



The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe

This is a transcript of the [Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

To begin with we'll consider Solidarity. The 1970s saw a debt-ridden Poland that faced enormous criticism by its population. The Polish people condemned the inequalities of Polish society (where most people barely scraped by while the influential members of the regime lived in luxury) and the lack of political voice they experienced. In the Gdansk shipyards during 1980 the workers' unhappiness led to the development of a trade union called Solidarity. Its leader, Lech Walesa, was a popular man who brought together workers from all over Poland, along with the support of the influential Catholic Church. By January 1981 Solidarity had a membership of 9.4 million people and found itself in a position to place demands on the government.

It's important to remember that at the start, Solidarity was not an anti-Communist movement. It wanted to reform the government, not overthrow it, although over time the union grew to a size and influence where it began to threaten the survival of the Communist regime. The government at first agreed to many of their demands but, with the appointment of the new Polish leader General Jaruzelski in October 1981, Solidarity found itself in trouble. The leader of the Soviet Union, Brezhnev, warned Jaruzelski that he had to clamp down on Solidarity otherwise he would send in Soviet troops to Poland. Two months later Jaruzelski declared martial law and arrested Lech Walesa and a further 10,000 members of Solidarity. The following month, Solidarity was declared illegal. Its members didn't resist. They knew that if they were to oppose the clampdown the Soviet army would crush them.

However, Solidarity did not completely disappear. Its former members continued to oppose the government, such as through operating an illegal radio station, and campaigned (along with many Western countries) for the release of Lech Walesa. Although the defeat of Solidarity would suggest the survival of the Communist regime, it is seen by many people as the beginning of the end. Firstly, it was clear that many ordinary people living in Communist countries were fed up with the government. Secondly, Solidarity was only put down thanks to the threat of Soviet military power. What would happen if the USSR refused to use its army to prop up the Communist governments of Eastern Europe?

Soviet dominance of Eastern Europe continued through the 1980s, but by the summer of 1989 it was losing its grip on events. By the end of 1990 the USSR's satellite states in Eastern Europe had broken free of Soviet control, and by the end of 1991 the USSR itself had broken up.



Throughout the 1980s the USSR had struggled to fund the large number of troops in Eastern Europe, especially as it faced massive social problems at home. Politically, the influential leaders of the USSR were mainly old men who were ill – known as ‘rule by geriatrics’. The new leader of the USSR, who became Soviet leader in 1985, was Mikhail Gorbachev. He knew he needed to fix these problems if the USSR was to survive. The two key policies he introduced to achieve this were Perestroika and Glasnost.

Perestroika, or ‘restructuring’ involved him reforming many elements of Soviet society. For example, he began to allow a free market economy to operate in the USSR, and cut military spending in order to increase investment in health and housing programmes. Glasnost, or ‘openness’ saw Gorbachev refusing to use propaganda to cover up the country’s problems and even saw him encouraging people in the USSR to speak out and to suggest new ways to run the economy and the country. This openness extended to Gorbachev telling the USA that the USSR would no longer compete with America. Gorbachev wanted to work build good relations as a way to achieve security for the USSR, not continue the arms race.

These new policies had an enormous effect on the way that the USSR operated, particularly in terms of its relationship with satellite states. In order to save money, for example, Gorbachev said he could not afford to station millions of Soviet troops in Eastern Europe to keep it Communist. Nor, he said, would he use Soviet troops to put down demonstrations in Eastern European countries. Gorbachev believed that the leaders of these states needed to adapt and change in the same way he was reforming the USSR if they were to survive.

The cracks in Eastern Europe first began to show in Hungary, which had begun to remove its barbed-wire border with non-communist Austria in early 1989. Very quickly, East Germans used the opportunity of going on holiday to Hungary as an opportunity to bypass German border controls and work their way into West Germany. By September the East German leader, Erich Honecker, was forced to ask Hungary to close its border due to the large amount of East Germans fleeing the country. Hungary refused. The following month Gorbachev visited East Germany as part of the anniversary celebrations of the creation of East Germany. Here he made it clear to the leaders of Eastern European states that he would not use Soviet troops to keep them in power, and urged them to reform their countries and win the support of their people. Honecker didn’t heed the advice. In November, thousands of East Germans marched on the Berlin Wall after hearing a rumour that the border to West Berlin would be opened. Honecker ordered troops to fire on the civilians but they refused, and opened the border leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Meanwhile, in Poland, Communist party leaders had agreed to free and open elections in August. Solidarity won 99% of the seats in Poland’s Senate and Lech Walesa became the first non-Communist leader since the Second World War. In October, Hungary did the same and became a democratic republic. November saw Czechoslovakia follow suit, while the



communist regimes in Bulgaria and Romania fell following massive demonstrations in December. The USSR itself soon disintegrated after a failed coup by the old Communist officials to wrestle back power. Recognising that attempting to resolve the situation was fruitless, on 25th December 1991, Gorbachev announced the end of the Soviet Union.

The most popular questions on the Collapse of Communism focus on asking WHY a certain event contributed to the end of the system, or ask to what extent – or how far – a particular event was responsible. Remember that to answer any of these questions you need to support your reason with solid evidence, and explain exactly WHY it contributed to the collapse of the communism.