chapter 20

The Fall of Communism, 1945–1989

Between 1989 and 1991, several key events signaled the end of the Cold War. First, Communist dictatorships collapsed throughout Eastern Europe. Second, the Berlin Wall fell and East and West Germany were reunited. Third, the Soviet Union broke up.

To many people, it had appeared as though the Cold War would drag on permanently. When it ended, it did so abruptly and rapidly and with almost no bloodshed (the disastrous civil war in Yugoslavia was not the result of Cold War issues). The swiftness of the change happened for a variety of reasons: peace and prosperity in the West, the unifying factor of the destruction of World War II, and the persistent underground resistance to communism behind the Iron Curtain throughout the Cold War.

Economically, the West had prospered during the Cold War years. Those in the East were well aware that their own governments prevented them from enjoying much of a share in the postwar boom. The Communists always insisted that workers in the capitalist nations were oppressed and unhappy, but Eastern Europeans knew that Westerners enjoyed higher wages and a higher standard of living than they did.

World War II had been enormously destructive, but Europeans managed to create positive effects from the destruction. It created a genuine spirit of cooperation among Western nations, including the United States. With all nations working busily to rebuild and repair, employment was high and the atmosphere was one of courage and hope. Eastern nations also had to repair and rebuild, but without the freedom to choose their own employment, to form trade unions, or to install the latest technology, they felt less of a personal stake in the outcome. The atmosphere was one of stagnation and resignation.

The basic philosophy behind communism is that each person should contribute what he or she can to society and the economy and take as much as he or she needs. Most would agree that such an idea is compassionate, generous, and fair. Unfortunately, communism in practice did not reflect its philosophy. It meant censorship and oppression. When people are not permitted to say what they think, to write what they please, to travel where they wish, or to describe accurately the conditions they live in, they are not free. The history of modern Europe shows a constant progress toward freedom—the human freedom to live as a reasonable being with the right to make one's own basic choices. Communism was intolerable to many precisely because it refused to allow such freedom. Throughout the Cold War, many Eastern Europeans resisted it—some vocally, some silently, but all consistently. Individuals—sometimes prominent ones—defected to other nations. Writers smuggled their works out of the country for publication. Leaders led actual armed revolutions. Workers fought for their rights to bargain for higher wages and safer conditions. Without courageous resistance from within, the Communist governments of the East would never have fallen so rapidly.

CHAPTER 20 OBJECTIVES

- Describe the important events that marked the end of the Cold War.
- Describe the course of events in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin.
- Explain the purpose of the European Union.

Chapter 20 Time Line

- **1953** Death of Stalin
- **1957** Treaty of Rome establishes EEC (later European Union)
- **1968** Prague Spring
- **1980** Formation of Solidarity in Poland
- **1985** Mikhail Gorbachev becomes head of Soviet Union
- **1989** Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia; Grosz lifts Iron Curtain in Hungary; Berlin Wall falls; Communist governments throughout Eastern Europe fall
- **1990** East and West Germany are reunited; civil war begins in Yugoslavia
- **1991** Soviet Union is dissolved; Commonwealth of Independent States is established

Soviet Leadership After Stalin

The major turning point in the rise and fall of the Soviet Union took place in 1953, with the death of seventy-four-year-old Joseph Stalin. His successors would never impress their personalities on the nation as he had done. They lacked both his personal brutality and his insistence on personal control over every aspect of Soviet life as well as Soviet government.

In terms of the rivalry with the United States, Stalin had followed a policy of bluffing. He deceived the United States and the world into believing the USSR was much stronger militarily than was in fact the case. In truth, so many millions of Soviets had been killed during the wars, and the western region of the country had been so badly damaged by the German invasions, that the USSR would take a long time to recover. Stalin created an atmosphere of secrecy and mystery that was highly successful in maintaining the illusion of the Soviet state as a mighty superpower. The purpose of his bluff was mainly defensive; he wanted at all costs to prevent any American attack on the USSR. In fact, there was never any real danger of such an attack. The United States had no desire to engage in all-out war with the Soviet Union unless such a situation absolutely could not be avoided. Stalin, however, always believed that capitalist nations

were his natural enemies and that they would crush the Soviet Union if they could.

A gradual thaw in Soviet foreign and domestic policy followed Stalin's death. Nikita Khrushchev, his successor, clearly showed the course of the future when he gave a 1956 speech denouncing Stalin's crimes against humanity. From this time on, the cult of personality that Stalin had cultivated began to fade; he was no longer officially venerated in the USSR. This "de-Stalinization" process helped lead to the Hungarian revolution of 1956 (see Chapter 19).

Khrushchev also oversaw substantial domestic reforms. Although he could not have predicted the breakup of the Soviet Union that would come later, he helped lay the groundwork for it by decentralizing the bureaucracy of the state, shifting authority from Moscow to the fifteen individual republics. He also relaxed censorship in the arts, although he did not by any means eliminate it. New agricultural policies led to a short-term economic surge. In addition, Khrushchev presided over the space race, in which Soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin became the first person to orbit the Earth.

In 1964, Party leaders forced Khrushchev to resign from his post. A downturn in the economy, plus long-standing discontent with some of his policies, had made him unpopular among the leadership. His successor, Leonid Brezhnev, is most notable for signing the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) Treaty with U.S. President Richard Nixon. This treaty limited the number of intercontinental nuclear missiles for both nations. In addition, the two leaders discussed relaxing trade restrictions between their countries.

The milder political climate under Stalin's successors gave rise to some degree of political protest within the Soviet Union. Soviet workers were well aware that while they were badly housed, poorly paid, and had little access to consumer goods or even much choice in basic items like groceries, the Party elite lived in comparative luxury. Since everyone in a Communist state is supposed to be treated equally, this had long caused resentment. That resentment began to find public expression under Khrushchev and those who succeeded him. Soviets were no longer content to accept the high degree of inequality, nor the censorship that was an international embarrassment to a nation that had always prided itself on its great artists. For example, Boris Pasternak, an acclaimed poet and the author of the novel *Dr. Zhivago*, was ordered to refuse the 1958 Nobel Prize for literature, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn was deprived of his Soviet citizenship because he wrote honestly about the gulags (the notorious Soviet prison camps).

The Gorbachev Era

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the head of the Soviet Union. Born in 1931 to a peasant family in the North Caucasus region, Gorbachev was well aware that major political changes were necessary. Beginning around 1980, the United States had enormously increased military spending; the Soviet Union simply could not afford to keep up without ruining its own economy. To remedy the economic and social problems in the USSR, Gorbachev instituted *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (a restructuring of the economy and society). *Glasnost* was intended to encourage open debate within the Soviet Union. Gorbachev believed that the economic and social problems the country faced demanded input from all segments of society, not just Party members. He relaxed censorship and instituted policies that encouraged writers and intellectuals to speak out about society's problems and suggest their own solutions.

Perestroika called for increases in foreign trade and reductions on military spending. During a 1987 meeting with U.S. President Ronald Reagan, Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, eliminating all medium-range nuclear missiles from Europe. This made Gorbachev very unpopular with the Soviet military, who were convinced it made the USSR vulnerable to attack.

In 1988, Gorbachev thoroughly reorganized the Soviet government. He called for a Congress of People's Deputies, whose members would then elect the Supreme Soviet (the federal legislative assembly). Under Gorbachev's predecessors the Supreme Soviet had simply served as a rubber stamp for the Party; from now on it would function as a powerful lawmaking body. Deputies for the Congress represented all segments of society and government: one-third represented the interests of the many nationalities within the USSR, one-third were freely elected on a geographical basis, and one-third were directly nominated by major institutions such as the Orthodox Church, the trade unions, and the Communist Party. The new Supreme Soviet was bicameral and would meet twice a year for three- or four-month sessions. The era of one-party rule in the Soviet Union was over. Non-Communists were allowed to run for office at the national, republic, and local levels in 1989.

In July 1988, due to a severe economic slump and his own awareness of the changed atmosphere in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union would withdraw from any interference in the self-government of other nations. Eastern Europe would have to take care of itself from now on; the

Soviet Union could no longer afford to control and monitor nations outside its own borders.

The Cold War Ends in Europe

To the Western world, communism appeared to collapse almost all at once. In fact, there were different degrees of communism in the Eastern European nations. In some nations the level of authority was much harsher than others, and some began an active fight against communism sooner than others. By 1990, all the Communist governments of Eastern Europe had fallen.

Poland

In 1978, Karol Cardinal Wojtyla of Poland became Pope John Paul II—the first non-Italian to hold the Church's highest office since the early 1500s. In the wake of his election, Poland became the focus of a great deal of international attention. This played a significant role in bringing about political reform.

Beginning in 1980, soaring prices led Polish laborers to stage a series of strikes and to demand the right to form trade unions. The Polish government gave in to the workers' demands in September, and the workers formed Solidarity, a national council to coordinate independent trade unions. Solidarity members created a list of demands that made it clear they wanted real reform, not just higher wages: a union's right to strike, freedom for dissenters being held in prison, and the lifting of censorship. Dock worker Lech Walesa, who headed Solidarity, would later become the president of a democratic Poland.

The Polish government was naturally hostile to Solidarity, which had made itself a national political party rather than just a labor organization. Despite an outright 1981 ban on Solidarity, the political tide had turned in Poland. By 1989 the government was forced to legalize Solidarity once again, and the party swept the elections held that year. Combined with Gorbachev's public withdrawal of Soviet influence in Iron Curtain nations, the Communist Party in Poland was thrust aside for good.

Hungary

Although several years of Stalinist repression had followed the 1956 rebellion, Hungary had been gradually flexing its political muscles since the Soviet thaw of the early 1960s. In 1968, Hungary announced the New Economic

Mechanism, which moved state controls on the market and allowed for free enterprise. Karol Grosz, who took office in 1987, supported Gorbachev's policies of openness and greater political freedom. With the 1989 withdrawal of Soviet interference in Hungarian affairs, Grosz ordered the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria. This was the first official lifting of any part of the Iron Curtain, and it caused an immediate flood of Eastern European immigrants into Hungary and across the border.

Czechoslovakia

In the wake of Communist crackdowns meant to prevent the workers from uniting in imitation of Solidarity, popular demonstrations occurred in the streets of Prague and other cities in the fall of 1989. In a series of events known as the Velvet Revolution, the Communist premier Gustav Husak resigned and was replaced within the month by the democratically elected Vaclav Havel. Alexander Dubcek, the hero of the 1968 Prague Spring, became the head of the Czechoslovak Parliament. Longstanding ethnic hostility between Czechs and Slovaks caused the 1993 separation of Czechoslovakia into Slovakia (also called the Slovak Republic) and the Czech Republic.

East Germany

Perhaps the most emotional and dramatic moment of the entire Cold War came on November 9, 1989, when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down.

Gorbachev had visited East Berlin in October. As he watched the East German crowds during an outdoor ceremony, he was amazed to hear them calling to him by name, appealing for help against their leaders. This was all the more astounding as the crowd was made of handpicked Communist Party activists. Clearly, the days of Communist rule in East Germany were numbered. A police crackdown took place a few days after the demonstration, but the government realized it could not stem the tide of popular resistance any longer.

Travel restrictions were relaxed in early November, and on the evening of the ninth, one ill-prepared official, flustered by a reporter's question, announced that the new rules would "immediately" take effect at the border. East Berliners flooded to the wall checkpoints in such huge crowds that the guards could not hold them back. By midnight, young Germans were attacking the wall on both sides with sledgehammers and pickaxes, clambering to the top and pulling up their friends to dance and cheer alongside them. Berliners poured freely

through the Brandenburg Gate in both directions for the first time since 1961. During the following weeks, border restrictions throughout Eastern Europe were removed, and easterners could freely travel to the West once again. In 1990, East and West Germany were officially and formally reunited under one government. After nearly fifty years, the Iron Curtain had come down.

Yugoslavia

Marshall Tito was a Communist, but he had such independent ideas that the Comintern actually expelled him from the Party. Tito governed Yugoslavia from 1945 until his death in 1980, managing to keep the mutually hostile forces of ethnic nationalism under control. In the great revolutionary year of 1989, however, civil war broke out, with Serbians wanting to dominate the power structure of the nation and Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Bosnia agitating for independence and self-determination. Fierce fighting among the various ethnic groups—Serbs against Croats, Bosnians against Serbs, Albanians against Serbs—continued through 1995. By 2008, Yugoslavia had broken into independent states—Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia.

The Breakup of the Soviet Union

The USSR had instigated the Cold War; fittingly, it was the last European nation to let go of Communist rule. In 1991, Party leaders attempted a coup against Gorbachev, who had been losing popularity due to a severe economic crisis and the Communist Party's dismay at the loss of influence in Europe. Additionally, the Baltic republics had been agitating for self-determination.

The actual coup attempt was inept and an embarrassing failure; however, it gave the western republics the opportunity to seize their independence. Gorbachev realized that he could no longer hold the Soviet Union together. In late 1991, all the Soviet republics became independent nation-states; all except Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia formed an association known as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This association was intended as a successor to the USSR, which was officially dissolved on December 31. Members of the CIS are entirely independent, self-governing nations. The CIS unites them for purposes of security, economics, internal and external trade, and justice.

The European Union

The foundation of the European Union goes back to the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Astonishingly, this agreement was first set in motion by the two nations that had perhaps the deepest and longest-standing traditional enmity in Europe: France and (West) Germany. For the first time in centuries, the two largest and strongest nations of central Europe realized that they could accomplish much more as allies than they ever had as enemies.

The richest coal-producing region in central Europe lay on the Franco-German border. In 1950, France proposed to West Germany that an international organization be created to administer the region so that all of Europe could benefit from the coal. An immediate and enthusiastic agreement led eventually to the creation of what was then called the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Commission. In 1957, the EEC had six members: France, West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Italy. In addition to overseeing coal production, the nations lifted tariffs among themselves, thus encouraging internal trade, and agreed to establish common tariffs for imports from non-EEC nations.

Soon other nations became eager to join the EEC and share its benefits. French concerns about possible American influence, and objections to certain British demands for special treatment, held up any expansion of membership until 1973. In 1991, the present-day European Union was founded, with fifteen member nations; between 2004 and 2007, membership was extended to almost all the nations of Eastern Europe.

Member nations of the EU are entirely separate and self-governing, but they share a common foreign and security policy and cooperate on domestic affairs and affairs of international justice. Since 1999, the EU nations also have had a shared currency, the euro. Member states are required to have stable, freely elected governments; to guarantee basic rights and protections to their citizens; to manage their economies; and to abide by EU laws and treaties.

QUIZ

1. **_____ issues were the primary motivation for the creation of the EEC and later the European Union.**
   A. Cultural
   B. Philosophical
   C. Economic
   D. Political

2. **What was the major cause of the civil war that broke out in Yugoslavia in 1989–1990?**
   A. ethnic nationalism
   B. resistance to Communist rule
   C. economic concerns
   D. censorship

3. **The Polish Solidarity is best described as**
   A. a trade union of skilled workers.
   B. a major political party.
   C. an underground resistance movement.
   D. a one-party system of government.

4. **The political concept of *glasnost* welcomes**
   A. free expression of political opinions.
   B. universal suffrage for adults.
   C. the lifting of restrictions on travel.
   D. the establishment of a strong legislature.

5. **Which best describes the change in the Soviet government after the death of Stalin?**
   A. It became substantially harsher and more repressive.
   B. It became somewhat less repressive.
   C. It became more centralized.
   D. It became radically more democratic.

6. **The people of Eastern Europe caused the downfall of communism by means of**
   A. changes in domestic policy.
   B. ethnic civil wars.
   C. passive and active resistance.
   D. establishing a free press.