

## THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNIST EUROPE



Striking workers bar an entrance to the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk, Poland, in 1980. Notice the picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the left.

Communist rule in much of Eastern Europe collapsed in 1989. The first signs of the collapse could be seen much earlier, in Poland in 1980.

### Poland and Solidarity

In 1980 the Polish government announced a massive increase in food prices. The government was already unpopular, and this led to strikes by shipworkers in the Baltic ports. The strikers demanded wage rises, the right to form a free trade union, and more freedom for the Catholic Church.

The government tried to calm the situation by allowing workers in Gdansk to form a union called Solidarity. For the first time ever in a communist country, there was a non-communist trade union.

Led by Lech Walesa, and with around 10 million members, Solidarity quickly became a powerful force in Poland.

When Solidarity began to make new demands – for example, for free elections – many people feared that the Soviet Union would invade Poland to crush the new movement. But Soviet forces were already having a hard time in Afghanistan, and an invasion of Poland would have over-stretched them. The Soviet government decided to rely on Poland's leader, General Jaruzelski, to stop the situation running out of control. Jaruzelski took action in 1981. He declared martial law, banned Solidarity and had thousands of Solidarity members arrested, including Walesa. Communist rule again seemed safe.

### Gorbachev and the satellites

Only three years later there was a new challenge to communist rule, this time from the Soviet Union itself. In 1985, as you have read, Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet leader, and began to reform the country. He started a process of 'perestroika', which meant the 'restructuring' of Soviet society and the economy. He also called for 'glasnost', or openness, as a way of making the government and industry more efficient and less corrupt. As a result, the press became more free, factories started to manage their own affairs, and voting was allowed for places in some government organisations.

All this encouraged people in the Soviet satellite states to hope for the same in their own countries. But their leaders were old-fashioned communists who found it difficult to accept the need for change. As they hung onto power without any attempt at reform, dislike of their rule increased. So too did dislike of communism. Living standards in Eastern Europe remained generally low, while those in the West were generally rising. Forty years of communist rule did not seem to have created the fair, prosperous societies described by communist thinkers such as Karl Marx.

At the same time, Soviet attitudes to the satellites were changing. In 1945, Stalin and his generals saw Eastern Europe as a buffer zone to protect the Soviet Union against any invasion from the West. For them, the country's security depended on Soviet control over Eastern Europe. By the 1980s this was no longer true. The development of long-range missiles meant that the Soviet Union could be attacked from every direction. Eastern Europe could only protect it from a single direction.

By 1989, therefore, the satellite states were ready for change while the Soviet Union had less need than ever before to stop change from taking place.

### 1989: a 'year of miracles'

#### Poland

The changes began in Poland. Sharp price rises again led to mass protests and strikes. This time,

General Jaruzelski decided against using force. Hoping to get the support of the strikers, he ended the ban on Solidarity and arranged free elections. He miscalculated. Solidarity won so many of the seats in the election that he was forced to appoint a Solidarity member as Prime Minister.

#### Hungary

In Hungary the communist leaders had also accepted the need for change. In 1989 they allowed political parties to be set up and arranged elections. They also took away the barbed wire and fences from their border with Austria, thus opening the first gap in the Iron Curtain.

#### East Germany

This immediately triggered changes in East Germany. Now that there was a gap in the Iron Curtain, many thousands of East Germans rushed to escape through Hungary into Austria and then to West Germany. As in 1961, East Germany could not afford this drain of skilled workers. In an attempt to slow the rush to escape, the government announced that people could travel freely abroad. When this led to the opening of the Berlin Wall in November, joyful Berliners began to destroy the wall with hammers and chisels.

#### Czechoslovakia and Romania

These events in turn triggered changes elsewhere. After mass protest rallies in Prague, the Czech parliament ended the 'leading role' of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia and announced free elections. In Romania, the Communist leader Ceaucescu was shot while trying to flee the country after widespread demonstrations against his rule.

By the end of 1989, then, communist rule had ended in all the Soviet satellites and the Iron Curtain had been torn down. This was so sudden and unexpected that 1989 has since been described as 'the year of miracles'.

### Questions

- A. 1. What was 'Solidarity', and what were its aims?  
2. What part did it play in causing the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe?
- B. 1. Who was Mikhail Gorbachev and what were his aims?  
2. What part did he play in causing the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe?
- C. Would communism have collapsed in 1989 if Solidarity had not existed? Explain your answer.
- D. 1989: 'the year of miracles' (chapter heading in Martin Walker's book *The Cold War*, published 1993)  
1. Why do you think many people at the time were surprised by the events of 1989?  
2. Looking back from today, is it still surprising that communism ended in 1989? Explain your answer.