

The collapse of the Communist bloc

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The collapse of the Communist bloc

Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist policies in the Soviet Union fuelled opposition movements to the Communist regimes in the Soviet bloc countries. Demonstrations became more frequent. Governments were forced to accept measures — recommended, moreover, by Gorbachev — towards liberalisation. However, these measures were not deemed to be sufficient.

Hopes of freedom, long suppressed by the Communist regimes in the countries of the Soviet bloc and in the USSR itself, were inevitably fuelled by Mikhail Gorbachev's attempted reforms in the Soviet Union and his conciliatory policy towards the West. It proved impossible to maintain reformed Communist regimes. They were entirely swept away by the desire for political democracy and economic liberty. Within three years, the Communist regimes collapsed and individual nations gained freedom, initially in the USSR's satellite countries and then within the Soviet Union itself. The structures of the Eastern bloc disintegrated with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and Comecon. The Soviet Union broke up into independent republics.

In Poland, economic reforms led to strikes in the spring and summer of 1988. The Solidarity movement ('Solidarność') called for trade union pluralism. During the Round Table negotiations, which enabled the gradual creation of the Third Polish Republic, the Polish Communist leaders recognised the social movement in April 1989. Solidarność was therefore able to take part in the first semi-legal elections since the Second World War. The elections, held on 4 and 18 June, saw the collapse of the Communist Party, and Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the first non-Communist head of government in Eastern Europe. He was appointed on 19 August 1989 and endorsed by an overwhelming majority by the Polish Sejm on 8 September 1989 as a result of a coalition between Solidarity, the agricultural party and the Democratic party. In December 1989, Lech Wałęsa, symbolic leader of Solidarność, replaced General Jaruzelski of the Polish United Workers' Party as President. The victory of the trade union's candidates in these elections triggered a wave of peaceful anti-Communist revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe.

In Hungary, demonstrations against the regime increased during 1987 and 1988. The Opposition became more organised, and reformers entered the government in June 1988. On 18 October 1989, the Stalinist Constitution was abandoned, and Hungary adopted political pluralism. Earlier that year, in May, the 'Iron Curtain' separating Hungary from Austria had been dismantled, enabling many East Germans to flee to the West.

In Czechoslovakia, a programme of reforms inspired by those of the USSR was adopted in December 1987 but was not widely implemented. The regime became more oppressive and suppressed demonstrations in 1988.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 further accelerated the demise of the Communist governments. In Czechoslovakia, the Opposition leader, Václav Havel, was unanimously elected interim President of the Republic by the parliament of the Socialist Republic on 29 December 1989. In the same vein, the anti-establishment Civic Forum movement won the first free parliamentary elections on 8 June 1990 and reappointed Václav Havel as President of the Republic in July of that year. In Hungary, the parliamentary elections held on 2 April 1990 resulted in the formation of the Democratic Forum government. On 9 December 1990, Lech Wałęsa became President of the Republic of Poland. In Bulgaria, a coalition government was formed on 7 December 1990, and a new Constitution

was adopted on 9 July 1991. In Romania, following violent demonstrations, the Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu was executed on 25 December 1989 and a new Constitution establishing pluralism was adopted on 8 December 1991.

This transformation proceeded, for the most part, in a peaceful manner. Nevertheless, in Romania, the revolution against the dictator Ceaușescu resulted in heavy bloodshed, and the fragmentation of Yugoslavia led to a long and bitter civil war.

The collapse of Soviet Communism led to dislocation of the Soviet Union, sapped by an ideological, political and economic crisis. This in turn precipitated the break-up of the empire, both cause and effect of the end of Communism. The organisations specific to ‘Soviet federalism’ hastened the implosion of the Soviet Union despite being primarily intended to consolidate it. One after another the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) proclaimed their sovereignty in the summer of 1991. In December of the same year, some of these republics, which had become independent in the meantime, redefined their respective links by creating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).