

The Soviets gained further credibility in their negation of the Brezhnev Doctrine with the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. The war had been extremely costly, in terms of lives lost and public opinion, in addition to government coffers. At its height of intervention, the Soviets had over 100 000 troops stationed there with no clear objective. The Soviets determined that it was necessary to withdraw from Afghanistan; it was costly, made the USSR unpopular internationally and was extremely unpopular at home. Thus, as early as 1986 symbolic withdrawals began and in a 1988 agreement in Geneva, the Soviets agreed to full withdrawal; by February 1989 all Soviet forces had left Afghanistan.

The Soviet-backed regime collapsed almost immediately and once again Afghanistan suffered a political vacuum. Into it came the religious leaders, imposing a restrictive, repressive Islamic regime in the country. Like the Soviet client state before it, the Taliban could not maintain consistent control over the entire country but they did manage to obtain a level of control previously unattained in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the warlord system that had historically dominated Afghanistan once again prevailed and war continued.



▲ The Chernobyl reactor after the disaster, 1986.



▲ Reagan and Gorbachev at the Reykjavik summit, 1986

The US certainly noticed this change in Soviet attitudes and this led to a series of meetings between Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan. These summits, notably in Geneva and Reykjavik, signalled an improvement in relations between the USA and the USSR, a remarkable reversal after the strain in their relations that characterized the Brezhnev era. US President Ronald Reagan had tentatively resumed arms talks with the USSR in 1982 but these were abandoned until Soviet leadership stabilized. With Gorbachev firmly in power, the talks on arms reductions began anew with US determination to continue nuclear testing and to construct a defence shield (Strategic Defense Initiative or SDI), angering Soviet leadership. After the Chernobyl disaster, limiting nuclear arms testing and development was a priority for the Soviet regime. The Reykjavik summit, held in October 1986, was seen as a failure, particularly in the USA, since it led to no agreement or framework for an agreement, yet the leaders began to develop a rapport and seemed willing and able to work together.

In December 1987 Gorbachev went to Washington and the result was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty which eliminated intermediate range nuclear weapons in Europe. The summit meetings culminated in Reagan's visit to Moscow where the leaders began the discussions for a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that would be finalized in 1991. With this treaty, both sides agreed to reduce their stockpile of nuclear arms – the Soviet Union by 25% and the USA by 15%.

ATL Communication skills

Choose one of Gorbachev's policies and link it directly to the end of the Cold War (for example, *perestroika*, *glasnost*, summits). Create a multimedia presentation with 5–7 slides, including slides for the introduction/thesis; arguments; and conclusion. The slides should have the main point of the oral essay presented in one sentence and then a supporting visual. Visuals can include political cartoons, maps or photos.

The Soviet–US peace march of 1988

In the midst of the Cold War, individuals in both the USSR and the USA participated in peace marches that were intended to show the solidarity of humanity as opposed to government policies of animosity. They promoted peace and, in some cases, the desire for nuclear disarmament, through the direct interaction of people, rather than waiting for their governments to take action.

The first of these took place in 1960 and 1961. Americans walked across the USA, boarded a plane to London and then crossed the Channel and walked through Europe, for the cause of non-violence and nuclear disarmament. Their walk through East Germany, Poland and finally into the Soviet Union took nearly 10 months.

The idea of a peace march was largely abandoned after Khrushchev was ousted; Brezhnev was a hardliner and while arms discussions were progressing, along with the Helsinki Accords, the Soviets clamped down on dissent and were fearful of such actions.

In the 1980s the idea was resuscitated when Gorbachev came to power and exchanges were more likely than when Brezhnev was in power. Americans travelled to the USSR and vice versa. In the summer of 1988 approximately 200 Americans met in Washington DC to travel to Ukraine to march with a similar number of Soviet citizens from Odessa to Kiev and, it was hoped, eventually to Moscow, covering roughly 3200 kilometres. There were no restrictions placed on the marchers and they provided American culture in the form of films such as *A Night at the Opera* and *Gone with the Wind*, while the marchers held potlucks with Soviet villagers as they marched through the Soviet Union. The final day – in Moscow – was scheduled to coincide with the dismantling of a Soviet missile.

In retrospect, the final walk demonstrated Gorbachev's commitment to *glasnost*: even after Chernobyl, the Soviets willingly admitted Americans into Ukraine where citizens from both countries shared a long march that could not be easily monitored. Openness had come to the Soviet Union, and Americans were willing to abandon the anti-communist rhetoric that still dominated domestic politics at the time.



▲ *Gone with the Wind*, a US film that filtered into the USSR as a result of the Soviet–US peace march

4.4 The effect of Gorbachev's policies on Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War

Conceptual understanding

Key question

- Did all Eastern European countries react to Gorbachev's policies in similar ways?

Key concept

- Significance

When reviewing the events of 1989 it often seems as if there was an overnight awareness of repression that led to a quick, spontaneous revolution in all of Eastern Europe – but this was not the case. The Revolutions of 1989, as they are collectively called, were the result of a long period of struggle against the domination of the Soviet Union and the communist parties in each individual country. The eastern bloc was seen as critical to Soviet security, and indeed the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968 was issued to justify action in Czechoslovakia and prevent its withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact.

The Brezhnev Doctrine endured well into the 1980s but when Gorbachev came to power in 1985, change was clearly afoot in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev was facing the same problems as his neighbours – economic instability, lack of consumer goods – and was looking for ways to divest the Soviet Union of its responsibilities to other communist countries, which had cost the Soviets tremendous sums of money over the years and resulted in the USSR becoming a debtor nation.

Gorbachev's promised reforms and his rejection of the Brezhnev Doctrine were not welcome news to the Party leaders in Eastern Europe. Although intervention from Moscow was always a concern, it also provided comfort, knowing that their regimes had the moral and military support of the USSR and other Warsaw Pact countries. The changes brought by Gorbachev threatened the stability of *apparatchiks* in Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe. Brezhnev had seen Eastern Europe as critical to Soviet foreign policy; Gorbachev sought to divest the USSR from its role of patron.

Seeing Soviet withdrawal from the internal affairs of the Warsaw Pact countries as an invitation to act, dissenters in the eastern bloc spoke out once again, and organized themselves. Witnessing Gorbachev's rehabilitation of dissidents, and encouragement of *glasnost*, opposition in Eastern Europe grew. In some cases (such as Czechoslovakia), there had been an almost constant struggle against the communist regime; in others there was a radical change in a very short time period. But 1989 signalled the end of communism in Eastern Europe: the collapse of the

apparatchiks

Members of the Communist Party and/or government bureaucracy. This is usually a derogatory term signaling lack of creativity or initiative.

Stalinist regime in Romania was brutal for its totalitarian leaders, ending with the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, while the other revolutions were notable for the opposition's use of passive resistance and the unwillingness of Party leadership and the secret police to use the typical terror and intimidation techniques. Unlike Chinese communists in May 1989, the Eastern European communists surrendered to popular revolt, thereby changing the system of government in the east and paving the way for integration of all Europe.

Hungary

To the amazement of the world, Hungary's movement away from communism was peaceful and served as a model for other Eastern European countries. Worsening economic conditions in the country led to general dissatisfaction, and even dedicated communists looked for alternative routes to improve the local economy. Economic advisors were especially interested in engaging in trade with western Europe. In 1988, János Kádár (who had been in power since the 1956 revolution) resigned as Secretary General; a young Politburo member, Miklós Németh, negotiated a 1 billion Deutschmark loan from West German banks. On the strength of his economic acumen he was named Prime Minister and followed economic reforms with political ones.

First, in May 1989 he oversaw the decision to remove the physical barrier between Austria and Hungary. The fence was now old and Hungary was unwilling to make expensive repairs. As the Hungarians removed the barriers, the Soviet Union did nothing and, nearly overnight, the border between Austria and Hungary was removed. This in itself was momentous, but he then announced that the citizens of other Warsaw Pact countries could travel freely through Hungary and would not be stopped as they crossed its borders. This led directly to the crisis in East Germany in November 1989.

Then, the government adopted what was termed the democracy package: basic freedoms, civil rights and electoral reforms. The communist government was ready to adopt a multiparty system. Symbolically, Imre Nagy was rehabilitated and reburied. The government also initiated round-table discussions to change the constitution that included a number of new and reconstituted pre-communism political parties. In April 1989 the Soviets agreed to withdraw

all their military forces from Hungary by 1991; in the end, this was completed in 1990 with the first free elections in Hungary since before the Second World War.

Poland

In 1983 martial law was lifted. Nonetheless, anti-government activities continued, and while the government tried to repress the liberalization movements that began in the late 1970s, opposition to the regime continued. In 1985, Polish opposition was further encouraged when Gorbachev came to power in the USSR. Encouraged by *perestroika* and



▲ East Germans entering Austria in August 1989 after the border with Hungary was opened



glasnost, solidarity reconstituted itself in October 1987. Despite continued harassment from the Polish government they were certain that they would not face retribution from the Soviet Union.

Due to continued economic problems, the government once again raised food prices in February 1988. This led yet again to strikes and demands for changes in the system. All but the most radical members of Solidarity advocated negotiating with the government, showing that it was not a revolutionary party in the strictest sense; they too sought to bring about changes from within the existing system. February 1989 proved to be a decisive turning point in Polish history. In Warsaw the government initiated talks with Solidarity and other opposition groups in an attempt to maintain their power over Poland. These discussions led to three major reforms: legalization of non-governmental trade unions; creation of the position of President; and the formation of a Senate (thereby giving Poland a bicameral legislature). In the lower house (Sejm) 35% of the seats would be freely elected – the rest would be reserved for the Communist Party.

In July 1989 elections were held and Solidarity won 99% of the seats in the Senate and all 35% of the seats in the Sejm. Even though he was the only candidate on the presidential ballot, Jaruzelski won by a very narrow margin. Given the results of the elections, even the 35–65 division in the Sejm was abolished and by the end of 1989, Poland was a multiparty state with a coalition government dominated by Solidarity. Poland's successful transition to democracy was soon mirrored by other satellite states in Europe, and by the end of 1989 only Albania would remain as a communist country.

East Germany's revolution and the end of the Berlin Wall

The German revolution was the most televised, well known of the revolutions of 1989, due largely to the photo opportunities it provided. This revolution inspired people far beyond its borders because it seemed so simple: the masses brought about spontaneous change through their actions. This was not a revolt of the elites or simply a student movement that spread.

East Germany was a paradox among the satellite states. On the one hand it had a reputation for being the most loyal of all the satellite states; its leaders were communist hardliners and its secret police, the Stasi, was feared above all other Eastern European political police. On the other, it received benefits from West Germany through Willy Brandt's policy of *Ostpolitik*, which was meant to build a bridge from the democratic, capitalist west and its communist counterpart. While Berlin remained a sticking point for the East Germans, they received benefits from this city's location as Moscow saw it as a place to showcase the benefits of communism to the outside world. In 1984, the two German states reached agreements for cultural exchanges and the removal of mines on their frontier, signalling an accord, or at least a commitment to the status quo for both states, rather than seeking the inclusion of the other side.



▲ Lech Walesa

This policy actually began during the Brezhnev era with the Helsinki Final Acts; in recognizing the post-war frontiers of Europe, the political decision to have two German states was not only acknowledged by the 33 signatories, it was legitimized. Thus, it seemed that East Germany was an accepted, entrenched regime as late as 1988 and no one foresaw the changes that would take place in the coming year; indeed East German leader Erich Honecker seemed to ignore the calls for reform embedded in perestroika and the dissent at home and in other Eastern European states. At 77, Honecker was the last of the communist leaders who had come of age at the same time as Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko. He remained firmly loyal to the Communist Party and was determined to keep East Germany a single-party state.

As in Czechoslovakia, events in East Germany were precipitated by events outside of its own state. In Hungary, there had been tremendous pressure on the government to relax controls and in particular, to stop limiting travel of its citizenry, especially within the Warsaw Pact. Thus, on 2 May 1989 the Hungarian government removed the fence on its border with East Germany, and while travel between the two countries remained legally unchanged, in practice, anyone dissatisfied in either country could cross the border. By September 1989 it is estimated that 60 000 East Germans had left for Hungary, making their way to Budapest (and others to Prague), to seek asylum in the West German embassies there. Budapest was suffering under the weight of these refugees, and when the Hungarian Foreign Minister announced that East Germans would not be stopped if they sought to travel west to Austria, 22 000 East Germans crossed to the West.

East Germany was embarrassed by this action and tried to make some repairs to prevent continued exodus. Responding to the actions of the Hungarian and Czechoslovak governments, East Germany promised East Germans safe passage to the FRG in a sealed train if they returned to East Germany. This only served to further exacerbate the situation; when one such train stopped in Dresden, a number of locals tried to board the train and were beaten by the police.

In October full dissent was in the streets of East Germany. Encouraged by actions of opposition groups in other Eastern European countries, East Germans protested at the lack of reforms in the Honecker regime and the repressive regime that he embodied. Unlike his counterparts in the other countries, Honecker held firm and refused to grant any changes. He was even unmoved by Gorbachev's exhortations to reform when the Soviet leader came to Berlin to participate in the fortieth anniversary of the founding of East Germany. Gorbachev famously advised Honecker that "Life punishes those who wait too long". Honecker would not even allow the distribution of Soviet publications that he saw as too liberal and reformist; he was much more sympathetic to Deng Xiaoping and his treatment of dissenters at Tiananmen Square the previous May.

At this point, other members of the Party leadership felt that they needed to make changes or face revolution. The number of demonstrators agitating for change increased dramatically throughout October, nearing 100 000 in cities such as Leipzig. With such startling



opposition to the regime, the Politburo forced Honecker's resignation and fellow member Egon Krenz became the General Secretary of the Party and Chairman of the Council of State on 18 October. Krenz immediately announced that East Germany was going to implement democratic reforms and endorsed Gorbachev's ideas. Even so, demonstrations continued; on 4 November alone an estimated 300 000 congregated in Leipzig and 500 000 in Berlin, demanding immediate change. On that same day, Czechoslovakia opened its border and 30 000 East Germans left.

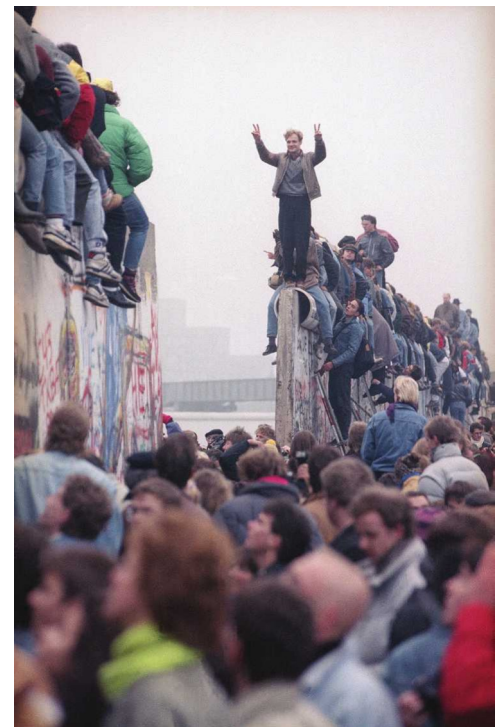
In response to the continued flow of its citizenry, the government proposed relaxing travel laws on 5 November, but rather than mollify the population, it was criticized as too limited. Change was not happening fast enough for the East Germans and they were making that abundantly clear to the government. The entire Politburo resigned, leaving Krenz and his colleagues in the government to respond to the population. On 9 November another travel law was proposed; a news conference was broadcast live on television announcing authorizing foreign travel without advance notice and free transit through border crossings into West Germany. With this action, the Berlin Wall became an anachronism as East Germans poured into the streets, headed to Berlin and entering the West.

The East Germany leadership had been hoping that this reform would increase its credibility and popularity as a People's Republic but instead it hastened its demise. On 1 December, facing increased calls for further reforms, the government changed the constitution, eliminating the clause that gave the Communist Party a dominant role in the government. Two days later, Krenz and the Central Committee resigned. In place of the government, a coalition government was put in place but it became clear very quickly that this was a provisional government at best. Most Germans wanted the reunification of the country, and negotiations began to that effect almost immediately.

The revolution in East Germany then was perhaps the most dramatic of the revolutions of 1989. Not only did communism collapse in East Germany but the map of Europe was redrawn as a result of the revolution. After 41 years as a separate state, East Germany ceased to exist and was incorporated into the FRG on 3 October 1990.

Czechoslovakia – the Velvet Revolution

In Czechoslovakia, the rise of Gorbachev and resignation of the ageing General Secretary Gustav Husák in 1987 opened up the country to further discussion and open opposition to the regime. (Husák remained as President in largely a ceremonial capacity.) Communists maintained control until the collapse at the very end of 1989, even going so far as to arrest demonstrators in Prague who came to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Soviet troops remained in the country but Gorbachev made it abundantly clear that the USSR would pursue a policy of non-intervention in Warsaw Pact countries.



▲ The fall of the Berlin Wall, 9 November 1989

The entire year of 1989 was one of transformation for Czechoslovakia. In January 1989 there was a demonstration in Wenceslas Square in memory of the suicide of a Czech student; Havel and 13 other members were arrested and jailed for organizing this commemoration. Rather than suppress further opposition movements, it seemed to lead to their creation. In addition to protesting against political policies of the government, there were numerous protests regarding environmental policies. It had been estimated that nearly half of the rivers in Slovakia were polluted and over three quarters of well water was unsuitable for human consumption. As early as 1983 substantial amounts of Czech forests were dying, and a children's hospital in Prague had been built for the sole task of treating respiratory ailments in children.

In the 1980s the Czechoslovaks, like the Poles, experienced a shrinking economy and negative growth. The country still relied on heavy industry for export, leaving it at the mercy of heavily subsidised, antiquated industries. This was extremely costly to the Czechoslovak and Soviet governments who had to help pay for these moribund industries. The Czechoslovaks were increasingly relying on the black market to fuel their desire for consumer goods. By 1989, the population was tired of hearing and seeing western prosperity while they still remained behind the iron curtain with limited fashion and cultural developments.

The pace of reform accelerated in the country as people participated in demonstrations that ostensibly honoured certain core historical events in Czechoslovakia, such as the overthrow of the Prague Spring or the founding of the state in 1918, but really they were veiled criticisms of the current government. The situation was further intensified by actions at the West German Embassy in Prague where East Germans had historically gone in an attempt to emigrate to West Germany. By September 1989 there were thousands of East Germans camping on the grounds of Bonn's embassy in Prague. Further pressure was put on Czechoslovakia when the West German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, gave a speech on 30 September announcing that an agreement had been reached with the communists and that these refugees could enter Germany. Initially the Czechoslovaks would not allow them to pass, but the announcement meant that even more East Germans poured into Czechoslovakia, so finally the government in Prague gave way and allowed free passage for East Germans on 3 November.

This announcement and the collapse of the Berlin Wall were further encouragement to students to speak out, but the real end of the communist regime began on 17 November with yet another commemorative demonstration. This time, police attacked and beat students, prompting a popular outcry against the police and the government. Within a week, the entire **Presidium** had resigned and Czechoslovakia seemed to lack a government. Into the void stepped Havel with the newly established Civic Forum. The Forum put forth the "Programmatic Principles of the Civic Forum" which stipulated its basic desires: state of law, free elections, social justice, clean environment, educated people, a return to Europe and prosperity. In response, the constitution was amended and a phrase that gave the Communist Party a leading role in the government was removed. The Party suggested the idea of a coalition government but this was rejected by the Civic Forum;

Presidium

The standing executive committee of Czechoslovakia.



at this point, the communist leadership resigned. Then, the Forum agreed to join a cabinet in which the majority of ministers were not communists. At this point, Husák resigned as President of the country and elections were hastily called. On 28 December, Havel was elected President and the political change was complete. The year that began with demonstrations and arrests of the opposition ended with the re-emergence of a democratic, multiparty state in central Europe.

Bulgaria and Romania

The Romanian transition was far bloodier than the others, with over a thousand killed in December 1989, including the head of state and his wife. Romania had been under the iron fist of Nicolae Ceaușescu who had been a maverick among Eastern European leaders, especially after he criticized the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Facing alienation from the Kremlin, he remained in the Warsaw Pact but adopted autarchic policies and closer relations with the People's Republic of China. Facing a high foreign debt, in the 1980s he instituted austerity measures that impoverished the country while he and his family lived in luxury. In December 1989 opposition to the regime turned violent, first in the city of Timișoara and then in Bucharest. The military almost unanimously turned against Ceaușescu who tried to flee but was captured on 22 December. There was a quick military show trial in which he and his wife Elena were found guilty and they were executed on 25 December, with free elections being held in May 1990.

In Bulgaria demonstrations regarding environmental policies turned into a larger indictment of the government in November 1989. Trying to head off radical change, Bulgaria's Communist Party replaced its ageing leader Todor Zhivkov with a younger, more reform-minded successor, but this was not sufficient given the vast changes taking place in Eastern Europe. In February 1990 street protests led to a communist renunciation of power and the country held free elections in June.

The Revolutions of 1989 considered

In an attempt to correct the primarily economic problems of communism, reform had been the desire of Gorbachev and his colleagues in Eastern Europe; the result, instead, was revolution and the end of communism in Eastern Europe. There are a number of theories as to why these revolutionary attempts were successful when previous ones were not. Some will argue that this is a "domino theory" of sorts. When one country successfully rejected communism, given the strictures of the regimes and their interrelatedness through the Warsaw Pact, it became inevitable that the other states would follow suit. For example, the removal of electric fences along the Hungarian border would necessarily have an impact on the neighbouring countries. Another argument is the role of the international media; given the changes in communication, the totalitarian



▲ Bucharest, Romania in the aftermath of the conviction and execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu

ATL Communication skills

The role that Václav Havel played in the Velvet Revolution is considered instrumental to its success. It is generally argued that Havel was significant to the revolution and to the emergent opposition because he understood the spirit of the times. He became an eloquent spokesman for those who sought to bring about political change due to his popularity and his international status. He had been imprisoned for following his own ideals – those outlined in his *The Power of the Powerless* – and was known as a dissident playwright.

This brings up an interesting question regarding the “cult of personality” concept. Often considered a critical element in totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, the idea is that propaganda, publicity and popularity are all contingent upon the persona of the political leader.

Using Havel as an example, evaluate the claim that a “cult of personality” is only possible in an authoritarian regime. Consider the following points when formulating your answer.

- Can the rise and leadership of Havel be considered a cult of personality?
- Can a democratic state have a leader with a cult of personality?
- At what point does the leader’s popularity fade or wane in a democracy?

regimes were no longer able to staunch the flow of information from one place to the next, allowing people throughout Eastern Europe to see what was happening, and perhaps more importantly, to see the reactions of other peoples and governments.

Also of paramount importance is the role of Gorbachev. His decision to reject the Brezhnev Doctrine for the impertinently named “Sinatra Doctrine” (that is allowing the satellite states to “do it my way”) showed individual populations that they no longer had to fear the influx of troops from Moscow or other Warsaw Pact countries if they rose up against their governments. Even in Czechoslovakia, where Soviet troops remained until 1990, the citizenry did not seem to fear external intervention.

It was also a time for change, be it within the communist parties themselves or an entire regime change. The leadership of the communist parties was ageing and dying; all the leaders of the satellite states were in their 70s. The new leaders – even within the communist parties – came from younger generations who did not share the same experiences of the horrors of the Second World War with their leadership, and instead had memories of repression by the Warsaw Pact governments. Plus, the students in all of these countries did not want to reform socialism, they wanted to change it. They saw the benefits of capitalism and democracy on their television sets and wanted similar advantages.

One last component that needs to be reinforced is that the protestors consistently refused to engage in the use of force to bring about change. These were not violent revolutionaries; they were people who had learned the lessons of civil disobedience from Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian independence movement as well as the US civil rights movement. As they rejected the use of violence to oppose the regime, they exposed the secret police and government and party cadres as needing to use force to impose their will upon the people. Furthermore, many people who otherwise may not have participated in the demonstrations of 1989 did so because they were willing to engage in passive resistance against governments they no longer had confidence in.

In 1985, Gorbachev came to power as a reforming communist, but it seemed fairly clear that he was determined to keep the socialist sphere intact. No one was aware that his calls for change within the Soviet Union, designed largely to reinvigorate a failing economy and make the USSR competitive with the West, would lead to the end of communism in Europe. Unlike the party leadership in China, the Europeans were either unable or unwilling to engage in economic reform while continuing as socialist states. Deng did not hesitate to use force against protestors; elsewhere this was not the case. In the end, China made economic reforms that allowed for material prosperity yet the regime continued; in Eastern Europe, economic reforms worsened the situation and communism ceased.

TOK discussion

Discuss the statement below.

Popular political change rarely comes from repression; it tends to come from economic distress that makes the population so uncomfortable that they are willing to take risks to bring about change.

4.5 The end of the USSR, 1989–1991

Conceptual understanding

Key questions

- Why did the Soviet Union last until 1991?
- What were the most important factors in the collapse of the USSR in 1991?

Key concept

- Change

When Gorbachev began his tenure as leader of the USSR, he was received enthusiastically at home and with cautious trepidation abroad. By the end of 1988 (and the end of the Reagan era in the USA), the situation was reversed. The Soviet economy was failing and the Chernobyl accident highlighted all that was wrong in the authoritarian system, yet the decisions to free political dissidents, withdraw from Afghanistan and engage in arms limitations discussions created a paradox where Gorbachev was more popular in the USA than he was at home. The situation would continue in much the same vein until the collapse of the Soviet state in 1991.

As the Warsaw Pact countries won increased autonomy, and then full independence, the non-Russian Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) also began to agitate for recognition. The Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, with connections and borders with the West, demanded first autonomy and then full independence. Unlike the other SSRs, these countries were incorporated into the USSR through agreements with Nazi Germany. Although their integration into the USSR was not challenged by the western powers, they were not recognized as official members either. Thus, their political agitations for independence were supported not just by anti-communists but also by those who were reacting against a Nazi action that was accepted by the international community. These were swiftly followed by similar movements in other peripheral areas: the Caucasus of the south and central Asia. The government lacked the strength to combat the separatist movements that developed in the SSRs which were, technically, their own countries (represented in the United Nations at the behest of the Soviet Union) that could determine their own political futures.

To combat the collapse, in August 1991 communist hardliners kidnapped Gorbachev, announced that he was too ill to govern and announced leadership under members of the KGP and Communist Party. The population went apoplectic and refused to accept this decision. There were massive protests in the main cities, and when the coup organizers tried to suppress the public, the military mutinied, refusing to use force against Soviet citizens. After three days, the coup collapsed when the leaders recognized they could not govern the country without military support.



▲ Soviet citizens demonstrate to show support for Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991

In reaction to the attempted coup, on 24 August Gorbachev dissolved the Central Committee of the Communist Party and resigned as General Secretary. Shortly thereafter, all communist elements of the Soviet government were dissolved, leaving a power vacuum. Gorbachev lost control of all but Moscow, and even there, Boris Yeltsin overpowered him.

Between August and December, ten republics declared independence from the USSR, events that were legitimized by the Alma-Ata Protocol. Russia would be the successor to the Soviet Union in the United Nations, retaining the Security Council seat. On 25 December 1991 Gorbachev resigned as President of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union was replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in January 1992. There were now 15 independent but related countries; the largest and most powerful was Russia with Boris Yeltsin as President. There were numerous issues to be worked out within the CIS, especially with regard to nuclear weapons, but the dishes were done and the Soviet Union was no more.

Source skills

If anything were ever to occur to disrupt the unity and efficacy of the [Communist] Party as a political instrument, Soviet Russia might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of societies.

George Kennan. 1947. "The sources of Soviet conduct."
Foreign Affairs. Vol 24, number 4 (July), p. 579–580.

Questions

- 1 How accurate was Kennan's view on what might lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union?
- 2 What enabled Kennan to provide such a prediction?



Conclusions

The United States is often seen as the victor in the Cold War and discussion often focuses on how much US foreign policy, and particularly the policies of Reagan and Bush, are responsible for the end of the Cold War. Reagan took a very strong stance that often reflected his background as an actor, calling the Soviet Union the “evil empire” and his SDI programme “Star Wars”. While such pop-culture references may seem comical today, they were very potent in engaging an American public that had been stung by Vietnam and that viewed any form of aggressive US foreign policy with trepidation. The nuclear threat was further heightened by the much-publicized accidents at Three Mile Island in the US and Chernobyl in the Soviet Union. The Cold War’s influence on American culture was once again renewed, as was fear of a nuclear threat.

The Cold War ended quickly and abruptly, but it was the result of long-term causes. The weaknesses of the Soviet dominion had been clear as early as 1948 when Czechoslovakia tried to remain outside the eastern bloc and failed, and Yugoslavia was expelled only to experience economic success beyond that of other communist countries, due to a large extent to the receipt of American aid. Risings in East Germany, Poland and Hungary in the 1950s showed the tensions within the Warsaw Pact, as did the Prague Spring of 1968. Rather than a show of strength, the Brezhnev Doctrine in some respects was an articulation of Soviet weakness, that it would need to prevent countries from leaving their sphere.

Gorbachev’s statement that its allies should be able to pursue socialism in ways compatible with their histories and cultures had led to the collapse of communism. In June 1990 the Warsaw Pact countries agreed to its dissolution, signaling to a large extent the end of the Cold War.

The Cold War did not end communism, nor did it end ideological conflicts. However, it signaled the end of the bipolar world that had existed since 1945 and left a power vacuum. It has seen the balkanization of central and eastern Europe and an increase in sectarian violence. This is not to say that the Cold War was a desired state of affairs, but that it was a conflict between two largely rational actors that were arguably guided by ideological differences and that had parity of power. Communism arguably teeters on the verge of extinction but socialism prevails in many parts of the world, even those considered capitalist democracies.