

Although it was still technically banned, Solidarity once more began to show its power. When the government tried to impose price rises in 1986, Solidarity threatened to call a general strike. Jaruzelski was forced to back down. He was also forced to witness foreign politicians coming to Poland for talks with Lech Walesa, as if he were running the country. Jaruzelski was gradually losing his authority. Following the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, economic reforms were introduced in Poland. In 1987 Jaruzelski held a referendum on his reforms, but failed to win support. In 1989 he was forced to agree to hold free elections. In those elections Solidarity won massive support and Jaruzelski was forced to give a share in government. Shortly afterwards Jaruzelski resigned and in 1990 Walesa became president of Poland's first non-communist government since the Second World War.

The significance of the Solidarity movement

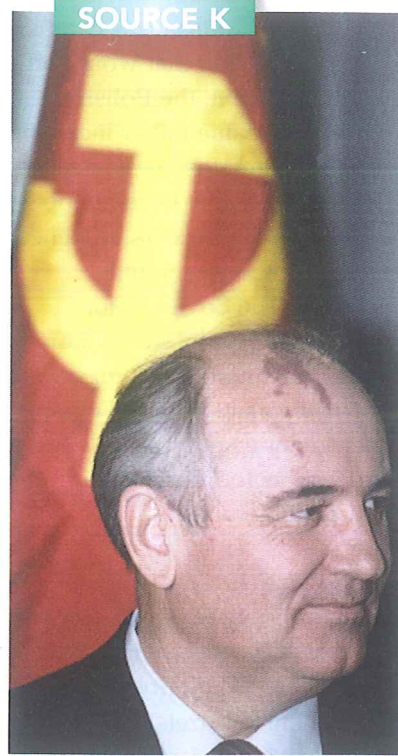
Solidarity had begun life as a trade union aiming to improve conditions for workers in the shipyards. But it had quickly become a mouthpiece for opposition to oppressive communism in Poland. Its greatest significance is that it became so powerful that the Polish government and the Soviet Union were unable to stamp it out. The days of 1956 and 1968, when opposition could be dealt with by Soviet tanks, were in the past. What Solidarity showed people in communist countries was that, if they stood together against oppression, it was very difficult for the authorities to deal with them. This was to prove a very vital lesson in the dramatic events of 1989.

How far was Gorbachev responsible for the collapse of Soviet control over eastern Europe?

The Soviet Union in crisis

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union. Although it was one of the two great 'superpowers' in the world, the Soviet Union and communism were in crisis.

- Communism was based on a belief in equality and fairness. It had become obvious, however, that there was great corruption in the Soviet system. Party members often lived in luxury and had access to goods that the workers could only dream of.
- The people of the Soviet Union no longer had faith in their government. They did not believe the promises made by politicians and bitterly resented the lack of good-quality consumer goods available in the country, when the West seemed to be getting richer.
- Industry and agriculture were not performing efficiently. Many goods produced in Soviet factories were of such poor quality that they did not work properly. Despite its huge agricultural areas, the Soviet Union had to import millions of tons of grain.
- The Soviet Union's role as head of the Warsaw Pact meant that it was spending huge sums on weapons while many of its citizens lived in poverty. Since 1979 thousands of Soviet troops had been



Mikhail Gorbachev.

fighting a war to protect the communist government in Afghanistan. It was estimated that this war alone was costing \$8 billion a year.

Gorbachev's solutions

- Gorbachev proposed that the Soviet economy should be improved by a process of 'perestroika' (restructuring) to include some of the practices that made capitalism successful.
- There should be more 'glasnost' (openness) to restore faith in the government and end corruption. Soviet citizens should be more aware of the reasons for government actions. Dissidents (people who criticised the government) should no longer be persecuted.
- There should be a cutback in the money spent on arms and defence. The Soviet Union should pull out of Afghanistan and negotiate arms reductions with the USA. It should also stop spending huge sums interfering in other countries' affairs. The Brezhnev Doctrine should be dropped.

Gorbachev wasted little time in putting his plans into action. In February 1986 the leading Soviet dissident, Andrei Sakharov, was released from prison, and in 1987 reforms were introduced to allow market forces, with buying and selling for individual profit, to be part of the country's economic system. In the same year, a disarmament treaty was signed with the USA, and two years later, further cuts in nuclear weapons were introduced. In December 1988 Gorbachev announced at the United Nations that the Brezhnev Doctrine was no longer part of Soviet policy. From now on, communist governments in eastern Europe had to be responsible for their own policies and could not expect support from the Soviet Red Army.

Reactions to Gorbachev's policies

Hard-line communists were horrified by what Gorbachev was doing. They accused him of betraying communism and threatening the security of the Soviet Union. Introducing market forces into



A cartoon from a British newspaper in January 1990 showing the communist hammer and sickle in tears.

the economy went against the principles of communism. Glasnost and freeing dissidents were bound to stir up trouble and raise the expectations of Soviet citizens when there was little chance of providing them with what they wanted. And the decision to abandon the Brezhnev Doctrine and withdraw support from other communist countries was highly dangerous. How was the Soviet Union to be defended if countries in the Warsaw Pact chose to abandon communism?

As it was, this was exactly what happened. In an extraordinary summer in 1989, one by one the communist governments came to an end in Europe.

The break-up of the Soviet Union

By the end of 1989, Gorbachev was in a difficult position. He was a great hero in the eyes of the world. In October he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and in December he and the American president, George Bush, met to announce the end of the Cold War.



But inside the Soviet Union, Gorbachev was extremely unpopular. The hard-liners hated what he had done and blamed his policies for the fall of communism in eastern Europe. At the same time he was unpopular with liberals in the Soviet Union. His economic reforms did not work because the task was too big to be done quickly. Corruption and inefficiency ran so deep that people were either unable or unwilling to make the changes he required. Many managers, for example, saw his drive for efficiency as a threat to their positions. So they simply made sure that the reforms were not introduced.

However, Gorbachev had taken the lid off a box that could not be closed. The people of the Soviet Union had been promised reforms and resented the fact that they were not getting them. Certainly government was more open, but that merely allowed people to see more of the problems – and the greater freedom to criticise the government just led to more discontent. There were also those, such as Boris Yeltsin, the ex-mayor of Moscow, who criticised Gorbachev for his failure to introduce reforms to make the Soviet Union even more democratic.

The fall of Gorbachev

Following the fall of communism in eastern Europe and the failure of his domestic reforms, Gorbachev's position in the Soviet Union came under great pressure. In February 1990, 250,000 people demonstrated against communism in Moscow, and in the annual May Day parade in Red Square, Gorbachev was heckled by demonstrators. In August 1991 there was an attempt to overthrow Gorbachev, after which he had little authority.

Under pressure from Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachev signed a decree suspending the activities of the Communist Party. Then, in December 1991, the Soviet Union was formally disbanded. A new Commonwealth of Independent States was formed, in which each of the twelve member states was considered to have equal authority. The Russian-dominated Soviet Union was gone. So was its leader. In the same month, Gorbachev resigned.

SOURCE N

What was my reaction the other night? I'll tell you. I'm a tough old retired colonel, but I had tears in my eyes. The right to choose is priceless. At some point it's worth more than life itself. To see people standing on the wall, where once they would have been shot, I could hardly take it in.

SOURCE M

'My life's work has been accomplished,' Mr Gorbachev said last Thursday. Not quite. He did not set out to abolish the Soviet Union, nor the Communist Party. These events happened in spite of his resistance and because, in the long run, the entire Soviet system was heading for disaster. Mr Gorbachev's career is proof not of the impact that one man can make on history, but of how powerful historical forces sweep aside the efforts of one man to resist them.

From an article in an English newspaper on 15 December 1991, shortly before Mikhail Gorbachev's resignation.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why was communism in crisis in 1985?
- 2 What solutions did Mikhail Gorbachev propose?
- 3 Explain the meaning of Source L.
- 4 Why did the Soviet Union break up?
- 5 Source M says that Gorbachev lost office because he could not resist historical forces. Do you agree?

The views of Gail S. Halvorsen, the pilot who organised the 'Little Vittles' campaign in 1948, talking of how he felt when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989.