

What was the significance of 'Solidarity' in Poland for the decline of Soviet influence in eastern Europe?

Soviet control was extremely unpopular in Poland. Many Poles were strong Catholics, who were fiercely proud of their country's history. They also remembered how the Red Army had failed to help the Poles in the Warsaw Rising of 1944, and claimed that Soviet troops had carried out atrocities in Poland equally as bad as those carried out by the Nazis.

In the period after 1949, there were many protests in Poland. In both 1956 and 1970, a series of strikes by Polish factory workers and farmers led to changes in the leadership of the country. During the 1970s, industry performed better in Poland than in most east European countries and there was a degree of prosperity within the country. Although they hated Soviet influence, many Poles seemed to have accepted that life under communism could be quite successful. In the late 1970s, however, the Polish economy went into recession and the standard of living fell. Polish workers began to form trade unions, and when the government announced increases in the price of food in July 1980, there was an outbreak of strikes.

The most influential of the newly formed trade unions was 'Solidarity'. This was a union of workers at the Gdansk shipyards, led by Lech Walesa. The union soon became a symbol of opposition to authoritarian communist government.

Solidarity versus the government

In August 1980, Solidarity issued 21 demands calling for greater political and religious freedom. Its size was increasing all the time – by the end of 1980, Solidarity had over 9 million members.

The government was in a difficult position. Solidarity was a popular trade union and as many as a third of the members of the Polish Communist Party were in the union. Lech Walesa was a highly popular figure with enormous support in Poland. He was also becoming widely known across the world as the media in other countries watched events in Poland with interest.



SOURCE H

Lech Walesa addressing a Solidarity meeting.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What were the similarities and differences in the Hungarian uprising and the Prague Spring?
- 2 Why was there so much opposition to Soviet control in Poland?
- 3 Why did the Polish government find it so difficult to deal with Solidarity?

Yet, although Walesa was careful not to provoke action that would offend the Soviet Union, the Polish government came under increasing pressure from Moscow to deal with Solidarity before it became too powerful and before its influence spread to other communist countries. The Soviet Union considered sending troops into Poland, as it had into Hungary and Czechoslovakia. But the Soviet government decided that Solidarity's support was too widespread to be dealt with by tanks.

Instead, in February 1981 a new prime minister, Wojciech Jaruzelski, was appointed. He was told to bring Solidarity into line. By this time, Solidarity was demanding a role in the government. Jaruzelski could not allow Solidarity to become a political party in opposition to the Communist Party. Yet the wave of strikes and protests was having a damaging effect on Poland's already fragile economy. Unemployment and inflation were rising and there were such food shortages that rationing had to be introduced in April 1981.

So, in December 1981, Jaruzelski declared martial law. This gave him special powers which he used to arrest Walesa and 10,000 other Solidarity members. Solidarity itself was declared illegal and meetings or demonstrations in its favour were banned. While Jaruzelski took these measures, Brezhnev sent the Red Army to carry out manoeuvres on the Polish border. It was a warning to the prime minister and the Polish people of what might happen if things were not settled to Moscow's liking.

SOURCE J

I was summoned three times to the Soviet Union. On the last occasion I was shown army manoeuvres all along the Polish border. The Soviet army leader, Marshal Ustinov, informed me that what was happening in Poland was intolerable.



A cartoon in the *Sunday Times* in August 1980. The face of the Soviet Union is that of Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader.

Having arrested the leaders of Solidarity, Jaruzelski now set up his own union, the Patriotic Movement for National Regeneration, and forced government workers to join it. But his tough measures did not work. Walesa's imprisonment merely added to his popularity both in Poland and abroad. Solidarity was not crushed and seemed to have even more support in other countries. Jaruzelski was forced to free Walesa in November 1982, and in 1983 Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He had become too powerful to be 'dealt with'.

Jaruzelski continued his campaign against Solidarity, but with little success. A sign of his desperation was that in 1983 he even turned on the Catholic Church, which had been criticising his government. In 1984 the Polish people were outraged to hear that a leading critic of the government, Father Jerzy Popielusko, had been beaten to death by secret police. Almost a quarter of a million Poles attended his funeral in what was really a protest against the government. In response to what was going on in the country, western nations introduced trade sanctions against Poland, which led to further economic problems.

General Jaruzelski describing the pressure put on him to deal with Solidarity in late 1981.

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

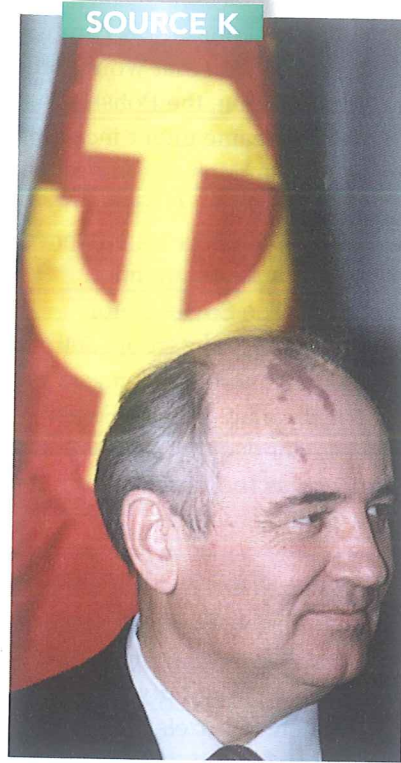
Solidarity had begun life as a trade union aiming to improve conditions for workers in the shipyards. But it had quickly become a mouthpiece for opposition to oppressive communism in Poland. Its greatest significance is that it became so powerful that the Polish government and the Soviet Union were unable 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.

SOURCE K

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.