

History: The Cold War
Lesson 28 of 30

Worksheet:

How did the Soviet Union's hold on Eastern Europe come to an end?



Introduction

On **7th December 1988**, **Mikhail Gorbachev** made a speech to the **United Nations** that was set to change the course of history. During his speech, he announced that the **USSR was reducing its armed forces by 500,000 persons** and that **six tank divisions were being withdrawn from the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Hungary** with them being completely disbanded by 1991. He also announced that **Soviet forces situated in Warsaw Pact countries were to be cut by 50,000 persons** and that they would **lose 5,000 tanks**. Any remaining forces in these countries would be there purely to assist with defence, evidenced particularly through their lack of tanks. This cutting of troops from Warsaw Pact countries sent a clear message to the governments of Eastern Europe – **the USSR was no longer prepared to use force to support an unpopular regime.**



This speech came just five months after **Gorbachev** had made **a similar speech to the leaders of Warsaw Pact countries**. In this speech, he had given forewarning of his **plans to withdraw large numbers of troops, tanks and aircraft from eastern Europe**. By **March 1989, Gorbachev** could not have been any clearer. He **announced that Soviet forces would not intervene to prop up Communist regimes in Eastern Europe**. This set off a chain of events that, over the next twelve months, would see **existing Communist governments toppled in many Eastern European countries** and the **collapse of Soviet control and influence**. But why did Gorbachev allow this to happen? How were Soviet- controlled Communist governments toppled? How would this affect the future of the USSR?



How did **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' change countries in Eastern Europe?

By 1988, **Gorbachev** had shown that he was prepared to do what no Soviet ruler had done before – he was **prepared to make deals with the USA and stick to them** and was also **prepared to introduce genuine freedoms into the lives of Soviet citizens** in order to improve their standards of living. However, **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' had also influenced his approach to countries in Eastern Europe – countries that had spent at least the last forty years as satellite states of the USSR. For one, **Gorbachev** was keen that **people living in Eastern Europe** should also **enjoy the benefits of *perestroika* and *glasnost***. Protests in countries like Poland had shown him that many Eastern Europeans were unhappy with the shortages that weak communist economies were creating and that, like the citizens of the USSR, they **needed to have their belief in the benefits of Communism restored**. By encouraging the leaders of Warsaw Pact countries to introduce similar policies, he hoped that **Communism would be strengthened in Eastern Europe** and renewed support found for the political system that he so strongly believed could succeed.



At the same time, **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' also extended a specific policy to the countries of Eastern Europe, through its **rejection of the Brezhnev Doctrine**. By rejecting this doctrine in 1988, **Gorbachev** signalled to Eastern European countries that the **USSR would no longer try to influence them** and that they had **more independence**. This was confirmed by the **Sinatra Doctrine of 1989**. Named after **Frank Sinatra's** famous song 'My Way', the **Sinatra Doctrine confirmed that members of the Warsaw Pact now could choose their 'own ways' of living and governance**. This meant that they were **free to choose the type of political system that they followed** and that the **USSR recognised their freedom of choice** over this. In many respects, **Gorbachev** had been **forced** to introduce these reforms due to the **USSR's weak financial position** – it could no longer afford to support Eastern European countries and **especially could not afford to have Soviet troops stationed in each country**.



Also, perhaps naively, **Gorbachev** hoped that introducing these freedoms to Eastern European countries would **encourage them to see the positive side of Communism** and that they would **choose to continue with this political system**, without any need for the use of Soviet force. However, coupled with **Gorbachev's** announcement that Soviet troops were to be withdrawn and armed units gradually disbanded, this 'new thinking' signalled to many people in Eastern European countries that the **time for change had come**. Most importantly, it showed them that, if they wanted to overthrow or reform their governments, the **USSR no longer stood in their way**.



How did countries in Eastern Europe respond to these changes?

Despite his best intentions, it soon became clear that **Gorbachev's** 'new thinking' had **weakened Communist rule in Eastern Europe**. Once reform started in satellite states, it became **very hard to contain**.

Poland

Reform began first in **Poland**. In 1988, **strikes began to sweep the country**. Food costs had **increased by 40 per cent** and people felt that the promised reforms were not going far enough. The strike was organised by supporters of an influential **trade union**, called **Solidarity**, that had been **banned in Poland in 1981**. The Polish government soon realised that the only way to overcome the strike would be to negotiate with **Solidarity**. **Solidarity was legalised by the Polish government in April 1989**. Most significantly, the union was also **allowed to put forward candidates in the upcoming elections**. During these elections, the **Communist candidate for Prime Minister failed to gather enough support to form a government**, whilst the **Solidarity candidates won every seat they ran for in parliament**. This led to a member of **Solidarity, Tadeusz Mazowiecki**, becoming the **first non-Communist Prime Minister of Poland since 1945** and the **first anywhere in Eastern Europe for 40 years**.



Hungary

Encouraged by events in Poland, in **1989 Hungary also began to take steps to end one-party rule** and **started to form a range of political parties. Free elections** were planned for the following year and **Gorbachev** also began to **withdraw Soviet troops from Hungary**. Most significantly, in **May 1989, the barbed wire fence between Hungary and its non-Communist neighbour, Austria, was dismantled** creating a **'hole' in the Iron Curtain**. Thousands of East Germans on holiday in Hungary escaped via Austria to West Germany and from this point on the **whole purpose of the Berlin Wall was undermined**. In 1990, the promised **free elections** occurred in Hungary and were **won by the Democratic Forum, an alliance of anti-Communist groups**. Just as had happened in Poland, and in spite of **Gorbachev's** hopes, **Communist rule in Hungary had not survived democratic elections** and a programme of anti-Communist reform soon began.



Czechoslovakia

Events in Hungary spurred on **further calls for reform in other eastern European countries**, while the gap in the Iron Curtain that had been created by Hungary opening its border sparked a chain of events that led to the **fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989**. By November of 1989, **protests had also spread to Czechoslovakia** where huge demonstrations came to be held against communism. **Labelled 'The Velvet Revolution' because of its non-violence**, the protests led to the **resignation of the communist government on 24th November 1989** and in December **Václav Havel** became the **first non-Communist President of Czechoslovakia since 1948**. In events that bore remarkable resemblance to Hungary, in 1990 democratic elections were won by the **Civic Forum** – **an alliance of anti-Communist groups**. Communism had once again not withstood the test of a **free election**.



Romania

In Romania, where the **most brutal government in Eastern Europe had existed**, events took a much **more violent turn**. In December 1989, **secret police fired on demonstrators in the city of Timișoara** in western Romania. Over the next week, **armed resistance heightened in Romania** as crowds turned out to boo the **President Ceausescu. Ceausescu** tried to flee Romania but was captured later. By Christmas of 1989, the **army had joined the rebellion against Communist rule** and **hundreds of people were killed** in clashes with the secret police and Communist forces. On 25th December 1989, **Ceausescu** and his wife **were shot by firing squad** and **Romania became the only Eastern European country to have ended Communist control violently** and by executing its leader. **In 1990, democratic elections were held** in the country for the first time in 42 years and these were won by the **National Salvation Front** who began to **introduce a programme of economic and democratic reform.**



By **December 1990**, communist leaders had either **resigned or been challenged, outvoted or, in the case of Romania, executed in all Eastern European countries** that had formerly been controlled by the USSR. While some Communist parties, such as the renamed **Bulgarian Communist Party**, achieved success in the **free elections** held in many countries in 1990, the **majority lost their footholds in these elections**. Change had happened **rapidly** and, as reform swept throughout Eastern Europe from 1989-1990, it became very clear that **Mikhail Gorbachev had lost control**. What had started out as the best intentions to reform and strengthen Communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR **ended in the complete loss of Soviet control over its former sphere of influence**. Indeed, as Latvia's declaration of independence in March 1990 signalled, it was soon to also **bring about the collapse of the USSR itself**.



Glossary

Brezhnev Doctrine – Soviet foreign policy which called for military intervention by Warsaw Pact forces if another member of the Warsaw Pact tried to leave the Soviet sphere of influence or reform communism in their country too much.

Glasnost – Russian word meaning ‘openness’ which refers to Gorbachev’s policy in the USSR that encouraged free speech, and end to censorship and allowed people to question the government

Free elections – when the process of choosing a new leader or government is not controlled by an individual or party so that people are able to make their own choices



Glossary

Perestroika – Russian word for ‘reconstruction’ which refers to Gorbachev’s policy of re-organising and restructuring the Soviet state, particularly by allowing some elements of a free, Capitalist economy to function within the USSR to improve the economy’s efficiency.

Solidarity – a nationwide independent trade union that was established in Poland in 1980 to protect the rights of workers. Between 1980 and 1981, 10 million people joined Solidarity but It was banned by the Polish government in 1981. It was legalised again on 17th April 1989.

Trade union – a group of people who usually have the same or similar job, who work together to protect their rights as workers



Comprehension Questions

1. Why was Gorbachev's rejection of the Brezhnev Doctrine in 1988 important for people in Eastern Europe?
2. What was the Sinatra Doctrine?
3. Why was Hungary's decision to open its border with Austria in May 1989 important?
4. How were the methods used in Romania in 1989 to overthrow communism different from the methods used in other Eastern European countries from 1989-1990?
5. Challenge question: 'The USSR lost its hold on Eastern Europe because of the actions of Mikhail Gorbachev.' How far do you agree?

