THE COLD WAR: SUPERPOWER TENSIONS AND RIVALRIES

COURSE COMPANION

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4.3 Gorbachev’s policies

Conceptual understanding

Key question
➔ Why is Gorbachev’s commitment to communism sometimes questioned?

Key concept
➔ Change

Domestic changes: *perestroika, glasnost* and *demokratizatsiya*

When Gorbachev came to power, he was the third successor in less than three years. The first four leaders of the USSR governed for over 60 years collectively; the final three would be in power for less than a decade. The Soviet state had been stagnant for too long and there was rising dissent in the country. Gorbachev, a member of the Soviet *nomenklatura*, recognized that it was time for much-needed reforms to try and get the USSR back to a level competitive with the West and an emerging China.

Marking a trend in the new Soviet leadership, Gorbachev was relatively young and began his career outside Moscow. Somewhat unusual for the time and place, Gorbachev was trained as a lawyer and then elected a Party member. He became a regional Party official in Stavropol (Caucasus) and in 1978 he was elected to the Central Committee and became the secretary responsible for agriculture. In 1980 Brezhnev made him a full Politburo member at the age of 49, in an organization where the average age was over 70.

He attracted the attention and support of Andropov who also had felt the need for changes in Soviet society but knew that they would not be put into place during his tenure. When Chernenko died, Soviet Foreign Minister Andre Gromyko nominated Gorbachev for the position of General Secretary, and he was duly elected by the Politburo, whose membership was in a period of transition. Gorbachev had a different leadership style from his predecessors and it was under him that the USSR saw a wave of reforms that are often collectively referred to as *perestroika, glasnost* and *demokratizatsiya*. Although he faced ethnic unrest and political opposition, the main problem in Soviet society still seemed to be the economy, and Gorbachev felt that it was in need of a complete reorganization. This was not quite as new an idea as people generally thought; ideas for economic restructuring had been proposed as early as the 1960s but were blocked by Party hardliners who feared any moves away from central planning would mean a shift towards capitalism. When viewing Gorbachev’s policies it must be remembered that Gorbachev was a true communist – he was not a capitalist who wanted to end communism in the Soviet Union; he was seeking to repair an ailing system.
The first major reform of the Gorbachev era targeted alcohol. Like Andropov, Gorbachev was trying to target individual productivity and absenteeism, in addition to the tremendous social problem of alcoholism. With all this in mind, prices were raised on wine, beer and vodka and the places and times for selling alcohol were restricted. There were arrests for public drunkenness and for being intoxicated at work. One clearly stated goal was to decrease vodka production by 10% in five years, yet this was completed by 1986. In the end it did not have the desired effect and in fact it cost the Soviet state almost 100 billion rubles in taxes lost due to a drop in official consumption. It actually caused economic distress as official vineyards and distilleries were forced to close. Unofficially, of course, alcohol remained readily available through the black market.

In the Soviet Union, 1986 proved to be a watershed for a number of reasons. First, the policy of perestroika or economic restructuring was announced. The government decided that it was time to decentralize planning and end price controls by the state. Many were very nervous about these changes on an ideological level as they seemed to put the Soviet state on the road to capitalism. However, the state wanted to allow some degree of self-management but did not want to lose ownership of the factories and other business enterprises that it saw as necessary for state security. Pragmatically, the removal of price controls would lead to an increase in prices and discomfort among the population. Soviet citizens benefited from a system that allowed them to purchase most goods at below the cost of production due to government subsidies. The policy of subsidising goods for both Soviet citizens and foreign governments was extremely costly. Previously the USSR was reluctant to cut off foreign subsidies for fear of losing its sphere of influence but now the country was facing bankruptcy and sought the means to avoid this.

**The Chernobyl disaster**

In April, the weaknesses of the system were further highlighted by the explosion of the nuclear facility in Chernobyl, Ukraine. The nuclear power plant, which had been opened in 1978 and had six reactors, was considered a model facility in the USSR. On 26 April, a test of one of the reactor’s cooling systems began at 1 am. Almost immediately, the emergency shutdown failed and the reactor exploded. Firefighters responded to the explosion, unaware that it had released toxic levels of radiation into the air. Although the inhabitants of the nearby town of Pripyat were aware of the fire, they had no idea of the danger it posed and continued about their daily activities. The Soviet government did not issue any warnings or notify the public of the disaster, although on 27 April Pripyat was evacuated.

It was only when Sweden made it known to the world community that high levels of radiation had reached its borders and located its source in the Ukraine that the Soviet government made the accident public. The Soviet news agency TASS reported that there had been an accident at the Chernobyl nuclear facility and that an investigation would be forthcoming. It was announced that there were casualties, but the numbers were not released. Further evacuations were also announced, expanding the evacuation area to a 30-kilometre zone around the reactor.
The reactor continued to burn until 4 May and in the meantime, helicopters dropped approximately 5000 tons of materials on the fire in an attempt to extinguish it. It was thought that the reactor had ceased emitting radiation on 6 May and the situation started to relax, but evidently the reactor had not been fully extinguished and new fires began on 15 and 16 May.

The investigation reported that the disaster was a result of human error and equipment failure. There were a number of inexperienced staff working that weekend and there was inattention to safety procedures. Additionally the Soviet attitude of downplaying disasters for fear of repercussions certainly exacerbated the situation and slowed the rate of evacuation from the affected areas. The Soviet government refused assistance that was offered from foreign sources, perhaps in an attempt to avoid international criticism, although that had already been voiced.

In the official report, the death toll from the disaster never went above 31. The plant operators were found responsible for the explosion and were sentenced to hard labour. The reality was somewhat different and can be seen in Ukrainian attitudes and statements regarding the accident after the collapse of the USSR. The ability to keep information within the Soviet state was not possible in the face of an international incident, and with changing Soviet policies criticism came from its citizenry, not just from the international community.

**Treatment of opposition**

In December 1986 Gorbachev announced the release of the dissident Andrei Sakharov from his exile in Gorky. Sakharov, a physicist by training who became the most open opponent of the Soviet government, began to travel at home and abroad, presenting information on the repression of USSR citizens and explaining conditions in Gulags. He did this until his death, and although his was the public face for Soviet dissent abroad, his appeal within the USSR was limited. Nonetheless, Sakharov’s notoriety led to further expressions against the government, and open criticism of the past.

The official recognition and acceptance of this came in 1988 when Gorbachev announced glasnost: This policy, translated as openness, led to a re-examination of Soviet history and an open debate on past government actions such as forced collectivization and party purges. Former enemies of the state, especially those purged and executed by Stalin, were rehabilitated in this time period. Gorbachev’s government was free to do this as most of the participants – and supporters – of such Stalinist policies were now dead, and the criticisms would not cause serious divisions within the Party.

This led to a further questioning of socialist economic policies, and especially a criticism of central planning. In rejecting and criticizing forced collectivization, the government paved the way for agricultural reform and eventually, wider economic changes. The Gorbachev era saw an end to collectivization and a transition to privatization where farmers were granted long-term leases in an attempt to improve productivity.
In a nod to the New Economic Policy (NEP) the state still remained the owner of the land, but farmers paid for their leases and were taxed on their product. It did not take much for nascent entrepreneurs to begin to make similar demands for change regarding industrial and consumer goods.

**Foreign policy**

Initially Gorbachev’s route did not deviate much from that of his predecessors. In 1985 he renewed the Warsaw Pact and he continued the support of leftist revolutions, particularly that of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Unlike Brezhnev, however, he sought an end to the costly war in Afghanistan, and began to announce troop reductions, negotiating an agreement with the Afghans in 1988 that led to Soviet withdrawal by 1989. However, military expenses continued to cripple the national economy and Gorbachev needed to cut costs, even if it was at the expense of the Soviet empire.

The costliness of Soviet subsidies to its satellite states in itself forced a re-examination of the role of the USSR in foreign affairs. The USSR provided goods to its allies at reduced or subsidized prices and this was costing the state tremendous sums of money and leaving the Soviet Union indebted to western powers. When the cost of oil dropped, the trade imbalance worsened.

Brezhnev had made relations with satellite states in Eastern Europe a priority but Gorbachev sought to distance the USSR from these countries. In a series of speeches beginning in 1987, he encouraged the states to follow their own paths and be less reliant on the USSR. He made it very clear that the USSR would engage in a policy of non-intervention in the Warsaw Pact countries, which was a complete negation of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Henceforth, satellite states would pursue their own paths to achieving socialism and Gorbachev encouraged reform abroad.

The Soviets gained further credibility in their negation of the Brezhnev Doctrine with the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. The war had been extremely costly, in terms of lives lost and public opinion, in addition to government coffers. At its height of intervention, the Soviets had over 100 000 troops stationed there with no clear objective. The Soviets determined that it was necessary to withdraw from Afghanistan; it was costly, made the USSR unpopular internationally and was extremely unpopular at home. Thus, as early as 1986 symbolic withdrawals began and in a 1988 agreement in Geneva, the Soviets agreed to full withdrawal; by February 1989 all Soviet forces had left Afghanistan.

The Soviet-backed regime collapsed almost immediately and once again Afghanistan suffered a political vacuum. Into it came the religious leaders, imposing a restrictive, repressive Islamic regime in the country. Like the Soviet client state before it, the Taliban could not maintain consistent control over the entire country but they did manage to obtain a level of control previously unattained in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the warlord system that had historically dominated Afghanistan once again prevailed and war continued.
The US certainly noticed this change in Soviet attitudes and this led to a series of meetings between Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan. These summits, notably in Geneva and Reykjavik, signalled an improvement in relations between the USA and the USSR, a remarkable reversal after the strain in their relations that characterized the Brezhnev era. US President Ronald Reagan had tentatively resumed arms talks with the USSR in 1982 but these were abandoned until Soviet leadership stabilized. With Gorbachev firmly in power, the talks on arms reductions began anew with US determination to continue nuclear testing and to construct a defence shield (Strategic Defense Initiative or SDI), angering Soviet leadership. After the Chernobyl disaster, limiting nuclear arms testing and development was a priority for the Soviet regime. The Reykjavik summit, held in October 1986, was seen as a failure, particularly in the USA, since it led to no agreement or framework for an agreement, yet the leaders began to develop a rapport and seemed willing and able to work together.

In December 1987 Gorbachev went to Washington and the result was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty which eliminated intermediate range nuclear weapons in Europe. The summit meetings culminated in Reagan’s visit to Moscow where the leaders began the discussions for a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that would be finalized in 1991. With this treaty, both sides agreed to reduce their stockpile of nuclear arms – the Soviet Union by 25% and the USA by 15%.

**Communication skills**

Choose one of Gorbachev’s policies and link it directly to the end of the Cold War (for example, *perestroika*, *glasnost*, summits). Create a multimedia presentation with 5–7 slides, including slides for the introduction/thesis; arguments; and conclusion. The slides should have the main point of the oral essay presented in one sentence and then a supporting visual. Visuals can include political cartoons, maps or photos.
The Soviet–US peace march of 1988

In the midst of the Cold War, individuals in both the USSR and the USA participated in peace marches that were intended to show the solidarity of humanity as opposed to government policies of animosity. They promoted peace and, in some cases, the desire for nuclear disarmament, through the direct interaction of people, rather than waiting for their governments to take action.

The first of these took place in 1960 and 1961. Americans walked across the USA, boarded a plane to London and then crossed the Channel and walked through Europe, for the cause of non-violence and nuclear disarmament. Their walk through East Germany, Poland and finally into the Soviet Union took nearly 10 months.

The idea of a peace march was largely abandoned after Khrushchev was ousted; Brezhnev was a hardliner and while arms discussions were progressing, along with the Helsinki Accords, the Soviets clamped down on dissent and were fearful of such actions.

In the 1980s the idea was resuscitated when Gorbachev came to power and exchanges were more likely than when Brezhnev was in power. Americans travelled to the USSR and vice versa. In the summer of 1988 approximately 200 Americans met in Washington DC to travel to Ukraine to march with a similar number of Soviet citizens from Odessa to Kiev and, it was hoped, eventually to Moscow, covering roughly 3200 kilometres. There were no restrictions placed on the marchers and they provided American culture in the form of films such as *A Night at the Opera* and *Gone with the Wind*, while the marchers held potlucks with Soviet villagers as they marched through the Soviet Union. The final day – in Moscow – was scheduled to coincide with the dismantling of a Soviet missile.

In retrospect, the final walk demonstrated Gorbachev’s commitment to *glasnost*: even after Chernobyl, the Soviets willingly admitted Americans into Ukraine where citizens from both countries shared a long march that could not be easily monitored. Openness had come to the Soviet Union, and Americans were willing to abandon the anti-communist rhetoric that still dominated domestic politics at the time.
4.4 The effect of Gorbachev’s policies on Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War

Conceptual understanding

Key question
➔ Did all Eastern European countries react to Gorbachev's policies in similar ways?

Key concept
➔ Significance

When reviewing the events of 1989 it often seems as if there was an overnight awareness of repression that led to a quick, spontaneous revolution in all of Eastern Europe – but this was not the case. The Revolutions of 1989, as they are collectively called, were the result of a long period of struggle against the domination of the Soviet Union and the communist parties in each individual country. The eastern bloc was seen as critical to Soviet security, and indeed the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968 was issued to justify action in Czechoslovakia and prevent its withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact.

The Brezhnev Doctrine endured well into the 1980s but when Gorbachev came to power in 1985, change was clearly afoot in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev was facing the same problems as his neighbours – economic instability, lack of consumer goods – and was looking for ways to divest the Soviet Union of its responsibilities to other communist countries, which had cost the Soviets tremendous sums of money over the years and resulted in the USSR becoming a debtor nation.

Gorbachev's promised reforms and his rejection of the Brezhnev Doctrine were not welcome news to the Party leaders in Eastern Europe. Although intervention from Moscow was always a concern, it also provided comfort, knowing that their regimes had the moral and military support of the USSR and other Warsaw Pact countries. The changes brought by Gorbachev threatened the stability of apparatchiks in Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe. Brezhnev had seen Eastern Europe as critical to Soviet foreign policy; Gorbachev sought to divest the USSR from its role of patron.

Seeing Soviet withdrawal from the internal affairs of the Warsaw Pact countries as an invitation to act, dissenters in the eastern bloc spoke out once again, and organized themselves. Witnessing Gorbachev's rehabilitation of dissidents, and encouragement of glasnost, opposition in Eastern Europe grew. In some cases (such as Czechoslovakia), there had been an almost constant struggle against the communist regime; in others there was a radical change in a very short time period. But 1989 signalled the end of communism in Eastern Europe: the collapse of the

apparatchiks
Members of the Communist Party and/or government bureaucracy. This is usually a derogatory term signaling lack of creativity or initiative.
The Stalinist regime in Romania was brutal for its totalitarian leaders, ending with the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu, while the other revolutions were notable for the opposition’s use of passive resistance and the unwillingness of Party leadership and the secret police to use the typical terror and intimidation techniques. Unlike Chinese communists in May 1989, the Eastern European communists surrendered to popular revolt, thereby changing the system of government in the east and paving the way for integration of all Europe.

**Hungary**

To the amazement of the world, Hungary’s movement away from communism was peaceful and served as a model for other Eastern European countries. Worsening economic conditions in the country led to general dissatisfaction, and even dedicated communists looked for alternative routes to improve the local economy. Economic advisors were especially interested in engaging in trade with western Europe. In 1988, János Kádár (who had been in power since the 1956 revolution) resigned as Secretary General; a young Politiburo member, Miklós Németh, negotiated a 1 billion Deutschmark loan from West German banks. On the strength of his economic acumen he was named Prime Minister and followed economic reforms with political ones.

First, in May 1989 he oversaw the decision to remove the physical barrier between Austria and Hungary. The fence was now old and Hungary was unwilling to make expensive repairs. As the Hungarians removed the barriers, the Soviet Union did nothing and, nearly overnight, the border between Austria and Hungary was removed. This in itself was momentous, but he then announced that the citizens of other Warsaw Pact countries could travel freely through Hungary and would not be stopped as they crossed its borders. This led directly to the crisis in East Germany in November 1989.

Then, the government adopted what was termed the democracy package: basic freedoms, civil rights and electoral reforms. The communist government was ready to adopt a multiparty system. Symbolically, Imre Nagy was rehabilitated and reburied. The government also initiated round-table discussions to change the constitution that included a number of new and reconstituted pre-communism political parties. In April 1989 the Soviets agreed to withdraw all their military forces from Hungary by 1991; in the end, this was completed in 1990 with the first free elections in Hungary since before the Second World War.

**Poland**

In 1983 martial law was lifted. Nonetheless, anti-government activities continued, and while the government tried to repress the liberalization movements that began in the late 1970s, opposition to the regime continued. In 1985, Polish opposition was further encouraged when Gorbachev came to power in the USSR. Encouraged by perestroika and
glasnost, solidarity reconstituted itself in October 1987. Despite continued harassment from the Polish government they were certain that they would not face retribution from the Soviet Union.

Due to continued economic problems, the government once again raised food prices in February 1988. This led yet again to strikes and demands for changes in the system. All but the most radical members of Solidarity advocated negotiating with the government, showing that it was not a revolutionary party in the strictest sense; they too sought to bring about changes from within the existing system. February 1989 proved to be a decisive turning point in Polish history. In Warsaw the government initiated talks with Solidarity and other opposition groups in an attempt to maintain their power over Poland. These discussions led to three major reforms: legalization of non-governmental trade unions; creation of the position of President; and the formation of a Senate (thereby giving Poland a bicameral legislature). In the lower house (Sejm) 35% of the seats would be freely elected – the rest would be reserved for the Communist Party.

In July 1989 elections were held and Solidarity won 99% of the seats in the Senate and all 35% of the seats in the Sejm. Even though he was the only candidate on the presidential ballot, Jaruzelski won by a very narrow margin. Given the results of the elections, even the 35–65 division in the Sejm was abolished and by the end of 1989, Poland was a multiparty state with a coalition government dominated by Solidarity. Poland’s successful transition to democracy was soon mirrored by other satellite states in Europe, and by the end of 1989 only Albania would remain as a communist country.

**East Germany’s revolution and the end of the Berlin Wall**

The German revolution was the most televised, well known of the revolutions of 1989, due largely to the photo opportunities it provided. This revolution inspired people far beyond its borders because it seemed so simple: the masses brought about spontaneous change through their actions. This was not a revolt of the elites or simply a student movement that spread.

East Germany was a paradox among the satellite states. On the one hand it had a reputation for being the most loyal of all the satellite states; its leaders were communist hardliners and its secret police, the Stasi, was feared above all other Eastern European political police. On the other, it received benefits from West Germany through Willy Brandt’s policy of Ostpolitik, which was meant to build a bridge from the democratic, capitalist west and its communist counterpart. While Berlin remained a sticking point for the East Germans, they received benefits from this city’s location as Moscow saw it as a place to showcase the benefits of communism to the outside world. In 1984, the two German states reached agreements for cultural exchanges and the removal of mines on their frontier, signalling an accord, or at least a commitment to the status quo for both states, rather than seeking the inclusion of the other side.
This policy actually began during the Brezhnev era with the Helsinki Final Acts; in recognizing the post-war frontiers of Europe, the political decision to have two German states was not only acknowledged by the 33 signatories, it was legitimized. Thus, it seemed that East Germany was an accepted, entrenched regime as late as 1988 and no one foresaw the changes that would take place in the coming year; indeed East German leader Erich Honecker seemed to ignore the calls for reform embedded in perestroika and the dissent at home and in other Eastern European states. At 77, Honecker was the last of the communist leaders who had come of age at the same time as Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko. He remained firmly loyal to the Communist Party and was determined to keep East Germany a single-party state.

As in Czechoslovakia, events in East Germany were precipitated by events outside of its own state. In Hungary, there had been tremendous pressure on the government to relax controls and in particular, to stop limiting travel of its citizenry, especially within the Warsaw Pact. Thus, on 2 May 1989 the Hungarian government removed the fence on its border with East Germany, and while travel between the two countries remained legally unchanged, in practice, anyone dissatisfied in either country could cross the border. By September 1989 it is estimated that 60 000 East Germans had left for Hungary, making their way to Budapest (and others to Prague), to seek asylum in the West German embassies there. Budapest was suffering under the weight of these refugees, and when the Hungarian Foreign Minister announced that East Germans would not be stopped if they sought to travel west to Austria, 22 000 East Germans crossed to the West.

East Germany was embarrassed by this action and tried to make some repairs to prevent continued exodus. Responding to the actions of the Hungarian and Czechoslovak governments, East Germany promised East Germans safe passage to the FRG in a sealed train if they returned to East Germany. This only served to further exacerbate the situation; when one such train stopped in Dresden, a number of locals tried to board the train and were beaten by the police.

In October full dissent was in the streets of East Germany. Encouraged by actions of opposition groups in other Eastern European countries, East Germans protested at the lack of reforms in the Honecker regime and the repressive regime that he embodied. Unlike his counterparts in the other countries, Honecker held firm and refused to grant any changes. He was even unmoved by Gorbachev’s exhortations to reform when the Soviet leader came to Berlin to participate in the fortieth anniversary of the founding of East Germany. Gorbachev famously advised Honecker that “Life punishes those who wait too long”. Honecker would not even allow the distribution of Soviet publications that he saw as too liberal and reformist; he was much more sympathetic to Deng Xiaoping and his treatment of dissenters at Tiananmen Square the previous May.

At this point, other members of the Party leadership felt that they needed to make changes or face revolution. The number of demonstrators agitating for change increased dramatically throughout October, nearing 100 000 in cities such as Leipzig. With such startling
opposition to the regime, the Politburo forced Honecker’s resignation and fellow member Egon Krenz became the General Secretary of the Party and Chairman of the Council of State on 18 October. Krenz immediately announced that East Germany was going to implement democratic reforms and endorsed Gorbachev’s ideas. Even so, demonstrations continued; on 4 November alone an estimated 300 000 congregated in Leipzig and 500 000 in Berlin, demanding immediate change. On that same day, Czechoslovakia opened its border and 30 000 East Germans left.

In response to the continued flow of its citizenry, the government proposed relaxing travel laws on 5 November, but rather than mollify the population, it was criticized as too limited. Change was not happening fast enough for the East Germans and they were making that abundantly clear to the government. The entire Politburo resigned, leaving Krenz and his colleagues in the government to respond to the population. On 9 November another travel law was proposed; a news conference was broadcast live on television announcing authorizing foreign travel without advance notice and free transit through border crossings into West Germany. With this action, the Berlin Wall became an anachronism as East Germans poured into the streets, headed to Berlin and entering the West.

The East Germany leadership had been hoping that this reform would increase its credibility and popularity as a People’s Republic but instead it hastened its demise. On 1 December, facing increased calls for further reforms, the government changed the constitution, eliminating the clause that gave the Communist Party a dominant role in the government. Two days later, Krenz and the Central Committee resigned. In place of the government, a coalition government was put in place but it became clear very quickly that this was a provisional government at best. Most Germans wanted the reunification of the country, and negotiations began to that effect almost immediately.

The revolution in East Germany then was perhaps the most dramatic of the revolutions of 1989. Not only did communism collapse in East Germany but the map of Europe was redrawn as a result of the revolution. After 41 years as a separate state, East Germany ceased to exist and was incorporated into the FRG on 3 October 1990.

**Czechoslovakia – the Velvet Revolution**

In Czechoslovakia, the rise of Gorbachev and resignation of the ageing General Secretary Gustav Husák in 1987 opened up the country to further discussion and open opposition to the regime. (Husák remained as President in largely a ceremonial capacity.) Communists maintained control until the collapse at the very end of 1989, even going so far as to arrest demonstrators in Prague who came to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Soviet troops remained in the country but Gorbachev made it abundantly clear that the USSR would pursue a policy of non-intervention in Warsaw Pact countries.
The entire year of 1989 was one of transformation for Czechoslovakia. In January 1989 there was a demonstration in Wenceslas Square in memory of the suicide of a Czech student; Havel and 13 other members were arrested and jailed for organizing this commemoration. Rather than suppress further opposition movements, it seemed to lead to their creation. In addition to protesting against political policies of the government, there were numerous protests regarding environmental policies. It had been estimated that nearly half of the rivers in Slovakia were polluted and over three quarters of well water was unsuitable for human consumption. As early as 1983 substantial amounts of Czech forests were dying, and a children’s hospital in Prague had been built for the sole task of treating respiratory ailments in children.

In the 1980s the Czechoslovaks, like the Poles, experienced a shrinking economy and negative growth. The country still relied on heavy industry for export, leaving it at the mercy of heavily subsidised, antiquated industries. This was extremely costly to the Czechoslovak and Soviet governments who had to help pay for these moribund industries. The Czechoslovaks were increasingly relying on the black market to fuel their desire for consumer goods. By 1989, the population was tired of hearing and seeing western prosperity while they still remained behind the iron curtain with limited fashion and cultural developments.

The pace of reform accelerated in the country as people participated in demonstrations that ostensibly honoured certain core historical events in Czechoslovakia, such as the overthrow of the Prague Spring or the founding of the state in 1918, but really they were veiled criticisms of the current government. The situation was further intensified by actions at the West German Embassy in Prague where East Germans had historically gone in an attempt to emigrate to West Germany. By September 1989 there were thousands of East Germans camping on the grounds of Bonn’s embassy in Prague. Further pressure was put on Czechoslovakia when the West German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, gave a speech on 30 September announcing that an agreement had been reached with the communists and that these refugees could enter Germany. Initially the Czechoslovaks would not allow them to pass, but the announcement meant that even more East Germans poured into Czechoslovakia, so finally the government in Prague gave way and allowed free passage for East Germans on 3 November.

This announcement and the collapse of the Berlin Wall were further encouragement to students to speak out, but the real end of the communist regime began on 17 November with yet another commemorative demonstration. This time, police attacked and beat students, prompting a popular outcry against the police and the government. Within a week, the entire Presidium had resigned and Czechoslovakia seemed to lack a government. Into the void stepped Havel with the newly established Civic Forum. The Forum put forth the “Programmatic Principles of the Civic Forum” which stipulated its basic desires: state of law, free elections, social justice, clean environment, educated people, a return to Europe and prosperity. In response, the constitution was amended and a phrase that gave the Communist Party a leading role in the government was removed. The Party suggested the idea of a coalition government but this was rejected by the Civic Forum;
at this point, the communist leadership resigned. Then, the Forum agreed to join a cabinet in which the majority of ministers were not communists. At this point, Husák resigned as President of the country and elections were hastily called. On 28 December, Havel was elected President and the political change was complete. The year that began with demonstrations and arrests of the opposition ended with the re-emergence of a democratic, multiparty state in central Europe.

**Bulgaria and Romania**

The Romanian transition was far bloodier than the others, with over a thousand killed in December 1989, including the head of state and his wife. Romania had been under the iron fist of Nicolae Ceaușescu who had been a maverick among Eastern European leaders, especially after he criticized the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Facing alienation from the Kremlin, he remained in the Warsaw Pact but adopted autarchic policies and closer relations with the People's Republic of China. Facing a high foreign debt, in the 1980s he instituted austerity measures that impoverished the country while he and his family lived in luxury. In December 1989 opposition to the regime turned violent, first in the city of Timișoara and then in Bucharest. The military almost unanimously turned against Ceaușescu who tried to flee but was captured on 22 December. There was a quick military show trial in which he and his wife Elena were found guilty and they were executed on 25 December, with free elections being held in May 1990.

In Bulgaria demonstrations regarding environmental policies turned into a larger indictment of the government in November 1989. Trying to head off radical change, Bulgaria's Communist Party replaced its ageing leader Todor Zhivkov with a younger, more reform-minded successor, but this was not sufficient given the vast changes taking place in Eastern Europe. In February 1990 street protests led to a communist renunciation of power and the country held free elections in June.

**The Revolutions of 1989 considered**

In an attempt to correct the primarily economic problems of communism, reform had been the desire of Gorbachev and his colleagues in Eastern Europe; the result, instead, was revolution and the end of communism in Eastern Europe. There are a number of theories as to why these revolutionary attempts were successful when previous ones were not. Some will argue that this is a “domino theory” of sorts. When one country successfully rejected communism, given the strictures of the regimes and their interrelatedness through the Warsaw Pact, it became inevitable that the other states would follow suit. For example, the removal of electric fences along the Hungarian border would necessarily have an impact on the neighbouring countries. Another argument is the role of the international media; given the changes in communication, the totalitarian
regimes were no longer able to staunch the flow of information from one place to the next, allowing people throughout Eastern Europe to see what was happening, and perhaps more importantly, to see the reactions of other peoples and governments.

Also of paramount importance is the role of Gorbachev. His decision to reject the Brezhnev Doctrine for the impertinently named “Sinatra Doctrine” (that is allowing the satellite states to “do it my way”) showed individual populations that they no longer had to fear the influx of troops from Moscow or other Warsaw Pact countries if they rose up against their governments. Even in Czechoslovakia, where Soviet troops remained until 1990, the citizenry did not seem to fear external intervention.

It was also a time for change, be it within the communist parties themselves or an entire regime change. The leadership of the communist parties was ageing and dying; all the leaders of the satellite states were in their 70s. The new leaders – even within the communist parties – came from younger generations who did not share the same experiences of the horrors of the Second World War with their leadership, and instead had memories of repression by the Warsaw Pact governments. Plus, the students in all of these countries did not want to reform socialism, they wanted to change it. They saw the benefits of capitalism and democracy on their television sets and wanted similar advantages.

One last component that needs to be reinforced is that the protestors consistently refused to engage in the use of force to bring about change. These were not violent revolutionaries; they were people who had learned the lessons of civil disobedience from Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian independence movement as well as the US civil rights movement. As they rejected the use of violence to oppose the regime, they exposed the secret police and government and party cadres as needing to use force to impose their will upon the people. Furthermore, many people who otherwise may not have participated in the demonstrations of 1989 did so because they were willing to engage in passive resistance against governments they no longer had confidence in.

In 1985, Gorbachev came to power as a reforming communist, but it seemed fairly clear that he was determined to keep the socialist sphere intact. No one was aware that his calls for change within the Soviet Union, designed largely to reinvigorate a failing economy and make the USSR competitive with the West, would lead to the end of communism in Europe. Unlike the party leadership in China, the Europeans were either unable or unwilling to engage in economic reform while continuing as socialist states. Deng did not hesitate to use force against protestors; elsewhere this was not the case. In the end, China made economic reforms that allowed for material prosperity yet the regime continued; in Eastern Europe, economic reforms worsened the situation and communism ceased.

### Communication skills

The role that Václav Havel played in the Velvet Revolution is considered instrumental to its success. It is generally argued that Havel was significant to the revolution and to the emergent opposition because he understood the spirit of the times. He became an eloquent spokesman for those who sought to bring about political change due to his popularity and his international status. He had been imprisoned for following his own ideals – those outlined in his *The Power of the Powerless* – and was known as a dissident playwright.

This brings up an interesting question regarding the “cult of personality” concept. Often considered a critical element in totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, the idea is that propaganda, publicity and popularity are all contingent upon the persona of the political leader.

Using Havel as an example, evaluate the claim that a “cult of personality” is only possible in an authoritarian regime. Consider the following points when formulating your answer.

- Can the rise and leadership of Havel be considered a cult of personality?
- Can a democratic state have a leader with a cult of personality?
- At what point does the leader’s popularity fade or wane in a democracy?

### TOK discussion

Discuss the statement below.

Popular political change rarely comes from repression; it tends to come from economic distress that makes the population so uncomfortable that they are willing to take risks to bring about change.