

What was the role of nationalism and people power in ending the Cold War?

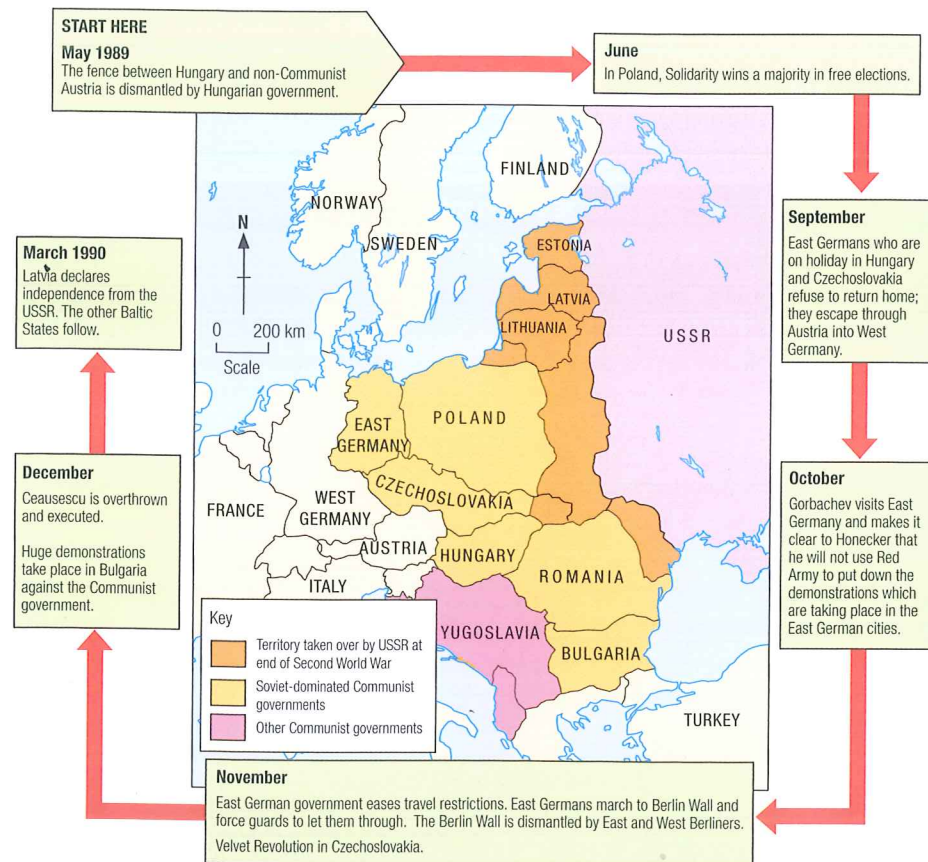
What no one understood, at the beginning of 1989, was that the Soviet Union, its empire, its ideology – and therefore the Cold War itself – was a sand pile ready to slide. All it took to happen was a few more grains of sand. The people who dropped them were not in charge of superpowers or movements or religions: they were ordinary people with simple priorities who saw, seized, and sometimes stumbled into opportunities. In doing so they caused a collapse no one could stop.

From John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (Penguin, 2005) p.238

In the late 1980s, a resurgence in nationalist movements began to develop in most of the satellite states. The reasons for this were a combination of the continued deterioration of living standards, the fact that the USSR was becoming less involved in the internal affairs of these countries and the implications of Gorbachev's reforms. Gorbachev made it clear that he was unwilling to use force to maintain control over the satellite states.

In a speech to the United Nations, on 7 December, 1988, he announced that the Soviet Union would cut by half a million men its commitment of troops to the Warsaw Pact. 'It is obvious,' he argued, 'that force and the threat of force cannot be and should not be an instrument of foreign policy ... Freedom of choice is ... a universal principle and it should know no exceptions'. This was a clear signal to the peoples and governments of Eastern Europe. Gorbachev had made it clear that the Brezhnev Doctrine would not be applied, and 1989 saw an amazing series of revolutions in the satellite states, resulting in the whole Soviet system, including Stalin's legacy, being swept away.

The events of 1989



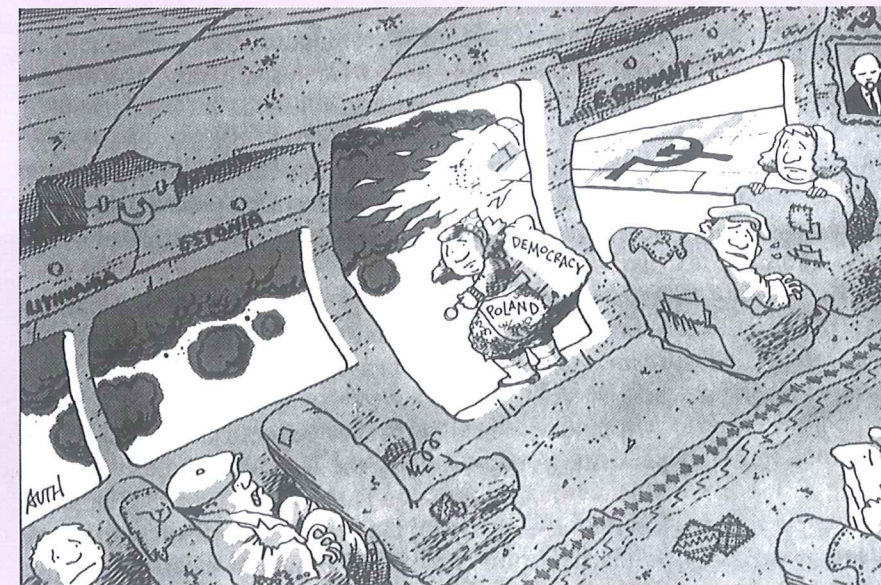
The process by which the Soviet Union collapsed began in May 1989 when the Hungarian government dismantled the barbed-wire fences on the border with Austria. Thousands of Hungarians and East Germans then crossed over to Austria in order to cross into West Germany.

Events in Poland

In Poland, the union movement called 'Solidarity' had been suppressed in 1981 by General Jaruzelski. He had then declared a state of martial law. Nevertheless, there continued to be popular support for Solidarity due to the combination of economic stagnation that the government failed to solve and support from the Catholic Church. In response to Gorbachev's reforms, Solidarity was legalized in 1988, and some attempt to introduce reforms was made. Solidarity won the first free elections in Poland in 1989. Jaruzelski remained President, but a Solidarity leader became Prime Minister. The Communist Party had been defeated by a huge popular vote, and the government was the first in the Eastern bloc since the 1940s not to be controlled by the Communists. Gorbachev had not intervened to support the old Communist regime and, in the absence of internal or external support, the Polish Communist Party collapsed.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Cartoon analysis



◀ An American cartoon of 1989 showing events in Eastern Europe (Tony Auth, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*).

Questions

- 1 What is the aeroplane supposed to represent? What is significant about the way the cartoonist has drawn the aeroplane?
- 2 Who are the passengers supposed to represent?
- 3 What is enabling Poland to jump out of the aeroplane?

Events in East Germany

Erich Honecker, a hardline Communist, had been the leader of East Germany since 1971. Although considered one of the more 'successful' countries in the Eastern bloc, living standards were well below those enjoyed by their fellow Germans in the West. Honecker

used sport as a focus for nationalism, but this did not create a sense of an East German society, and many people still looked forward to the day when Germany would be reunified. Evidence of the insecurity felt by Honecker's regime was the extremely repressive nature of the East German secret police, the Stasi. The Stasi kept files on 5.5 million people. The regime was unpopular, but Honecker was particularly hated. By the mid-1980s there was growing pressure on the government to remove him.

Honecker hoped to consolidate Communist control in East Germany during the celebrations for the 40th anniversary of the GDR. However, people criticized the harsh and repressive East German system and openly demanded reforms. Thousands of East German holidaymakers in Hungary crossed into Austria across the now open border. These 'escapes' were a return to the days before the building of the Berlin Wall – a mass exodus of East Germans (on one day alone 125,000 crossed to the West). More alarming still for the regime were the groups, like the 'New Forum', that decided to stay and resist rather than flee to the West. Honecker wanted to use force to control the swell of anti-Communist party feeling. Gorbachev, however, made it clear that he would not intervene if there were a full-scale revolt. Demonstrations in East German cities continued to grow and a new leader, Egon Krenz, was put in place by the Politburo. In order to try to stem the flow of people from East Germany, the government announced on 9 November 1989 the easing of travel and emigration restrictions. Although not actually intending this to mean an immediate opening of the checkpoints through the Berlin Wall, the lack of clarity in the official statement meant that thousands of East Berliners immediately descended on the checkpoints. The East German guards were taken by surprise and, lacking direction from above, had to go ahead and open the barriers that night. Within 24 hours, the Berlin Wall had ceased to be the symbol of Cold War division and instead its destruction by the people – both East and West Berliners – had become the symbol of the ending of the Cold War. When free elections were held in 1990, parties in favour of unification with West Germany won a majority of seats. East and West Germany were finally reunited on 3 October 1990.

The Berlin Wall comes down in November 1989.



Events in Hungary

Reform in Hungary came more from within the Hungarian Communist Party itself. Reformers, encouraged by the new policies expounded from Moscow, sacked the hardline leader, Kadar, and then dominated the government. On 23 October 1989 Mátyás Szűrös declared the Third Hungarian Republic and became interim president. Hungary's first free elections were held in 1990.

Events in Czechoslovakia

The changes that took place in Czechoslovakia that led to the downfall of the Communist regime have become known as the 'Velvet Revolution' as there was very little violence. People power can be seen as the clear driving force here. The government was forced to respond to mass demonstrations calling for reform. The campaign was co-ordinated by an organization called the Civic Forum and, in 1989, a leading dissident playwright, Vaclav Havel, was elected president. The Warsaw Pact nations, including the USSR, issued an official statement condemning the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia as 'illegal' and promising never to again interfere in each other's internal affairs.



The 'Velvet Revolution' in Czechoslovakia.

Events in Romania

In comparison to the 'Velvet Revolution' in Czechoslovakia, events in Romania were far more violent. Its leader was President Ceausescu and his regime was one of the most repressive in Eastern Europe. However, in December 1989, inspired by news of events in Hungary and by the killing of demonstrators by the Romanian army in Timisoara, there was an uprising against Ceausescu and his wife. When the Ceausescus appeared at a rally in the Romanian capital, Bucharest, one week after the army had killed 71 people in Timisoara, they met with a hostile reception. The army now refused to take action against the demonstrators. Ceausescu and his wife tried to flee, but were arrested by the army and then executed on Christmas Day, 1989.

At the beginning of 1989 the Communists had been in complete – and seemingly permanent – control of Eastern Europe. At the end of the year, they were gone. Democratic coalitions, promising free elections in the immediate future, had taken place in East Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Warsaw and even Bucharest ... As a result, the Warsaw Pact had been, in effect, dismantled. The Soviet Union had withdrawn inside its borders. The Cold War in Europe was over.

Stephen Ambrose sums up the events of 1989 in Rise to Globalism (Penguin, 1991) p.378

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Cartoon analysis

Questions

- 1 Explain what is happening in the cartoon.
- 2 What is the message of the cartoon regarding events in Eastern Europe?

*'The Pace of History Quickens',
The Philadelphia Inquirer, November 1989.*

