

# How secure was the USSR's control over eastern Europe 1948–c.1989?

By 1948 the Soviet Union had secured its western border by extending communism into a number of east European states. The task that lay ahead was to ensure that the communist system remained in place when it was challenged from within. In 1956 and 1968 Soviet military power ensured that communism survived in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, but in the 1980s the demand for change was so great that even the Soviet Union itself was swept away in the tide of reform.

## Khrushchev and the countries of the Warsaw Pact

In 1953 Stalin died and was succeeded by Nikita Khrushchev. Would his treatment of the communist countries in the Warsaw Pact prove as tough as Stalin's had been?

Early signs of Khrushchev's approach were seen in East Germany in 1953 when workers demonstrated against working conditions and lack of political freedom. Khrushchev ordered the Soviet Red Army to 'restore order' and 21 workers were killed.

In 1956 there were demonstrations against food prices in Poland. The Polish government was unable to keep control and so, once again, Soviet troops were sent to restore order. But there were signs of a different approach too. Khrushchev appointed Vladislav Gomulka as the new leader of the Polish Communist Party. He had been imprisoned by Stalin and his appointment was very popular. Khrushchev also allowed some reforms that gave the Poles more freedom.

Then Khrushchev launched a bitter attack on Stalin's treatment of the Soviet Union's communist neighbours. He ended the dispute between the Soviet Union and Tito's communist Yugoslavia and told the Yugoslavian people that the Soviet Union believed in 'equality, non-interference, respect for sovereignty and national independence'.

But if the other communist countries hoped that under Khrushchev they would be allowed to have a much greater say in running their own affairs, they were soon to be disappointed.

## Why was there opposition to Soviet control in Hungary in 1956?

During Stalin's years, Hungary had been ruled by Matyas Rakosi, a hard-line communist who ensured that the country remained loyal to the Soviet Union. His policies caused great resentment in Hungary:

- Soviet troops were stationed in Hungary to ensure loyalty, and a special secret police force (the AVO) carried out a terror campaign against anyone opposing government policy.
- Communist control extended to radio, newspapers and the arts. Strict censorship meant that Hungarians had no freedom of speech.
- In education, a communist 'eastern' history was taught to children. Hungary's historical links with the West were played down and its relations with eastern countries emphasised.
- Although the Hungarians were a deeply religious people, the Communist Party discouraged religious belief.

The Hungarian people heard the news of reform in Poland with great excitement. Perhaps this gave them an opportunity in their own country? Even within the Hungarian Communist Party there was opposition to Rakosi and he was forced to resign in July 1956. But his successor, Erno Gero, was not popular among the Hungarian people, who saw him as just another hard-line communist.

Soon Gero began to lose control. On 6 October 1956 thousands of Hungarians turned out to witness the state funeral of Laszlo Rajik. He was a communist leader who had wanted Hungary to break away from Soviet control. Stalin had him tried and executed. Now it was decided that he

should be reburied and have a state funeral. This would allow the Hungarians to show proper respect. It also allowed them to voice their opposition to Moscow.

On 23 October there was rioting on the streets of the capital Budapest and fighting between demonstrators and the AVO. Khrushchev responded by appointing the reforming politician, Imre Nagy, as prime minister. But he also sent tanks into Budapest.

At first, Nagy appeared to be achieving reform with Soviet approval, and after just one week the Soviet tanks were withdrawn. Yet any hopes that Khrushchev had of Hungary 'settling down' were soon dashed. At the end of October, Nagy announced that one-party rule would end in Hungary, Soviet forces would be withdrawn from the country and Hungary would leave the Warsaw Pact.

## How did the Soviet Union react?

These reforms were too much for Khrushchev. Although Nagy intended to keep Hungary as a communist country, there was no way that the Soviet Union would allow one of its 'satellite states' to leave the Warsaw Pact and threaten Soviet security. So, on 4 November, 200,000 Soviet troops, supported by 2500 tanks, arrived in Budapest. But unlike in Poland, the Hungarians fought against the Soviet troops. Nagy made an appeal to the United Nations for help, and radio messages begged for assistance from the West.

The western powers, however, did not send support. In 1956 Britain, the USA and France were squabbling over who should control the Suez Canal, and the Americans were not prepared to send troops into Hungary. Preventing the spread of communism was one thing, sending troops to fight in a country that was already communist was another.

## SOURCE A

The Hungarian government immediately repudiates the Warsaw Treaty and declares Hungary's neutrality. It turns to the United Nations and requests the help of the great powers in defending the country's neutrality.

## SOURCE B



A member of the AVO murdered by demonstrators in October 1956.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How similar were the policies of Stalin and Khrushchev towards members of the Warsaw Pact?
- 2 Why did the Soviet Union invade Hungary?

Prime Minister Nagy appealing to the United Nations for help against the invading forces.

Hungarian rebels in the streets of Budapest in November 1956.

Although they fought with fierce determination, without military support from the West, the Hungarian rebels stood no chance against the Soviet Red Army. After two weeks of fierce fighting, up to 27,000 Hungarians are thought to have died, but Soviet control was restored. Nagy was dismissed and replaced by Janos Kadar. Nagy fled to the Yugoslavian embassy in Budapest. He was later captured and hanged in Moscow.

As Khrushchev had intended, the communist countries of eastern Europe had been taught a lesson, although communists around the world were horrified by the severity of the Soviet action. Anti-communist feeling in the West intensified. Although it had taken no action, the USA became even more determined to resist Soviet expansion in Europe. However, the people of Hungary were embittered by the lack of support from the West. The United Nations had been discredited. It had tried to call for a withdrawal of Soviet troops and to set up a Committee of Investigation, but these moves had been blocked by the Soviet Union.

### Why was there opposition to Soviet control in Czechoslovakia in 1968?

By 1968 Khrushchev had been replaced as Soviet leader by Leonid Brezhnev. He continued the policy of firm Soviet control of satellite countries – as the Czechs were to find out in 1968.

- Czechoslovakia, like other communist countries, had no freedom of speech, and radio, television and newspapers were censored.
- All candidates in elections were members of the Communist Party. Many Czechs wanted the right to form their own parties, have more say in how their factories were run and not be subject to control by the Soviet Union.

### SOURCE C



### SOURCE D

There is no stopping the wild onslaught of communism. Your turn will also come, once we perish. Save our souls! Save our souls! We implore you to help us in the name of justice and of freedom.

A broadcast from an unidentified radio station in Hungary on 4 November 1956.

- Czech industry was run for the benefit of the Soviet Union and few consumer goods were produced. So the standard of living for Czech citizens was low.

In the 1960s, protests against the low standard of living and lack of political freedom began to increase. In 1966 student demonstrations were broken up by the police and critics of the government were imprisoned.

By 1968 it was obvious that the Czech leadership was out of touch with the people. Consequently, in January, President Novotny was replaced by Jan Svoboda, and Alexander Dubcek became party secretary – effectively the ruler of Czechoslovakia.

Dubcek talked about providing 'socialism with a human face'. He wanted to raise people's living

standards and give them more freedom. He introduced a number of reforms to reduce government control.

- He allowed public meetings and discussions, and relaxed censorship. It would no longer be a crime to criticise the government.
- Trade unions were given greater freedom and government control of industry was relaxed. Now managers and workers had a greater say in what they did.
- More foreign travel was allowed.

Dubcek's reforms became known as the 'Prague Spring' because they represented a thawing in the old repressive communist approach. But Dubcek was careful to reassure Brezhnev that Czechoslovakia had no intention of leaving the Warsaw Pact and that the changes he was making did not threaten the Soviet Union.

Brezhnev was not convinced. He disapproved of the increased liberties being given to the Czechs. Wouldn't people in other communist countries want them too? Anyway, Czechoslovakia was too important to lose to communism. It was the link between West Germany and the Soviet Union. It had to stay communist. Already Yugoslavia was independent and Romania was refusing to attend Warsaw Pact meetings. What if the three countries formed an alliance? Wouldn't that mean the end of the Warsaw Pact?

### How did the Soviet Union react?

At first, Brezhnev tried to threaten Dubcek by having Warsaw Pact troops carry out army 'manoeuvres' in Czechoslovakia. Then in July 1968, Dubcek was warned that his reforms threatened the rule of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. Finally, when Dubcek invited Tito of Yugoslavia and Ceausescu of Romania to Czechoslovakia for talks, Brezhnev acted.

On 20 August 1968, Warsaw Pact forces entered Czechoslovakia and took control. Although there was some street fighting, there was none of the bloodshed that had been seen in Budapest in 1956. For some of the invading army, however, their hostile reception came as a shock. They had been told that the Czech government had invited them in to restore law and order. They expected to be greeted with enthusiasm, not contempt.

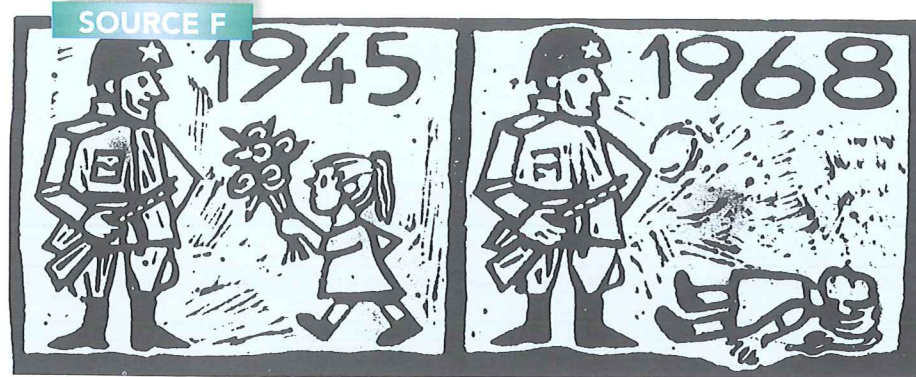
### SOURCE E



Czech citizens attacking a Soviet tank in the streets of Prague in August 1968.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 What were the consequences of the Soviet invasion in Hungary?
- 2 a What did Dubcek mean by 'socialism with a human face'?  
b Why did the Soviet Union oppose Dubcek's changes?



A drawing on a wall in a Prague street in 1968, twenty years after the Soviet Union had liberated Czechoslovakia from Nazi rule.

One Czech student, Jan Palach, set fire to himself in Wenceslas Square as a protest against the invasion. His funeral became a focus for protest against the Soviet Union. In February 1969, thousands of Czechs took to the streets once more – this time to celebrate the Czech victory over the Soviet Union in the world ice hockey championships.

#### The Spring reversed

Dubcek was arrested, sent to Moscow and forced to agree to reverse his reforms. Then in 1969 he was forcibly removed from office and replaced by Gustav Husak. Shortly afterwards, over a thousand Czechs were detained in two days of arrests.

The Soviet Union had successfully clamped down on attempts to reform communist rule. In what became known as the Brezhnev Doctrine, the Soviet Union announced that it was the task of all Warsaw Pact countries to act together to resist an attempt by any member to abandon communism.

#### How similar were events in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968?

Although there were obvious differences between the two events, in many ways they were very similar. The Hungarians had tried to break completely free from the Soviet Union, whereas the Czechs considered themselves to be loyal members of the Warsaw Pact. But as far as the Soviet Union was concerned, both 'uprisings' threatened the unity of the Warsaw Pact and therefore the security of the Soviet Union. They had to be stopped with force, before their influence spread to other communist countries. There was little difference in the eventual methods used to restore the control of the Moscow government.

#### Why was the Berlin Wall built in 1961?

As you read on pages 218–19, the city of Berlin was divided into four zones after the Second World War. By 1961 these had become West Berlin and East Berlin. The French, British and Americans controlled West Berlin, and their investment helped to create a wealthy city with all the consumer benefits that people in other western countries were enjoying. Soviet-controlled East Berlin, however, was not prosperous and was under strict communist control. Not surprisingly, many East Germans, particularly skilled craftsmen and professional people, crossed from East to West Berlin and on to West Germany. The Soviet Union had to find a way to stop this huge flood of refugees, which deprived East Germany of over two and a half million citizens between 1949 and 1961.

Of course, Berlin was also a pawn in the political game being played between the Soviet Union and the USA in the Cold War. The Soviet Union saw West Berlin as a capitalist boil in the middle of Soviet-controlled East Germany. It wanted the three western allies out of West Berlin. The USA, however, was determined to protect 'free' West Berlin from communism.

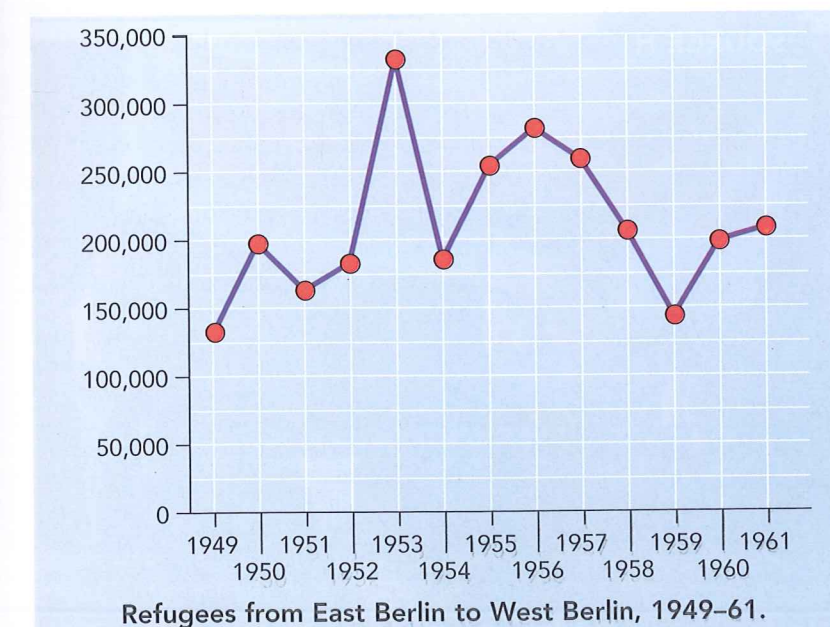
In June 1961, the Soviet leader, Khrushchev, met the new American president, J. F. Kennedy, in a summit meeting in Vienna. Khrushchev demanded that the western powers leave Berlin. Kennedy insisted that he would stand by Berlin. Both sides stepped up their spending on weapons and there seemed to be a threat of war over Berlin.

#### The wall goes up

Khrushchev, however, had a better solution than war. On 13 August 1961, Soviet troops put up barbed-wire barricades all around West Berlin. Later they were replaced with the more substantial 'Berlin Wall'. West Berlin was cut off from East Berlin and anyone trying to cross was shot. In all, 86 people are known to have died trying to cross the Berlin Wall between 1961 and 1989.

The building of the wall was extremely unpopular in Berlin. In places, East German troops had to clear protesters away from the wall. The border took no account of roads or even houses. Some roads simply came to an end as the wall crossed them, and some houses found that they had doorways in the East and back windows in the West. In several tenement blocks, East Berliners tried to cross to the West by throwing mattresses out of their windows and jumping on to them. Sometimes West Berliners caught them in fire blankets. Sometimes they fell to their deaths.

Yet the wall achieved its purpose. The flood of refugees to the West ended and the Soviet Union was able to develop East Berlin as it wanted. However, the wall did provide opponents of communism with a propaganda opportunity. If communism was such a great system, they asked, why did the Soviet Union have to build a wall to stop people running away?



The body of Peter Fechter, an eighteen-year-old bricklayer in East Berlin. On 17 August 1962 he tried to cross into West Berlin to join his sister. He was shot by border police as he climbed the barbed wire on the eastern side and fell back into the strip between East and West. He could be heard crying for help and shouting his sister's name as he slowly bled to death. Fechter was only 300 metres from the West Berlin border post, and as crowds grew on the western side to witness the awful spectacle, they begged the Americans to rescue him. But the soldiers were told by their officers not to intervene. An hour later, East German guards collected Fechter's body.

## 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.



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.

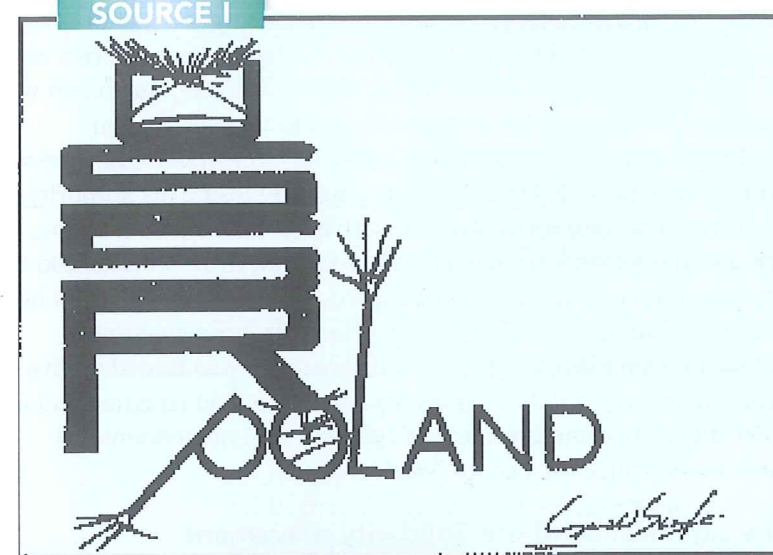
So, in December 1981, Jaruzelski declared martial law. This gave him special powers which he used to arrest Walesa and 10,000 other Solidarity members. Solidarity itself was declared illegal and meetings or demonstrations in its favour were banned. While Jaruzelski took these measures, Brezhnev sent 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.

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

### SOURCE I



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.

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

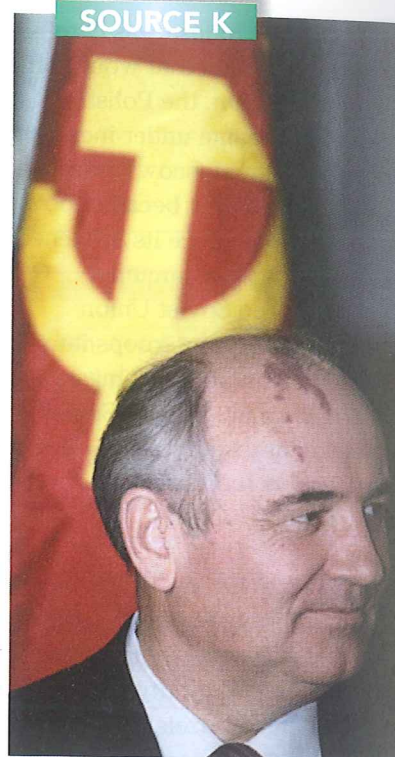
Solidarity had begun life as a trade union aiming to improve conditions for workers in the shipyards. But it had quickly become a mouthpiece for opposition to oppressive communism in Poland. Its greatest significance is that it became so powerful that the Polish government and the Soviet Union were unable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