



THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM AND THE BREAK-UP OF THE USSR

What factors led to the collapse of Communism in the USSR?

The Soviet system collapsed suddenly. Was it destroyed from above, ousted from below, or was it a combination of both factors?

The speed with which the Soviet state disintegrated took almost everyone by surprise. The system appeared immune to change during the Brezhnev years. Even the most disaffected nationalities within the Soviet Union could not have anticipated that within less than seven years of Gorbachev assuming power in 1985, they would be living in independent states.

The economy was struggling, and over 50 per cent of government expenditure went to the military. There were shortages, but the Soviet people were used to going without. There were no signs of mass discontent.

UNREST IN EASTERN EUROPE

There was growing opposition to Soviet policies in the states of Eastern Europe. The majority of people opposed Soviet interference and the presence of Soviet troops in the Eastern Bloc. In March 1989, Gorbachev announced that the Red Army was to be withdrawn from the satellite states, that force would not be used against Soviet-bloc nations and that Moscow would no longer prop up communist puppet regimes. The satellite states reacted swiftly.

The ending of communist control of Eastern Europe was characterised by the near absence of violence. This was in sharp contrast to the **Hungarian Uprising** of 1956, when the Red Army crushed the revolt resulting in a death toll of between 2,500 and 3,000 Hungarian citizens, and the **Prague Spring** of 1968, where 82 died. The lack of bloodshed in 1989 gave rise to the term “**Velvet Revolution**”.

Poland



Lech Walesa

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The trade union **Solidarity** was founded in 1980 and was the first workers' organisation to be established in a Soviet controlled state. It was suppressed and its leaders arrested by the Polish government. Poland was hit by a wave of strikes in 1988, with workers demanding the re-legalisation of Solidarity. The organisation re-emerged in 1989. Its leader, **Lech Walesa**, was invited to Warsaw for talks with the communist authorities, and in April, Solidarity was legalised, and free parliamentary elections were planned for June 4th. Solidarity swept to power, winning all the seats that they were allowed to contest, and many leading communist candidates were voted out. In August 1989, Poland's parliament ended over forty years of one-party rule, and **Tadeusz Mazowiecki** became Prime Minister of a non-communist government.



Hungary

On January 12th 1989, the Hungarian Parliament adopted a “democracy package” which allowed the creation of trade unions, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of the press, a new electoral law and a radical revision of the constitution. Following mass demonstrations on March 15th, the National Day, the government was persuaded to begin negotiations with the emergent non-Communist political forces.

In May 1989, Hungary began dismantling the electric fence along its 240 kilometre-long border with Austria, punching a hole in the Iron Curtain - and through it poured such a torrent of refugees that it destabilised its communist neighbours, the GDR and Czechoslovakia.

In October 1989, the Communist Party re-established itself as the **Hungarian Socialist Party**, and in an historic session from October 16th to October 20th, the parliament adopted legislation providing for multi-party parliamentary elections. The first free parliamentary election was held in May 1990, with the **Democratic Forum** winning 43 per cent of the vote and the **Free Democrats** capturing 24 per cent. Communist candidates performed poorly. All Soviet troops had been withdrawn from Hungary by June 1990.

East Germany

Unlike Poland and Hungary, the communist leaders in East Germany (and Czechoslovakia) were unwilling partners to the events of 1989.

Hungary's opening of its borders with Austria resulted in a large number of East Germans fleeing to the West. By the end of September 1989, upwards of 50,000 East Germans had escaped to the West before the GDR denied travel to Hungary, leaving Czechoslovakia as the only neighbouring state where East Germans could escape to. The GDR closed the border to Czechoslovakia on October 3rd and so isolated itself from all its neighbours. In protest, East Germans participated in the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig in September, and many were arrested and beaten. On October 6th/7th, Gorbachev visited East Germany on the 40th anniversary of the creation of the GDR, and urged the East German leadership to accept reform. However, the hard-line leader **Erich Honecker** remained opposed to internal reform.

He had hoped that the Soviets would enter the GDR to suppress the protests and restore the communist government, but they took a neutral stance. Faced with the ongoing civil unrest, Honecker was deposed on October 18th and replaced by Egon Krenz. Days later, the Leipzig protesters had swollen to 300,000, and the border to Czechoslovakia was opened again on November 1st. Unable to stem the flow of refugees to the West through Czechoslovakia, the East German authorities eventually caved in to public pressure by allowing East German citizens to enter West Berlin and West Germany directly via existing border points.

On November 9th 1989, a spokesman for East Berlin's Communist Party announced a change in the city's relations with the West. At midnight, citizens of the GDR would be free to cross the country's borders. East and West Berliners flocked to the wall, and at midnight, they flooded through the checkpoints. More than 2 million people from East Berlin arrived in West Berlin that weekend and used hammers and chisels to knock away chunks of the wall while cranes and bulldozers pulled down section after section. The most iconic symbol of the Cold War was gone.



On November 13th, the Prime Minister of the GDR, Willi Stoph, and his entire cabinet resigned, and a new government was formed under the more liberal Communist, Hans Modrow, who became the de facto leader of East Germany until free elections were held on March 18th 1990 - the first held in that part of Germany since 1933.

The two Germanies were reunified in October 1990.

Czechoslovakia

In October 1989, East German asylum seekers clashed with armed police while attempting to reach the West German Embassy in Prague.

The fall of the Berlin Wall inspired student demonstrations in Czechoslovakia which, in turn, encouraged dissidents to organize wider protest movements. On October 28th, on the anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia, 20,000 protestors were met by armed police on the streets of Prague. Facing daily protests which drew up to 700,000 demonstrators demanding an end to communism, the Communist regime, lacking Soviet backup, conceded to free elections and resigned from power. **Václav Havel** became President on December 29th by a unanimous vote of the Federal Assembly which was confirmed six months later by the people.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria experienced less unrest than any other Eastern European nation in 1989. Unlike the mass demonstrations in Poland and Czechoslovakia which were led by opposition dissidents, Bulgaria's revolution was a coup within the Communist Party itself. The issue that divided the party was whether or not to introduce perestroika-style reforms.

In November 1989, over 50,000 protestors took to the streets of Sofia demanding reform, including free elections, a new constitution and the removal of hard-line members of the government.

The Communist Party leader, Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's ruler for 35 years, was arrested and charged with corruption. He was replaced by the more moderate Petar Mladenov, who had successfully organised the coup by mobilising the anti-Zhivkov factions within the Communist Party.

Bulgaria's new leadership announced it would hold democratic elections in 1990 in an effort to address the demands voiced in protests in the nation's largest cities. In June 1990, the first free elections since 1931 were held and won by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (the new name of the Communist Party).



Romania



Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu
Gianni Ferrari / Getty Images

In contrast to the lack of violence in Bulgaria, the last of the popular uprisings in Eastern Europe saw Romania descend into anarchy and bloodshed. The Romanian revolution began in Timisoara on December 16th, when a dissident ethnic Hungarian priest spoke out against regime policies. This sparked massive protests, and the military responded harshly, which triggered rioting and civil unrest across the country. When the demonstrations reached Bucharest, the dictator, **Nicolae Ceausescu**, and his wife, Elena, fled the capital but were later captured, charged with genocide - namely, murdering "over 60,000 people" - and executed by firing squad.

The National Salvation Front, led by **Ion Iliescu**, quickly took power and were elected in a landslide in the following May. The new government implemented a series of economic and democratic reforms.

THE RISE OF NATIONALISM WITHIN THE USSR

It is important to have an understanding of the terms nationality and nationalism. **Nationality** refers to a population that shares key characteristics such as: language, heritage, culture, politics, religion and territory. **Nationalism** refers to an ideology where the nation becomes an important source of identity, along with the need to take collective action in pursuit of a particular objective.

Unrest in East Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s contributed to the rise of nationalist movements in almost all Soviet ethnic regions. Gorbachev's reforms gave rise to the growth of nationalist movements, and the implementation of freely contested elections for the Supreme Soviet in each republic allowed nationalists to win control and subsequently declare independence from Moscow.

The Baltic republics of **Estonia**, **Latvia**, and **Lithuania** were the first to demand independence. At first, the leaders of the popular fronts in the regions had embraced Gorbachev's reforms, but by 1988, they began to demand greater independence, a Western style market economy and multi-party political systems. The forces making for the breakup of the Soviet system were strengthened when **Boris Yeltsin**, as leader of the Russian republic, declared his solidarity with the Baltic movements.

With contested elections for the Supreme Soviet in each republic, nationalists were able to gain control of them and declare independence from Moscow. Nationalists swept to victory in the 1990 elections in the three Baltic states.

In the **Caucasus**, the movement towards independence was complicated by conflict between **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan**. The region of **Nagorno-Karabakh** was populated mostly by Armenians but was administered by Azerbaijan. In January 1990, a series of violent attacks on Armenians led to intervention by Soviet troops, which served to strengthen independence movements in both Armenia and Azerbaijan.



In **Georgia**, the emergence of a nationalist movement triggered a violent attack by Soviet troops on demonstrators in April 1989 that resulted in 19 deaths, with several hundred wounded. Ethnic minorities within Georgia began to demand more rights and freedoms.

Ukraine had a multi-national and multi-ethnic mix. The western regions of Ukraine were strong in their demands for independence, but the more eastern regions, where a larger proportion of the population was ethnically Russian, were less enthusiastic. In December 1991, the leaders of Russia, Belorussia, and Ukraine declared themselves independent, thus bringing to an end to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

THE ROLE OF YELTSIN



Boris Yeltsin

Image from Kremlin.ru / CC BY 3.0

The USSR was eventually killed off by a power struggle at the top. By attempting to reform an ailing communist system, Gorbachev's reforms ultimately destroyed it. **Boris Yeltsin**, it could be said, was mainly responsible for the abrupt way that it ended.

It is ironic that Yeltsin would not have risen to a position of power were it not for Gorbachev's support. Gorbachev brought Yeltsin, a regional Communist party boss, to Moscow in 1987 to work with him and promote his political reforms. Yeltsin was charismatic, fearless, and not afraid to speak out condemning communist party perks and privileges. He was keen to accelerate his career and, at a session of the Central Committee in October 1987, made a speech commenting on Gorbachev's policies. Even though Yeltsin did not criticise his boss directly, he had crossed a line. He then announced his resignation from the Politburo, an action which began a rift between the two men that was never healed. In 1989, as the country prepared for its first contested elections for more than sixty years, Yeltsin saw the opportunity for a political comeback. On a platform making strong criticism of perestroika's failure to improve

people's living standards, Yeltsin won a landslide victory to the Congress of People's Deputies in March 1990.

By mid-1990, the Communist party's rigid regime was being openly challenged. The party had agreed to make changes to the constitution which would allow other parties to exist, but Gorbachev's attempt to remove the conservatives from influence in the Communist party was met with growing resistance. Yeltsin decided to abandon the party completely. At its congress in July 1990, he dramatically announced his resignation and walked out of the hall.

As demands for independence developed in the Baltics, Yeltsin argued the need for a new treaty to transform the Soviet Union, not to abolish it. To show his solidarity with the Baltic states, he arrived in the region and called on Soviet troops not to obey illegal orders. It was a bold step that without doubt helped to split the Soviet establishment. By February 1991, many radicals concluded that Gorbachev had actually become an obstacle to change, and Yeltsin, sharing the view, called publicly for Gorbachev's resignation.

Yeltsin then took advantage of Gorbachev's situation. In 1991, he ran for the presidency of the Russian Republic and became the first popularly elected leader. He now had an alternative power base from which to challenge Gorbachev.



A group of hard-line politicians staged a *coup* and dramatically took Gorbachev hostage while he was on holiday in the Crimea in August 1991, with the aim of deposing him and reversing his reforms. On August 19th 1991, it was announced that Gorbachev had been deposed, and a state of emergency was declared. As elected president of Russia, Yeltsin was in a strong position to oppose them, and he rallied the people to oppose the *coup*. It collapsed, and Yeltsin was transformed into a national leader. Gorbachev emerged from the *coup* not only seriously weakened but now dependent on Yeltsin. The attempted *coup* alarmed those republics that were demanding more say and seeking independence. Yeltsin now began a programme of his own economic reforms in Russia.

He increasingly ignored Soviet law and suspended the Russian Communist party. Yeltsin then played the Russian card against the Union and so pushed it nearer to collapse. He demanded Russian sovereignty from the Union in 1990 and full independence in 1991.

The final act came on December 8th 1991, when Yeltsin secretly met with leaders of Ukraine and Belarus, and together they agreed to dissolve the Soviet Union. Gorbachev resigned on December 25th.

"After we crushed the coup, Yeltsin behaved very underhandedly in relation to Gorbachev. He isolated Gorbachev, and constantly exerted pressure on him. Then he basically finished him off."

Ruslan Khasbulatov, the former speaker of the Russian Parliament.

THE END OF COMMUNISM AND THE BREAK-UP OF THE SOVIET UNION

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Communist Party increased their wealth and power, in sharp contrast to millions of Soviet citizens who faced starvation. The Soviet Union's priority to industrialise resulted in frequent shortages of basics such as food and clothing along with consumer goods. The divide was felt particularly by the younger generation, many of whom rejected communist ideology and hankered for Western influences.

In the 1980s, the economy of the USSR was becoming increasingly weakened. The USA isolated the Soviet economy from the rest of the world and drove oil prices down. This, coupled with massive military spending, caused the economy to flounder and contributed to the weakening of the USSR's hold on its satellite states, which in turn led to demands for independence.

Gorbachev's reforms were too little, too late and hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union. Political revolution in Poland in 1989 sparked similar movements in other Eastern European states. By the end of 1989, the USSR had come apart at the seams.

The unsuccessful coup in August 1991 sealed the Soviet Union's fate by greatly reducing Gorbachev's power and propelling democratic forces, led by Yeltsin, to the forefront of Russian politics. When Gorbachev resigned, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.



In 1992, the states that had previously made up the Soviet Union agreed to establish the **Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)**. It was established on December 8th 1991 by **Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine**. **Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan** joined on December 21st 1991. **Georgia** joined the Commonwealth in December 1993. The CIS aims to promote the coordination of its members in the realms of trade and finance, law-making and security, and to support cooperation on democratisation.