

17 THE END OF COMMUNISM

Key Issue

- How did communism in Europe end?

THE BERLIN WALL DESTROYED

In May 1989, Hungary took down the barbed-wire fence along its Austrian border: people could now travel from East to West. About 20,000 East Germans fled to the West before the border was officially opened in September. The East German leader, Erich Honecker, tried to hold back the tide and stay in power. But, without Soviet support, there was little he could do and he resigned in October.

The East Berlin communist leader announced that the Berlin Wall would be opened on 9 November. At midnight on 8–9 November, thousands celebrated as the gates were opened. People hacked at the wall with pickaxes to take home a souvenir. The Iron Curtain's most famous landmark would soon be just a heap of rubble.

The rest of communist Europe could not avoid the effects. On 10 November, the Bulgarian president resigned after holding power for 33 years. Later that month, demonstrations in Czechoslovakia toppled the communist government without bloodshed.

By contrast, the revolution in Romania was a violent affair. A civil war raged for four days between the Romanian army and supporters of Nicolae Ceausescu, the country's unpopular president. Eventually, he was captured and executed by firing squad on Christmas Day 1989.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Reagan retired in 1989 as the most popular president in American history. The new president, George Bush, met Gorbachev on 3 December 1989. They made an historic announcement: the Cold War was over.

However, changes continued to sweep through eastern Europe during 1990. In March, talks began in Berlin on the reunification of East and West Germany. Britain, France, the USA and USSR later signed a treaty which gave back full powers to East and West Germany as independent

nations. In October, they were reunited after 45 years. Meanwhile, East Berlin's History Museum locked up the display which covered the years 1949–61.

In April 1990, communist rule in Hungary ended when voters chose the Hungarian Democratic Forum to lead the new government. Yugoslavia, too, held its first multi-party elections that month. Even Albania, the most Stalinist of the East European states, took its first steps towards the end of communist rule when the ban on opposition parties was ended in December. In the summer of 1991, they actually joined the government.

START TREATY SIGNED (1991)

In August, Gorbachev and Bush finally signed START after nine years of talks. They agreed to destroy about one-third of their nuclear weapons. They signed the agreement with pens made from scrapped missiles.



An image people never expected to see: Ronald Reagan speaking below the bust of Lenin (1988).



An image people never expected to see: Hungary sold its part of the Iron Curtain as souvenirs.

THE END OF THE USSR (1991)

In August 1991, there was an attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev by hard-line communists. It failed mainly because the new Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, opposed it. He urged soldiers to mutiny and workers to strike in protest. Thousands took to the Moscow streets.

Just four days later, Yeltsin suspended the Communist Party in Russia. As one ordinary Russian wrote to a Soviet newspaper, 'The world has moved on. The Party didn't make good use of 72 years.'

After the coup failed, many Soviet republics decided they wanted to be independent and not controlled by Moscow. One of them was Russia itself, led by Boris Yeltsin. In December, the Soviet state finally broke up. Gorbachev resigned as Soviet



An image people never expected to see: Gorbachev speaking in 1992 in Fulton, Missouri, where Churchill first spoke of an 'iron curtain' in 1946.

President, as there was no longer a Soviet state to be president of.

As he announced his resignation on television, the communist red flag was lowered for the last time over the Kremlin. Gorbachev said, 'The old system fell apart before the new one began to work.' The 'evil empire' which Reagan had wanted to destroy, had destroyed itself.

A SOURCE

An image people never expected to see: the Berlin Wall is torn down (1989).



Questions

- Study Source A. Explain the importance of this photograph. Support your answer by referring to details of the photograph and your own knowledge. [6 marks]
- Why did the Soviet Union cease to exist in 1991? [9 marks]