

Why Did Communism Fall?

Christiane Olivo
Political Science Department
University of Northern Colorado
christiane.olivo@unco.edu

While acknowledging that a confluence of factors led to the fall of communism, your task is to rank each of the following (1=most important, etc.) and reach consensus on your rankings. Discuss the significance of at least two of these factors.

Mikhail Gorbachev's Reforms:

“To his credit Gorbachev was quick to accept the need for a dramatic change of the whole vision of socialism. He recognized the need to reorganize the whole political system, limit the communist party prerogatives, and diminish the powers of the repressive apparatus. The search for rule of law and the creation of a checks-and-balances system in the Soviet Union became priorities on the leadership's agenda.” (Tismaneanu, pg. 181)

In a recent interview Gorbachev explained: “On the day I became Soviet leader, in March 1985, I had a special meeting with the leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries, and told them: ‘You are independent, and we are independent. You are responsible for your policies, we are responsible for ours. We will not intervene in your affairs, I promise you.’” (Interview in *The Nation*, Nov 16, 2009)

Lack of Human Rights and Repression:

“Socially, the Stalinization of Eastern Europe meant the destruction of the human bonds generally described as civil society. A universal sense of fear was instilled in individuals, who were treated as simple cogs in the wheels of the totalitarian state machine. The legal system was redefined to deprive the individual of any sense of protection....” (Tismaneanu, pg. 31)

Loss of Legitimacy:

“No society can function in the absence of at least a limited consensus among its members about common goals and values.” (Tismaneanu, pg. 178)

“The failure of the communist regimes to secure mass support once the open terror started to subside, as well as the erosion of their ideological foundations, shows the limits of the totalitarian paradigm.” (Tismaneanu, pg. 172)

“One of the most characteristic features of Communist rule was the debasement of ordinary political language. *Sovereignty* had come to mean loyalty to the Soviet Union; *freedom*, absence of choice; *reform*, cosmetic administrative reorganization and *economic success*, standing in line for hours to buy substandard goods.” (Stokes, pp. 33-34)

“...[T]he workers in this workers' state [Poland] regarded the regime as false, restrictive, humiliating, and oppressive....” (Stokes, pg. 20)

“The transition to postcommunism was linked to the deterioration of the communist elites' self-confidence, which was itself a reflection of the moral and ideological crisis of those regimes.” (Tismaneanu, pg. 177)

The Democratic Opposition:

“...[M]oral protest had an explosive political implication, in that it articulated the strategy of nonviolent resistance to the system’s attempt to reduce the individual to a submissive, totally pliable entity.” (Tismaneanu, pg. 145)

“...[A]ctivities like those of the KOR and Charter 77 [opposition groups in Poland and Czechoslovakia]...led to extraordinary transformations in those societies and created the embryo of the counterculture that was to replace the crumbling communist regimes during the 1989 upheaval.” (Tismaneanu, pg. 145)

Arms Race with the West:

“The Cold War was an unusually taxing game for the Soviet Union. With a GNP of about half that of the United States in the post World War II period, it was necessary to devote roughly twice the proportion of Soviet resources to military provisioning as the United States to achieve and retain parity.” (Dowlah and Elliott, pg. 175)

“[T]he escalation in military spending by the Reagan administration during the 1980s, vividly manifested by an 85 percent increase in such expenditures between 1981 and 1984...underlay Gorbachev’s decision to withdraw from Eastern Europe and begin the process of the dismantling of the Soviet nuclear war machine.” (Dowlah and Elliott, pg. 176)

Moral Pressure from the West:

“[I]n the summer of 1975 representatives of thirty-five countries, including all those of Eastern Europe except Albania, signed the Final Act in Helsinki...The so-called ‘Basket Three’ of the agreements committed all signatories to respect ‘civil, economic, social, cultural, and other rights and freedoms, all of which derive from the inherent dignity of the human person....’Not only did this portion of the agreement...give Western powers an excuse to upbraid the Soviet Union and its allies periodically about their failure to live up to its terms, but it gave dissidents within Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union a legal basis to insist that their governments uphold human rights.” (Stokes, pg. 24)

“If I was forced to name a single date for the ‘beginning of the end’ in this inner history of Eastern Europe, it would be June 1979...[T]he Pope’s first great pilgrimage to Poland was that turning point.” (Garton Ash, pg. 133). Poles understood Pope John Paul II’s words as implicit support for democratic opposition in the country: “The future of Poland will depend on how many people are mature enough to be non-conformists.”

Economic Problems:

“The Soviet development model essentially accomplished industrialization, a large GNP, and military prowess. But it did not achieve ‘modernization,’ that is, an advanced and technologically progressive economy.” (Dowlah and Elliott, pg. 178)

“[T]he Soviet economy...suffered from...the Stalinist command economy. The cost of this inhibition of initiative and innovation was finally being recognized under Gorbachev, as economic growth stagnated and the technological gap vis-à-vis the West steadily widened.” (Daniels, pg. 359)

“In 1980 the Polish GNP dropped 6 percent, and in 1981, it further declined by 12 percent. Due to the crises, about 40-50 percent of industrial capacity became idle, and exports declined by 19 percent. At the same time, Polish foreign debt increased from \$20.7 billion in 1979 to \$25.5 billion in 1981....[During the mid-1980s] food prices increased 350 percent and prices of other consumer goods rose 250 percent.” (Ekiert, pp. 392-393)

Adapted from an exercise by Pat Vreeland

Sources:

Daniels, Robert V., *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Russia* (Yale UP, 2007)

Dowlah, Alex F. and John E. Elliott, *The Life and Times of Soviet Socialism* (Praeger, 1997)

Ekiert, Grzegorz, *The State Against Society: Political Crises and Their Aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton UP, 1997)

Garton Ash, Timothy, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (Vintage, 1993)

Stokes, Gale, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Oxford UP, 1993)

Tismaneanu, Vladimir, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (The Free Press, 1993)

Looking Back to 1989: Why Did Communism Fail?

**Christiane Olivo
Political Science Department
University of Northern Colorado**

christiane.olivo@unco.edu

**Prepared for Presentation at the Annual Educating for Citizenship Conference,
Lakewood, CO, 4 Dec 2009**

The Communism System

One-party rule: The communist party's ruling position was usually enshrined in the constitution. In Romania, for example, the constitution stated that the Communist Party was "the leading force of the whole society." The Communist Party was a hierarchically organized entity that did not tolerate dissent: The Soviet Communist Party made clear that any factionalism or separate group activity was "incompatible with Marxist-Leninist party loyalty and with remaining in the party."

The party also played a leading role in society, seeking to control all forms of organized life, from elections to sport and the creative arts. The flow of information was subject to detailed censorship. The party sought to guide associations of all kinds, including trade unions, women's groups, youth associations and sports clubs. There was no "private life" outside the circle of family and close friends.

Military power: The communist regimes of Eastern Europe were created and maintained with the backing of Soviet military power. The Warsaw Pact, founded in 1955, established a collective defense requirement that meant all members were to come to the defense of any single member in the case of external attack. After the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Warsaw Pact countries were obligated to defend any threat to socialism (the Brezhnev Doctrine).

Repression: While the idea of building a new and just social order through socialism was appealing to some people who had been traumatized by World War II, nowhere did the Communists have majority support. During the initial years the new rulers were preoccupied with crushing and eliminating any political alternative. The years 1948-1953, when Eastern Europe was subjected to intense sovietization, were particularly violent: The communist regimes executed tens of thousands, imprisoned hundreds of thousands, staged show trials, and practiced mass intimidation. Some examples: In Hungary between 1950 and 1953 approximately 387,000 alleged political opponents (more than 5 percent of the population) were imprisoned. After the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, an estimated 2,000 to 4,000 political opponents were

executed. In Czechoslovakia in 1951, more than 100,000 people (including more than 6,100 priests, monks and nuns) were sent to concentration camps.

Through massive and organized violence, the communist leaders succeeded in imposing the Soviet-style totalitarian system on Eastern Europe. They crushed the existing societies, making possible the creation of a new social and political order.

Secret police: A central means of keeping total control over society was the secret police. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the secret police, known as the Stasi, was considered the “shield and sword” of the communist party. Its power grew enormously during the four decades of communist rule: 1957: 9,000 full-time employees; by the mid-1970s: more than 60,000; 1989: over 100,000. Communist regimes also used “unofficial informants”—individuals who spied on neighbors, co-workers, friends and sometimes even family members. In 1989 in the GDR there were approximately 200,000 part-time “unofficial informants.” The Stasi maintained files on over 4 million of the GDR’s 16.5 million citizens, plus files on 2 million citizens of West Germany.

The economy: Following Stalin, the East European communist leaders believed the most efficient economies depended on heavy industry, collectivized agriculture and state planning. Investments were concentrated on steel, heavy machinery and basic chemicals, and neglected both consumer needs and industries of the future. Based on the economic theories of Marx and Engels, communism was a product of deliberate design. Engels asserted:

In communist society it will be easy to be informed about both production and consumption. Since we know how much, on the average, a person needs...it is a trifling matter to regulate production according to needs.

The means, according to Engels, would be just as simple:

Through society’s taking out of the hands of private capitalists the use of all the productive forces and means of communication as well as the exchange and distribution of products and managing them according to a plan...Society will produce enough products to be able so to arrange distribution that the needs of all its members will be satisfied.

These ideas guided the economic policies of the communist regimes—with some exceptions, such as Hungary’s “goulash socialism” which allowed for some private economic initiatives,—well into the 1980s.

Indoctrination: The communist regime attempted through education and indoctrination to mold the ideal GDR citizen: “loyal to the State and Party, industrious, uncritical, satisfied with the GDR brand of welfare socialism. Citizens did not need to think or accept personal responsibility: the pervasive organs of the Party and State would do that for them.” As mentioned above, the totalitarian nature of the communist regimes meant that the Party sought to control all aspects of society. Socialist propaganda and education as well as organizations tied to the Party permeated daily life. For example, the Free German Youth, to which all young GDR citizens were pressured to belong. Or slogans about studying as a socialist. Indeed, from cradle to grave GDR citizens had to show outward support for the regime, through parades, the displaying of flags, participation in Party social organizations, and simply by not criticizing the regime in public or private.

Reasons for the fall of communism

Lack of Legitimacy: Political legitimacy under East European communism was based on three main pillars: the communist ideology, widespread (if largely formal) participation, and socioeconomic performance. As mentioned above, there was initially some support for the communist ideals. And rapid economic growth in the 1950s and some improvement in the standard of living, especially in the 1960s and 1970s also contributed to what some have called the “social contract” between the communist elites and the population: in return for material goods—such as jobs, healthcare and education—the public would put up with the repressive communist regimes. Increasingly, the socioeconomic accomplishments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union became the basis of political legitimacy. But as the economies began to deteriorate (see below), even this source of legitimacy disappeared.

Ideology was a central mechanism for upholding the repressive communist systems. But as political and social repression persisted for decades, the ideology

became hollow and had fewer and fewer true believers. Vaclav Havel assessed the role of ideology as follows:

Between the aims of the...system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss: while life, in its essence, moves toward plurality, diversity, independent self-construction, and self-organization, in short, toward the fulfillment of its own freedom, the...system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline....Ideology, in creating a bridge of excuses between the system and the individual, spans the abyss between the aims of the system and the aims of life....It is a world of appearances trying to pass for reality.

All of these characteristics of the Soviet-style political, economic, social and cultural doctrine led to a widespread sense of disillusionment and complete disbelief in the ideology. As Havel noted, people had to live a lie, saying one thing in private and another (required) thing in public. Thus, the communist system's lack of legitimacy, which was grounded in the type of system that was set up, contributed in important ways to the collapse of communism.

Perhaps the ultimate symbol of the lack of legitimacy under communism was the Berlin Wall. The GDR literally had to wall in its citizens to keep them from fleeing. Construction of the Wall began on Aug 13, 1961. Prior to 1961 about 3.5 million people had left the GDR for West Germany (20% of population). After 1952 when the border between East and West Germany was closed, over 90% of people left through West Berlin. Official communist ideology called it an "Anti-fascist Protective Rampart (or Wall)." The Berlin Wall was 97 miles long with 302 watch towers and 20 bunkers manned by 7,000-8,000 guards. Between 1961 and 1989, 235 GDR citizens were killed (the last one in Feb. 1989) trying to escape by the Wall.

Democratic Opposition Movements: Dissent, political organizing, reform and outright revolution occurred repeatedly during the forty year history of communism in Eastern Europe.

Hungarian Revolution of 1956: The Hungarian Revolution lasted from October 23 until November 10, 1956. It was a revolution from below, started by hundreds of thousands of Hungarians. Students, writers and journalists became politically active and began to criticize government. On October 23, 200,000 Hungarians protested to show support for reformers within Communist party. State security forces opened fire on another crowd, and protesters reacted violently: police cars were set on fire, guns were

taken from military depots and distributed to protesters, and communist symbols were vandalized. At 2 a.m. on October 24 Soviet tanks entered Budapest and armed revolutionaries fought back. Revolutionary councils formed nationwide, which assumed control of local government and called for general strikes. Spontaneous revolutionary militias attacked or murdered Soviet sympathizers and state security officers. In Budapest, the Soviets were fought to a standstill and hostilities lessened to the point of a ceasefire on Oct 28. The new prime minister Nagy called the insurgency a “broad democratic movement,” not a counter-revolutionary force. The reformist Nagy government included non-communists, and the new government abolished the state security apparatus and one party system. Nagy provocatively declared leaving the Warsaw Pact as well as Hungary’s neutrality in international affairs. The Soviet forces intervened again on November 4. And the last pockets of resistance called for a ceasefire on November 10. Over 2500 Hungarians and 722 Soviet troops were killed. According to Tismaneanu, “The glorious lesson of the Hungarian democratic revolution was indeed that it was possible for a mass movement inspired by humanistic ideals to overthrow a despised tyranny and to achieve a genuine breakthrough in the suffocating totalitarian universe.”

Prague Spring of 1968: The Prague Spring was an example of attempted reform from above, from within the communist party itself. On January 5, 1968 Communist reformer Dubcek became First Secretary of Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. By April of 1968 Dubcek had launched his “Action Program” which included increased freedom of press and speech; economic reforms; the possibility of multi-party democracy; and limiting the power of secret police. Dubcek called his approach “Socialism with a Human Face.” A Czechoslovak writer emphasized the importance of freedom of press and speech in creating new type of citizens: “a citizen assuming direct responsibility for all actions of society, capable of independent political action to a degree previously unknown. In short, a citizen exercising true self-government.” By June of 1968 anti-Soviet statements appeared in the press. The Soviet leadership tried to stop the changes through negotiations, but with only limited success. On the night of August 20-21 Eastern bloc armies invaded Czechoslovakia. 200,000 Warsaw Pact troops and 2,000 tanks entered country. Dubcek called on the people not to resist (though there was some

scattered resistance). In April 1969 Dubcek was replaced by communist hardliner Husak and all the reforms were reversed. The crushing of the Prague Spring led to depression among democratic oppositionists: Reform from above and reform from below were both hopeless against Soviet power. (In 1987 Gorbachev acknowledged that his liberalizing policies of Glasnost and Perestroika owed much to Dubcek's "Socialism with a Human Face.")

The Rebirth of Civil Society: As the economies and regimes began to weaken in the 1970s, dissident groups in Eastern Europe became more active, more visible and more popular. After the military invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, dissidents were forced to look for other ways to resist the seemingly all powerful communist states in the region. Peaceful resistance was the lesson learned from the outcome of earlier forms of dissent. Dissidents (among the best-known writers and philosophers are Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia, Adam Michnik of Poland and George Konrad of Hungary) developed an approach that focused on creating an independent civil society. The basic idea of civil society is that people can and should try to live as much as possible outside of the official structures of communist society. In Poland, where the civil society approach was most developed, a "second society" from below was created. Activities independent of the communist system included producing and reading "samizdat" (underground, illegal publications), underground art exhibits and discussions of banned books, buying or trading goods on the black market, "flying universities" (informal self-educational groups), and supporting those few organizations, like some churches, that were not controlled by the political authorities. (In Poland during the mid-1980s, there were over 2,000 regularly published samizdat publications, some of which were printed in the tens of thousands.) In pursuing these kinds of independent activities, the population would help to create an "alternative society" or a "second society" that was beyond the reach of authorities. Eventually, it was theorized by dissident writers, the official structures would simply disappear and be replaced by the civil society.

In his influential 1978 essay, "The Power of the Powerless," Vaclav Havel explained that the totalitarian system was built on lies and that people allowed the system to continue by accepting the lies and living within them. So the only way to resist the system was to "live in truth," thus rejecting the lies and exposing the vulnerability of the

system. “Living in truth” meant not just speaking the truth and rejecting the official lies (including the ideology), but living independently of official structures and norms in a civil society autonomous from them. The more people who did this, the greater the erosion of state power. Thus, the civil society approach was inherently political, even though most dissidents professed to be focused only on society, not on the communist political system. The culmination of dissent at the end of the 1970s was the founding of Solidarity in Poland. And, once Gorbachev gave the signal that the Soviet Union would not interfere with the domestic politics of East European countries, dissent grew enormously in the second half of the 1980s.

Solidarity in Poland: By the 1970s Polish society faced severe economic problems. Communist Poland had a long history of workers’ strikes and the growth of an independent civil society especially during the second half of the 1970s. Some scholars assert that the visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland in 1979 was a major turning point in the development of the Solidarity movement, and, more generally, dissent in Poland. The Pope was a Pole and the former archbishop of Krakow. Millions of Poles attended public masses and addresses, and many took the Pope’s words as implicit (perhaps even explicit) support for opposition to the communist regime. For example, the Pope said: “The future of Poland will depend on how many people are mature enough to be non-conformists.”

A government increase in food prices led to workers’ strikes throughout the country. On August 14, 1980 striking workers formed the Interfactory Strike Committee; by August 18 over 200 factories had joined. The Solidarity movement drew over 10 million members. It confronted the government with 21 demands; most fundamental was the legalization of an independent trade union. Besides the demand for independent, self-governing unions, Solidarity demanded the right to strike and freedom of expression. Solidarity’s Program explained, “History has taught us that there is no bread without freedom. What we had in mind were not only bread, butter and sausage but also justice, democracy, truth. Legality, human dignity, freedom of convictions, and the repair of the republic.” On August 31, the government agreed to strikers’ demands to set up independent and self-governing unions, but the union would still have to recognize the leading role of the Communist Party. Legalized Solidarity lasted 469 days. The political

significance of Solidarity's legalization cannot be overemphasized. One political historian notes that, "In a few short months Solidarity had achieved something not only unprecedented in postwar Eastern Europe but seemingly impossible....A vanguard party, basing its legitimacy on its claim to be the single true representative of the working class, had permitted the creation of a bona fide workers' movement outside of its control that commanded the loyalty of millions of Polish laborers."

Fearing Soviet intervention, the Polish government declared Martial Law on the night of December 12-13, 1981. The military government arrested Solidarity leaders and other activists; cut off telephone and other communications; patrolled city streets with intimidating show of force; re-imposed full censorship; placed coal mines under military control; and, created military courts that could impose long jail sentences for offences such as spreading false information. Solidarity was severely weakened but continued underground until it was re-legalized in April 1989. One assessment of the power of Solidarity stated, "Solidarity...precipitated the spiritual self-emancipation of the country, even though the preexisting political framework continued because of martial law....Martial law was able to destroy and suppress the surface organizational aspects of Solidarity, but it could not prevent the emergence of a de facto alternative political elite and the associated rebirth of genuine political life in Poland—even if that new life still operated partially below the official surface."

Economic Problems: In his analysis of the end of communist economics, Brzeski writes, "Rather than searching for an answer to the question Why communist economies collapsed? One should ask how they happened to survive as long as they in fact did. The economic system of the Soviet Union, later imposed also on Central and Eastern Europe, was fatally flawed from the very beginning." Communist economies had a number of common weaknesses. They were effective in accomplishing straightforward tasks that had well defined goals: building a railway station, eliminating illiteracy, winning a war. But as communist countries tried to move to more complicated tasks of "intensive" growth, based on higher levels of productivity, their centralized forms of management became a block to further development. Central planning meant that the preferences of planners took precedence over those of consumers. Less attention was paid to what

mattered to ordinary people, such as quality and design, and more to the requirements of the military-industrial complex, transport and construction, which had powerful advocates in the government. The collapse of communist economic performance in the mid- to late-1980s had a wide ranging effect on the population. As output fell, shortages became worse: soap, matches, wash power, salt and other basic commodities were all affected. And quality declined as well.

In the Soviet Union industrial output was hardly a contribution to real wealth. More tractors and combines were produced, for example, than people were available to operate them. More than twice as much steel was produced than in the U.S., but there was a smaller output of finished products. There was little incentive to innovate because rewards were tied to plan fulfillment and a risky initiative might not pay off. There was also no need to worry about going bankrupt if there was no demand for what enterprises sold because they were publicly owned.

Another issue greatly affecting the economy in the Soviet Union was world oil prices. In the Soviet Union oil exports had propped up the economy since the 1973-74 oil embargo and the resulting sharp increase in oil prices. (Russia was the world's second-largest producer of oil after Saudi Arabia.) In the 1970s Russia exported oil and gas and used the money to import food, consumer goods and machines for extracting oil and gas. The Soviet state extended itself and its subsidies into more and more areas, based almost entirely on oil revenues rather than real manufacturing or agricultural gains. By the early 1980s, however, global oil prices had started to decline. Oil prices and production kept falling as Gorbachev tried to reform communism, but by then it was too late.

Polish economic development is emblematic: there was an overconcentration on heavy industry and the needs of the defense economy at the expense of consumers, and real wages stagnated. In addition, there was a steady decline in the social infrastructure and natural environment. The housing stock was dilapidated; hospitals had frequent shortages of equipment and medicine; and there were period power cuts. The rationing of even basic goods continued until the late 1980s. The waiting list for a new car was upwards of ten years. Environment pollution became a steadily more serious threat to human survival. Poland's heavy dependence on coal contributed to a situation in which

half of the country's water was unusable by the late 1980s, and only 1 percent was suitable for drinking. A quarter of the land around Krakow was so poisoned by chemicals and metals that its produce was unfit for human consumption.

In addition, clear socioeconomic inequalities had developed throughout the Soviet bloc. Increasing differences in income meant obvious differences in lifestyles. For example, more affluent Hungarians spent three times as much as the average on newspapers, eight times as much on going to the theater and thirty-three times as much on books. They also ate more fresh vegetables, spent more on cosmetics and domestic help and on health care. There were also clear differences in education and career paths. For example, 83 percent of children of upper-level professionals stayed in school past the compulsory age, but at the other extreme only 15 percent of children of unskilled workers did so.

By the 1980s, the economies of all East European countries and the Soviet Union were in serious trouble. GNP growth rates had declined to near zero. External debts were so large that governments had to spend all of their export earnings just to finance the debts. With the collapse of foreign credit, highly valued Western consumer goods could no longer be imported. While well equipped for rapid growth in heavy industry, the centrally planned economies were not able to generate growth in more sophisticated sectors of the economy, such as services, consumer goods and high technology.

Arms Race with the West: The Soviet Union seemed to have succeeded in one respect: building up an enormous war machine. According to a characterization by Abraham Becker, the United States *had* a military-industrial complex, but the Soviet Union *was* such a complex. The Cold War was unusually taxing on the Soviet Union. With a GNP of about half that of the U.S., it was necessary to devote roughly twice the proportion of resources to the military as the U.S. in order to achieve and maintain parity. The CIA estimated that in the early 1980s, the Soviet Union was devoting 15 to 17 percent of its GNP to the military (excluding the space program and security forces). Because technology was not as advanced as in the U.S., a much larger share of Soviet scientific and technological talents and energies were used for military purposes. This situation meant that technology in many areas of the nonmilitary economy was primitive.

Between 1981 and 1984, the Reagan administration increased defense expenditures by 85 percent, compounding the problems in the Soviet Union. Some analysts argue that fact thus contributed to Gorbachev's withdrawal from Eastern Europe and his beginning the process of dismantling the Soviet nuclear war machine.

Reforms under Gorbachev: Coming to power in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev represented a new generation of communist leaders. Gorbachev admitted that the legitimacy of the Soviet regime as well as the other communist regimes was increasingly dependent on economic success and consumer satisfaction; that economic success could no longer depend on extensive growth and forced industrialization; and, that an intensive pattern of growth required commitment, hard work and support from the population, which would only come when the public had some input into the process. As Gorbachev put it, "A house can be put in order only by a person who feels he is the owner." He sought to replace a Stalinist socialism with one that was "humane and democratic." He delineated the problems afflicting the old system: It was overly "statified," leaving no room for citizen initiative; it was heavily bureaucratic, with one in seven employed by the state; it was based exclusively on public ownership and control and biased toward defense and heavy industry; and it was monolithic, leaving no room for political pluralism.

Gorbachev's increasingly more radical economic and political reforms can be classified into four main categories: perestroika (restructuring of the economy); glasnost (meaning openness or publicity); democratization; and "new thinking" in foreign policy. Beginning in 1986, Gorbachev's speeches became more radical, equating economic restructuring with "radical reform" and even "revolution." Openness and the public airing of issues and democratization were seen as necessary corollaries to the policies of restructuring. They would help to identify problems, build popular support for the regime, reduce the population's reliance on underground and foreign sources of information, and shake up the entrenched and conservative bureaucracy. Democratization included instituting competitive elections and allowing the formation of independent groups and associations in an effort to stimulate "socialist pluralism." By early 1989 over 60,000 informal groups had emerged. As pluralist elements in Soviet

society strengthened, Gorbachev also attempted to reduce the dominant influence of the communist party.

Accompanying the political and economic changes was a significant shift in foreign policy. This shift was also based on economics: If the Soviet Union wanted to develop an economy that was more efficient and more oriented toward consumer goods, it had to expand trade, attract technology, reduce military spending, and cut back aid to other countries. This required a more relaxed international environment and an improved relationship with the U.S. The Soviets thus reduced arms and military spending, negotiated arms-control agreements, and cut back on its military commitments to Eastern Europe and the Third World.

The official Soviet press often linked the military reorientation with the economy, noting that defense spending and the arms race with the West was “one of the basic reasons for the grave condition of the Soviet economy and the slow growth in the people’s standard of living.” In 1988 Gorbachev told the United Nations that the Soviet Union would unilaterally demobilize half a million troops and get rid of 10,000 tanks, including some 50,000 troops and 5,000 tanks from Eastern Europe. In June 1989, the government announced plans to cut defense spending in half by 1995.

By 1988 the Gorbachev reforms had cleared the way for major changes in Eastern Europe. Perestroika and glasnost provided a model for reform in Eastern Europe, legitimizing the kinds of reforms that dissidents and workers alike were demanding. The withdrawal of the threat of military intervention further encouraged reformers in the region. The opponents of change, such as communist hard-liners in the GDR and Czechoslovakia, could no longer count on the backing of the Soviet Union.

The Peaceful Revolutions of 1989 and the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Hungary opens the Iron Curtain: The reformist government in Hungary opened the border between Hungary and Austria beginning May 2, 1989. On August 19 the Hungarian government allowed 600 East Germans vacationing in Hungary to cross the border. Such a mass exodus had never been seen in Cold War-era Europe since the construction of Berlin Wall. About three weeks later more than 10,000 East Germans were allowed to travel to West Germany through Austria. (In October 1990 German

Chancellor Helmut Kohl said that it was in Hungary where “the first stone was removed from the Berlin Wall.”)

West German Embassy in Prague: In the summer of 1989 several hundred East Germans sought refuge in West German embassy in Prague. When checks on the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border were tightened, numbers swelled to several thousand. The GDR government agreed to let the refugees emigrate to West Germany, but on special trains that would travel through East Germany. Thousands of East Germans lined the tracks, cheering for the refugees. This train ride proved to be a blunder for the East German government as widespread media coverage of the event stirred even more unrest in the GDR.

Fortieth Anniversary of the GDR: On October 7, 1989 there were official celebrations for 40th anniversary of the GDR. Gorbachev attended and said to Honecker “Those who come too late will be punished by life.” On the same day, Stasi officers attacked East Berlin demonstrators.

Monday Demonstration in Leipzig: On October 9, 1989 between 70,000 and 100,000 people peacefully protest in Leipzig. This was the largest protest in East German history. It was unclear whether Stasi and police forces would use violence against demonstrators. But they stood by and let the people march. This was the decided turning point in peaceful revolution; it gave East Germans the courage to protest and form democratic opposition groups.

November 4 in East Berlin: Between 500,000 and 1 million people gathered in East Berlin in the largest demonstration ever in East German history. The crowd called for democratic reforms and an end to communist rule. Opposition groups continued to organize.

November 9, 1989: Member of the communist politburo announced on TV that East Germans will be allowed to travel to West. A reporter asked when, and he said “immediately.” Crowds of East Berliners rushed to the border crossings and celebrated on the Wall.

Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia: The breakdown of the East German police state energized dissident groups and movements in neighboring Czechoslovakia. The radicalization of the opposition had been visible since January of 1989, when

demonstrations were organized to commemorate the self-immolation twenty years earlier of the student leader Jan Palach. Havel and dozens of other activists were jailed in an attempt to stop the growing dissent. On November 17 the government used police violence to put down a student demonstration. The brutal response to a nonviolent action ignited a public explosion. Strikes and protest meetings spread throughout the country. A general strike on November 27 paralyzed the country and showed the government that it had no choice but to accept the democratic demands of the opposition. Mass demonstrations continued. On November 29 the Federal Assembly abolished the constitutional clause guaranteeing the communist party's leading role. On December 10 a coalition government was formed that included a noncommunist majority, and on December 29 Havel, the most well-known dissident from Czechoslovakia who had been imprisoned for years, was elected president.

According to Stephen White, an adequate understanding of the failure of communism in Eastern Europe “must bring together ‘structure’ (the wider context of communist rule) and ‘agency’ (the people whose choices made a difference at decisive moments).”

Sources

Brzeski, Andrzej, "The End of Communist Economics," in Lee Edwards, ed., *The Collapse of Communism* (Hoover Institution Press, 2000)

Brzezinski, Zbigniew, "The Grand Failure," in Edwards

Daniels, Robert V., *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Russia* (Yale UP, 2007)

Dowlah, Alex F. and John E. Elliott, *The Life and Times of Soviet Socialism* (Praeger, 1997)

Ekiert, Grzegorz, *The State Against Society: Political Crises and Their Aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton UP, 1996)

Friedman, Thomas L., *Hot, Flat and Crowded* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008)

Mason, David S., *Revolution and Transition in East-Central Europe* (Westview Press, 1996)

Stokes, Gale, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Oxford UP, 1993)

Tismaneanu, Vladimir, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (Free Press, 1993)

White, Stephen, *Communism and Its Collapse* (Routledge, 2001)