

Why Did Communism Fall?*

1. 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)

2. 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)

3. 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)

“The 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)

4. The Democratic Opposition:

“Moral 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)

“Activities 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)

5. 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)

“The 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)

6. Moral Pressure from the West:

“In 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.”

7. 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)

“The 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)

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Sources:

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