

The End of the Soviet Empire

Mikhail Gorbachev had fundamentally changed the Soviet Union. The policies of perestroika and glasnost brought new freedoms to the Soviet people. With these drastic changes in the Soviet Union, it was inevitable that change would also come to the countries of Eastern Europe. As early as March 1986, Gorbachev had said that, "the essence of perestroika . . . is for the people to feel they are the country's master." For the first time, change for Eastern Europe also seemed possible. Although Gorbachev may not have realized it, the people of Eastern Europe would demand the end of communism.

The Eastern European countries of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and East Germany had all been forced to accept communist governments after World War II. (See map on page 83.) After defeating Nazi Germany, the Soviet army occupied these countries and installed communist governments after rigged elections were held. Perhaps more than any other reason, the communist takeover of these Eastern European countries precipitated the Cold War. Among the people of most of the countries, the communist government was unpopular and resented. Soviet soldiers had remained to protect the new communist governments, and the people tolerated their governments only because they had no choice. Occasionally they tried to revolt, but the revolts were always put down harshly by Soviet troops. It was the threat of Soviet intervention that kept the Eastern European countries from throwing off their communist governments.

As Gorbachev's policies of reform took hold, changes also came to Eastern Europe. Much like the Soviet Union, the economies of Eastern Europe were in a terrible condition. People had little hope of a better life. They knew that their neighbors in Western Europe enjoyed a much higher standard of living. They longed for the freedoms that those in the West took for granted. Gorbachev had talked of reforming communism, but most of the people in Eastern European nations felt no loyalty to communism. They wished to eliminate their communist governments entirely. Various reforms that were carried out by the more liberal Eastern European regimes did not appease the people.

For decades, only the threat of intervention by the Soviet army had protected Eastern European communists. By 1989, it became apparent that Gorbachev was unlikely to order his troops to put down any revolts. On several occasions Gorbachev had spoken of his desire for people to run their own countries. It appeared that Gorbachev would hesitate to *continue to prop up the corrupt regimes of Eastern Europe*.

In 1989 the communist regimes of Eastern Europe fell one after the other to popular revolts. In Poland and Hungary, the change came peacefully. Poland's communist regime was the first to crumble when the Solidarity trade union was allowed to run against the



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communists in June elections. It was the first time that an opposition party had been allowed in the election. Solidarity won a great election victory, and Poland started on the road to democracy. In Hungary, elections held in 1990 also ended in a humiliating defeat for the Communist Party.

Other countries could not bring about change without bloodshed, however. In Czechoslovakia a large demonstration against the government on November 17, 1989, was brutally suppressed by police. Following the demonstration, the workers of Czechoslovakia started a national strike aimed at bringing down the government. All economic activity was stopped by the strike, and the communist government resigned. Vaclav Havel was elected as Czechoslovakia's first president on December 29, 1989. Romania's revolution was much bloodier. The most repressive of all the Eastern European countries, Romania's government was led by Nicolae Ceausescu. Ceausescu was determined to hold on to power at all costs. Army and police units clashed with demonstrators on December 17, 1989. Hundreds were killed in the fighting. It was the last time that the army would stand with Ceausescu, however. By December 22 the army had turned against him. The hated Ceausescu was captured and executed. In 1990 Romania had its first democratic election.

While communist governments in the rest of Eastern Europe tottered, speculation over the future of East Germany continued. East Germany suffered from the same problems as the other communist nations, but it also had unique problems. (See map on page 84.) Both the people of communist East Germany and democratic West Germany wished to reunite the country. However, this possibility had always been unthinkable to Soviet leaders. As a united country Germany had twice invaded Russia in the twentieth century. Many observers felt that Gorbachev would back the East German government to prevent reunification.

The situation in East Germany reached a crisis stage in 1989. Tens of thousands of East Germans fled the country. By traveling to Hungary, they could cross to the West over the newly-opened borders between Hungary and Austria. Pressure was building on East Germany's communist leaders. The people of East Germany were openly demonstrating against the government. They wanted freedom and unification with West Germany. On November 9, 1989, East German leaders made a desperate move. They opened a section of the Berlin Wall. They hoped that those opposed to the government would leave East Germany, leaving a more docile population. However, even this desperate act could not save them, and Gorbachev did nothing to help the desperate regime. After finally agreeing to free elections, the Communist Party was voted out of power in March 1990. In August 1990 the East German parliament voted in favor of the reunification of East and West Germany.

The fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of an era. Before 1989 many western leaders had remained distrustful of Gorbachev. While they supported his reforms, they were afraid that the reforms could be reversed and that the Soviet Union could again present a grave threat. The fall of the Wall was the symbolic end of communist rule over the nations of Eastern Europe. It was clear that the Soviet Empire was finished and that the people of Eastern Europe would not submit to Soviet troops again.

The fall of the Berlin Wall also made clear that Gorbachev had permanently changed the Soviet Union. Before Gorbachev, the Soviet Union would never have allowed communism to fall in Eastern Europe. Now, communism was dying. Freedom had come to Eastern Europe, and suddenly, the Cold War was ending.