

# Year 1989

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At the turn of 1944 and 1945, East-Central Europe was under Soviet influence. This fact was quietly accepted by the Western powers during the conference in Yalta in 1945.

In May 1945, after the end of World War II in Europe, the main winner was Stalin. As a result of the war, the territory of the Soviet Union was enlarged. The USSR gained the occupied Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finnish Karelia, at least the half of the pre-war Polish territory, Czechoslovakian Carpathian Ruthenia and the Romanian Bessarabia. These areas were exposed to immediate sovietisation and unification with the rest of the country, breaking the resistance of the local society.

The process of sovietisation and the installation of the Communist system were to take place in the countries of East-Central Europe. These countries would retain formal independence, but would be a subject of Moscow's direct control. For some time, in all of these countries, the appearance of democracy was kept up while gradually eliminating various rivals of local Communist parties. This process finished with the takeover of power by Communists in Czechoslovakia in February 1948. The inhabitants of East-Central Europe tried to resist this process. For a short period of time, legal opposition parties existed,

but they were systematically broken by repression and by the internally working Secret Service. In some countries (especially in Poland), the armed Underground was active. The spontaneous resistance of society was strong and it was shown by, among other things, strikes and demonstrations. All these signs of resistance were, however, brutally pacified.

The period of the installation of the Communist system and then the period of Stalinism were the most difficult ones in the post-war history of this part of Europe. This period was a time of massive terror which resulted in thousands of victims, wide spread propaganda and indoctrination and also one of destroying traditional social structures. Most of the private property in the economy was eliminated, central planning was introduced, forceful industrialisation began and in villages collectivisation was proclaimed. After dealing with the opposition, the time came for the fight with churches of various creeds, and the pacification of cultural and intellectual life, which were under ideological repression. The Communist party took full control of all aspects of social life using the omnipotent Security Apparatus. Despite the process of de-Stalinisation, which occurred after 1956, the nature of the system remained unchanged. With time, to keep power it was not necessary to use massive repression. Common fear and control over society was enough.

Nations of East-Central Europe tried to cast off the Communist regime. On 17 June, 1953, the people's uprising in the German Democratic Republic broke out. It was put down by the Soviet Army. On 28 June, 1956, tanks put down the

workers' uprising in Poznań. On 23 October of the same year, the revolution in Hungary broke out. Hopes of independence and the recovery of freedom were put down by the intervention of the Soviet Army, and about 3,000 Hungarians died. Over the next several years, massive repression took place. In 1968, the dream of a possibility of system reforms was essential for the whole Czechoslovakian society. And once again, Moscow's reaction was military intervention. On 21 August, 1968, the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia was invaded by the armies of the Warsaw Pact countries. Despite common peaceful resistance of the Czechs and Slovaks, soon the process of "normalisation", that is the reconstruction of Communist dictatorship, began. The axis of the Soviet policy was "Brezhnev's doctrine" which assumed the possibility of armed intervention in each of the countries of the eastern bloc where the Communist system was threatened.

Opposition against Communism was presented many times by Poles. Apart from the aforesaid uprising in Poznań, in the autumn of 1956, massive protests with demands of independence from the Soviet Union and of a return to democracy took place. In 1968, the students rebelled and in 1970 and 1976 the workers did. However, only the strikes of August 1980 induced Communist authorities to surrender and to accept the demands concerning the creation of independent trade unions.

The creation of "Solidarity" ("Solidarność") meant the beginning of the deepest and the last crisis of the Communist system. In spite of the fact that on 13 December, 1981, martial law was introduced

in Poland, the consequences of the crisis were irreversible. This time, despite massive repressions, the resistance was not pacified and a strong Underground emerged.

The crisis in Poland also influenced the reorientation of the Soviet policy. As early as in 1981, the Soviet authorities gradually began to reconcile with the thought that the price to pay for saving the Soviet Union would be the agreement to the changes in East-Central Europe. Brezhnev's doctrine went down in history. The Soviet Union went into an economic crisis and higher economic and political costs were caused by the involvement in the war in Afghanistan. The arms race with the USA was lost. In 1985, the post of the Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Sovetskogo Soyuz) was taken over by Mikhail Gorbachev. He proclaimed the policy of perestroika (reconstruction) and of glasnost (openness) while gradually increasing the range of liberties. What is more, already in 1985 Gorbachev gave a free hand to the leaders of Communist countries in system reforms. At first, this opportunity was used in Poland and in Hungary.

In 1988, in many countries of the Soviet bloc, the activity of opposition groups came to life - new organisations emerged, strikes and demonstrations occurred. Independence movements were also established in the Soviet Union, mainly in Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Estonia and Georgia. After a summer wave of strikes, talks of a Round Table with part of the opposition were announced in Poland.

The negotiations concluded with the reaching of

an agreement. As a result, on 4 June, 1989, partly free elections took place. The society treated it as a plebiscite and simply rejected the Communist system. Soon, further changes occurred. In August, Tadeusz Mazowiecki became the first non-Communist Prime Minister.

Events in Poland were the beginning of the fall of the Communist system in the whole of East-Central Europe. Already in June, negotiations between the authorities and the opposition in Hungary began. The abolishment of fortifications on the border with Austria meant the end of the "Iron Curtain". On 23 August, 1989, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, hundreds of thousands of Estonians, Lithuanians and Latvians created a living chain and manifested their desire for independence. In October, the "peaceful revolution" broke out in the German Democratic Republic and on 9 November, the Berlin Wall fell down. Shortly after that, the "Velvet Revolution" broke out in Czechoslovakia and also reforms in Bulgaria started. At the end of December, Ceaușescu's dictatorship in Romania was overthrown; however, over one thousand people died during the revolution.

In 1990, in most of the countries of East-Central Europe, free elections took place. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia proclaimed independence, which Soviets tried to crush with force at the beginning of 1991. It was, however the end of the Soviet Union. After an unsuccessful putsch of conservative forces in August 1991, at the end of the year the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus proclaimed the dissolution of the USSR. In the same year, the dictatorship in Albania

came to grief, the last Communist dictatorship in Europe. The Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance were dissolved. Those events were overshadowed by the change of the situation in China. On 4 June, 1989, the same day when Poles decided to abolish Communism, the Chinese army committed a massacre of students at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Thousands of people died and many participants are still in prison. Chinese Communists avoided political and social reforms and conducted only economic ones. Despite the problems caused by the dissolution of the USSR, the Communist dictatorships in North Korea and in Cuba survived. Additionally, the inhabitants of some countries which were created from the debris of the Soviet Union can not, even today, enjoy full freedom and democracy.

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Over the years, the nations of East-Central Europe went through a long way from totalitarianism to democracy, from the centrally planned economy to the free-market one, from the Warsaw Pact to NATO and from the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance to the European Union. The way was not always easy, and society incurred the costs of reforms. It is worth remembering, however, that not more than twenty years ago, today's reality seemed to be only an unattainable dream. The dream whose fulfilment was only possible thanks to the events of the year 1989, the year of freedom.



Soviet tanks bloodily crushed the Hungarian Revolution. Budapest (H. Betzler/SZ-Photo/FORUM)



The Warsaw Pact forces invasion destroyed hopes the Prague Spring had raised. Prague, 21 August, 1968 (Liber Hajsky/REUTERS/FORUM)



Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1964-1982.



A human chain linked Vilnius, Riga and Tallin on the 50th anniversary of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Estonia, 23 August, 1989 (T.Veermae/TASS/FORUM)



The massacre of students in Tiananmen Square. Beijing, 4 June, 1989 (Shunsuke Akatsuka/REUTERS/FORUM)

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