

1989 Revolutions of Eastern Europe

Few people remember Günter Schabowski. Schabowski, the spokesman for the East German Communist Party Politburo, played a vital role in the toppling of the East German Communist government in the fall of 1989. During a press conference on November 9, 1989, a reporter asked him about new travel regulations issued by the government that seemed to indicate the possibility of easier travel into West Berlin through the Berlin Wall. Schabowski had only recently received a copy of the new regulations and had not yet read them carefully. The reporter asked when, exactly, East German citizens could begin to take advantage of these new travel rules. Schabowski shrugged and responded, "from now."

That evening Reuters reported (incorrectly) that East German citizens could cross into West Germany by any border crossing and West German television news programs reported that the Berlin Wall was opening. Within minutes, thousands, then tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands of Berliners, both East and West, began converging on the Berlin Wall. Without orders for how to handle the surging crowds, the East German border guards simply opened the gates. Crowds poured through in both directions and within minutes began tearing down the wall that had for so long symbolized the division of Europe into a Communist East and a non-Communist West.

The night that the Berlin Wall collapsed was certainly one of the most dramatic moments in the cascading events of 1989, events that brought the era of Communist rule in Eastern Europe to a close. Textbooks often describe the events of that year as the inevitable collapse of a repressive system in favor of a freer democratic form of government. But the reality is much more complex. Many forces, both internal and external, conspired to bring down the Communist regimes, and not every government that replaced them could be described as fully democratic.

What follows is an examination of the intersecting developments that led to the collapse of the Communist regimes in 1989. As you read this essay and as you explore the resources on this website, ask yourself what common threads appeared across the region during a time of rapid change? What trends are unique to one or only a few countries? By engaging in this sort of comparative analysis, you can begin to make sense of the complex events of 1989.

Origins of Change in Eastern Europe

In 1980, the world seemed a cold and forbidding place. For two generations, the Cold War overshadowed national and international politics as the United States and the Soviet Union competed for global leadership. The twentieth century divided Europe between states that had Communist governments and those that did not. As Winston Churchill famously declared in 1946, this divide created an "iron curtain" across Europe from Stettin on the Baltic Sea to Trieste on the Adriatic. By the 1980s, this "cold" war had seen several "hot" conflicts in Afghanistan, Angola, and Iraq. Large nuclear arsenals in the United States and the Soviet Union targeted each other and analysts spoke of "mutually assured destruction" as the certain outcome of any nuclear exchange between the two superpowers. Meanwhile, leaders in both Eastern and Western Europe attempted to maintain the new cultural and economic ties they had created during the era *détente* of the 1970s, while they watched the two superpowers renew their Cold War hostilities.

Four factors played a significant role in the events leading up to the end of the Cold War. Three of these factors are best described as structural; they were the result of problems internal to the Communist economic and political systems or were the result of external diplomatic and military pressures. The fourth factor proved the most telling in the final demise of the regimes. This was popular pressure from citizens who took to the streets by the thousands to demand an end to the dominance of their lives by the Communist parties in their respective countries.

When Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union in 1985, trouble began brewing for the Communist parties of Eastern Europe. Believing that economic change could revitalize the Soviet system, Gorbachev introduced social and economic reforms in the Soviet Union that provided for more political freedom (glasnost – literally “openness”) and a restructuring of the economy (perestroika). As these changes began to take hold in the Soviet Union, Communist leaders in Eastern Europe were forced to consider similar reforms in their own countries (or tried to shut them out completely, as was the case in East Germany).

While publicly expressing support for his fellow Communist governments in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev also made clear his belief that Communist governments everywhere needed to pursue a similar path of change. Perhaps even more important, he made it clear that the Soviet Union would no longer intervene militarily in Eastern Europe to prevent reform movements as it had done in East Germany in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. For the East European Communist leaders, Gorbachev’s disavowal of the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine (in which former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev vowed to use military force to prevent Communist states from turning away from Communism) meant that they could no longer count on his support to stop those in their countries who had begun to press for change.

In addition to this pressure from Moscow to initiate reforms, the East European Communist regimes faced a renewed challenge from the West, particularly from the United States and its NATO allies. Beginning in 1981, the U.S. President Ronald Reagan embarked on a significant upgrade of American military capacity. The Soviets and their allies then had to decide whether or not to increase spending on their conventional military forces to keep pace. Ultimately, the Soviets and the East European regimes did increase their military spending at a time when their economies could not sustain the cost. Reagan also used the media to challenge the Soviets and the East Europeans to democratize, most famously on June 12, 1987.

On that day, he stood in front of the Berlin Wall and demanded: “General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” (To download the text of President Reagan's speech, go to the [1989 site](#))

A third significant challenge to the East European regimes came from the growing economic crisis in the region that inspired many government officials and ordinary citizens – who felt the consequences of the economic problems most acutely – to seek out ways to foster change. Excessive foreign borrowing had resulted in external

debts that could not be paid without substantial increases in state revenue. Centrally planned economies – where all important economic decisions were made by state bureaucrats and where almost all economic assets were state-owned – were often inefficient. The only way that Communist regimes could raise the revenue they needed to pay their external debts was to increase prices for essentials – food, shelter, and energy. Faced with rising prices and stagnant wages in an economy controlled by the government, citizens increasingly turned their ire on the government – first in private and later in public. Because they knew that the Soviet Union was experimenting with economic reform, many citizens in East European countries became very frustrated with their own leaders who seemed to resist similar reforms.

Desire for economic reform did not mean the vast majority of people in these countries wanted a capitalist economic system as promoted by the West. The evidence points instead to strong sympathy for a mixed economic system that ensured the benefits of a social welfare model while allowing market mechanisms to function in some sectors of the economy, such as wages and consumer goods. Poland The revolutions of 1989 followed three different paths. In the northern tier of the region (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany), the Communist regimes collapsed from a combination of popular protest and non-violent negotiation. In Bulgaria and Albania, the leaders of the local Communist parties essentially initiated regime change from within their own inner circles, eventually ceding power peacefully. In Romania and Yugoslavia, by contrast, regime change led to violent uprisings, massacres, and civil war. To fully understand the events of 1989, we have to examine all of these paths.

Poland

The Polish people had a long tradition of resisting the Communist government, including localized protests in 1956, 1970, and, most importantly, in 1980. That year, Polish workers, angered by consumer price increases, began striking at shipyards, factories, and mines across the country. This protest quickly developed into the independent self-governing trade union named Solidarity. Led by Lech Wałęsa, an electrician who later became a politician (and ultimately president of Poland), Solidarity challenged the Communist Party's monopoly on power from August 1980 to December 1981, when Polish Prime Minister General Wojciech Jaruzelski banned the union and imposed martial law throughout the country.

Jaruzelski's crackdown on Solidarity held until the late 1980s when the Polish government once again faced a serious economic crisis. Again angered by significant price increases – some as high as 200 percent over several months – Solidarity's members renewed their strike in the fall of 1988. In his public war of words with General Jaruzelski, Wałęsa announced that he would be willing to open talks with the authorities at any time, but only if such talks included representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. Jaruzelski countered that the strikes must end first.

Jaruzelski's position was undermined in December 1988 when, in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Soviet leader Gorbachev announced a substantial reduction in Soviet troops throughout Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union had intervened with military force in 1953, 1956, and 1968 to support Communist regimes in East

European countries, but Gorbachev essentially announced that his country would not do so again.

Unable to force the striking workers back to their jobs and lacking support from Moscow, General Jaruzelski finally agreed to what became known as the Round Table Talks, negotiations that lasted from February 6 to April 5, 1989. When the two sides emerged from these talks, they had agreed to compromise on economic issues, to the re-legalization of Solidarity, and most significantly, to elections in which parties other than the Communists would be able to field candidates.

The compromise agreement stated that two-thirds of the seats in the lower house of the Polish parliament (the Sejm) would be designated for Communist and associated parties, while the remaining third would be open to any candidate. The talks also resurrected the Polish Senate in which all 100 members of this upper house were to be freely elected. In addition, voters could cross off the name of any candidate. This meant that voters could reject Communist candidates in seats reserved for Communists. In the ensuing elections on June 4 and June 18, Solidarity candidates won 160 of the 161 seats in the Sejm that were available to

them and 92 of the 100 seats of the Polish Senate. In addition, many leaders of the Communist Party failed to secure enough votes to be elected to the parliament they had controlled for four decades. Hoping to avoid a crackdown similar to the one in 1981, Wałęsa persuaded his coalition to elect Jaruzelski president, thereby creating a power-sharing arrangement that secured Solidarity's victory.

When President George H.W. Bush visited Eastern Europe during that fateful summer, he included Gdańsk, Poland, the home base of Solidarity, on his itinerary. There, before a crowd estimated at 20,000, he stood next to Wałęsa and praised Poland for its achievement, for free elections, and for its dedication to liberty.

Hungary

The negotiated revolution in Hungary took a different form than it had in Poland, where workers had led the protest movement and had been motivated in large part by economic issues such as wages and prices. In Hungary, intellectuals and environmental activists led the opposition that coalesced around environmental questions, worries about the treatment of ethnic Hungarians in Romania, and a deep sense of anger about the way the regime handled the memory of Hungary's revolt against Soviet control in 1956.

The Danube Circle [Duna Kor in Hungarian], formed in 1984, was the first organization to challenge the regime's monopoly on power. The Danube Circle was created to fight construction of the massive Gabičkovo-Nagymaros dam across the Danube between Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Opponents of the dam argued that it would create an environmental disaster that would displace thousands of Hungarians from villages and towns where their families had lived for centuries.

Opponents of the regime soon joined this burgeoning environmental protest and by the fall of 1988 the Danube Circle had about 10,000 core followers who actively demonstrated against the dam in the streets of Budapest. These actions mirrored protests earlier in the summer of 1988, in which more than 30,000 people marched in Budapest to express their anger over the Romanian government's plan to bulldoze entire Hungarian villages in Transylvania. Hungary had not seen public protests on this

scale since 1956. (See the online 1989 Hungary primary sources for material on Duna Kor)

The memory of 1956, however, proved to be the issue that the Party could not ignore. Throughout the late 1980s, students and other opponents of the regime staged small-scale public commemorations on three important dates in March, June, and October. March 15 was the traditional Hungarian independence day (from 1848). June 16 was the anniversary of the execution of Imre Nagy, the leader of the 1956 uprising against Soviets and their local Soviet sympathizers. October 30 marked the anniversary of the start of the 1956 uprising. By the fall of 1988, public pressure to recognize these dates in Hungarian history was strong and the Party agreed to start allowing the celebration of March 15. The Party also agreed to allow the formation of opposition parties, in the mistaken belief that the Communist Party was still sufficiently popular to fend off challengers.

The three most important parties that emerged were led by intellectuals and students, in contrast with the worker-led movement in Poland. The first to form, the Hungarian Democratic Forum, had a nationalist orientation. The second, the Alliance of Free Democrats, was primarily interested in reshaping the economy along capitalist lines. The last of the three opposition parties to form in the fall of 1988, the Alliance Young Democrats (most commonly known by its acronym FIDESz), was led by students who were especially impatient with the pace of change in their country. Faced with this burgeoning opposition, reformers within the Communist Party began to win control of the Party and, in an attempt to win back some of its eroding popular support, agreed to “rehabilitate” the leaders of the 1956 revolution.

In the Communist world, to be “rehabilitated” meant that a person who had been cast out by the Party (and declared something akin to being a non-person) was again recognized by the Party. For example, after the Party executed several leaders of the 1956 uprising, most notably Imre Nagy, it also removed them from public memory. When they were rehabilitated in 1989, these men were restored to the official history of their country. Approximately 200,000 people showed up in Budapest on June 16, 1989, to attend the reburial of Nagy, whose remains were moved to a hero’s grave from the obscurity where they had languished since the 1956 uprising.

To ordinary Hungarians, Nagy symbolized not only their country’s resistance to Soviet domination, but a symbol of the will of the Hungarian people to chart their own course in the world and at home. The most provocative speech given that day was by Viktor Orbán, the leader of FIDESz, who derided the Communist Party – whose leaders were sitting behind him on the stage – for its many crimes against its own citizens. In the face of strong public sympathy for a Hungary free from a Communist monopoly on power, the government declared Hungary a Republic in October 1989, on the anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. It was no longer a “People’s Republic,” the standard designation of a Communist country.

In May 1990, the first free democratic elections in Hungary since the 1940s were held and the Democratic Forum won 43 percent of the vote, effectively ending the era of Communist power.

Czechoslovakia

The events of 1989 in Czechoslovakia are known as the “Velvet Revolution,” in part because of the non-violent nature of the protests. As in Hungary, intellectuals led the way and, similarly, their demand for a public commemoration of a significant moment played an important role in the events that followed. On January 15, 1989, a crowd of over 5,000 people marched onto the main square in Prague (Wenceslaus Square) to commemorate the self-immolation of Jan Palach, a Czech student who committed suicide in 1969 to protest the Warsaw Pact invasion of his country the previous fall. The government responded to this protest with violence, attacking the crowd and arresting more than 100 participants.

Over the next few days, crowds ranging in size from several hundreds to several thousands fought with police on the streets of the capital. Among those arrested was the playwright and prominent dissident, Václav Havel, who was sentenced to nine months in prison for his role in the protests. In contrast with Hungary, however, those in the Czechoslovak Communist Party who wanted reform were a minority without influence.

Throughout the spring, summer, and early fall, the government in Prague showed no sign of compromise or change similar to the shifts taking place in Budapest or Warsaw. On November 17, however, the regime took its repression of dissent too far. On that evening, two student groups – the officially sanctioned Socialist Student Union and a recently permitted alternative student group – marched toward Wenceslaus Square to commemorate the death of a Prague student who had died 50 years earlier fighting the Nazis. As the marchers neared the square, police units confronted them and in the ensuing mêlée several students were badly beaten. Immediately the rumor spread that one or possibly more students had been killed by the police, although no evidence has been found that anyone died that night.

Within two days, opposition organizations had formed – the Public Against Violence in Bratislava, and Civic Forum in Prague. Both organizations were led by writers, playwrights, professors, and other intellectuals. On the night of November 20, close to 200,000 people filled Wenceslaus Square. Suddenly, it appeared that the Czechoslovak Communist Party was a façade. And so it was, because on December 9, the Party transferred power to a coalition government led by none other than Havel, only recently released from jail.

East Germany

East Germany (GDR) played a profound symbolic role in Europe. It served both as a foil to West Germany and, for Soviet Bloc states, as a buffer against capitalist incursion. It represented Communist resistance to and triumph over the Nazi regime. And the Berlin Wall’s division of East and West Berlin served as the most powerful visual symbol of the Cold War.

Ruled with the iron, if aged, fist of Eric Honecker, the GDR was one of the most repressive regimes in the Eastern Bloc. Still, East Germany was not immune to the changes taking place around it. In the summer of 1989, the regime was undone largely by two things: popular protests across the country, especially in Leipzig and Dresden, and the decision of the Hungarian government to tear down its border fences with Austria.

When Hungary literally tore a hole in the Iron Curtain by removing the fences and minefields from its border during the summer of 1989, approximately 5,000 of East Germans who were vacationing in Hungary fled to Austria – a number that would rise to around 30,000 by December 1989. Other East Germans began camping on the grounds of West German embassies across Eastern Europe, requesting passports. International law viewed the embassy grounds as sovereign territory of the Federal Republic (West Germany) and according to West German law, East Germans who entered West Germany had an immediate right to West German citizenship. The problem was that the West German government could not secure exit visas for their new citizens from the Communist governments in Prague and Warsaw.

Faced with these mass defections, Honecker negotiated a deal with those waiting in the compounds of the West German embassies allowing them to leave for the West in sealed trains. They would pass through East German territory and be officially “expelled.”

In September 1989, an opposition organization called New Forum (Neues Forum) emerged. The resisters in this organization reflected the broad swathe of discontent in the GDR: it brought together young people, church leaders, women, gays, punk rockers, environmentalists, and other “outsiders” under its manifesto. Within weeks, this organization became the focus for opposition to the regime and its members helped to organize and lead street protests that grew increasingly large.

When Gorbachev visited Berlin during the 40th-anniversary celebration of the establishment of the German Democratic Republic, he uttered these famous words: “life punishes those who come too late,” an clear allusion to Honecker’s unwillingness to reform East Germany along the lines that Gorbachev was pursuing in the Soviet Union. Enthusiastic students chanted “Gorbi! Gorbi!” even as they marched and attended parades extolling the GDR. That evening a small group of dissidents gathered in a parsonage in the town of Schwante outside of Berlin and founded the first independent political party in East Germany—the Social Democratic Party in the GDR (SDP).

The city of Leipzig became a locus for resistance as demonstrations grew, drawing some 70,000 people by October 9, 1989, and Leipzig’s candlelight vigils caught the attention of the world. Some party leaders were calling for a “Chinese Solution” to stop the growing demonstrations, a reference to the Chinese government’s use of military force against pro-democracy demonstrators on Tiananmen Square in June. To this end, on the evening of October 9, local authorities prepared for mass arrests and even the use of deadly force – 3,000 riot police, 500 additional militia members, and 3,000 regular army soldiers were issued live ammunition and placed on alert at the outskirts of town. Faced with strong international pressure for moderation, the German authorities instead allowed the demonstration to proceed without incident.

The crowds marching through Leipzig chanted “Wir sind das Volk” or “We are the people,” which evolved after November 9 into “Wir sind ein Volk” or “We are one people,” a direct reference (by whom) to Germany’s long division and a desire to reunite the two German states.

Growing public opposition to the regime culminated on the night of November 9 when Günter Schabowski misspoke at a press conference and the Wall, literally and figuratively, began to fall. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall,

the East German Communist Party began negotiations with representatives from the SDP, Democracy Now, and other citizen action groups (most of which had previously been part of New Forum) under the auspices of a Central Round Table that brought the main opposition groups together with Party representatives. On March 18, 1990, the first free election was held in the GDR and transferred power to a new governing coalition comprised of Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD) led by Prime Minister Lothar de Maizière, a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union. In the ensuing months, the main task of de Maizière's new government was to negotiate the reunification of Germany, a process that was completed on October 3, 1990.

Bulgaria

Throughout the late 1980s, Bulgaria's longtime Communist leader, Todor Zhivkov, had resisted the reformist message coming from Moscow. As with other East European states, Bulgaria faced a combination of growing economic problems, international criticism for its discriminatory policies targeting Bulgarians of Turkish descent, and rising dissent among the general population. In an attempt to retain a monopoly on power, leading figures in the Bulgarian Communist Party forced Zhivkov to resign on November 10, 1989, the day after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nevertheless, a group of political parties opposed to the Communist government began to pressure the regime for change. Early in December 1989, these opposition parties merged together as the Union of Democratic Forces. In response, the "new" leadership of the Communist party experimented with political liberalization.

Ecoglasnost, one of the first opposition parties promoting environmental activism, was given full legal status by the Communist Party on December 11, 1989. In early 1990, other member groups of the Union of Democratic Forces were also granted full legal status. Because the Communists gradually recognized these alternative political parties, they managed to retain power for another 18 months, at which point free elections and a new constitution marked real change. Change moved more slowly in Bulgaria than in some of the northern countries, but the path was similar.

Albania

Much like the situation in Bulgaria, the Albanian Communist Party successfully managed its transition from communism, maintaining much of its power far longer than in the northern Communist countries. Throughout the post-1945 period, Albania was an enigma to outside observers. The Albanian regime severed its relationship with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s in a dispute over whether Albania ought to follow Moscow's lead in retreating from the most severe aspects of the Stalinist state. This split with Moscow left Albania with only one friend in the Communist world – China. Then, in the 1970s, the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha denounced the Chinese as well, leaving Albania almost completely isolated from the rest of the world. Hoxha died just as Gorbachev rose to power and his replacement, Ramiz Alia, faced the dual challenges of international isolation and extreme poverty.

The revolutions of 1989 did not echo in Albania. Instead, it was fallout from events in Yugoslavia that provoked change. Specifically, Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević's oppression of ethnic Albanians in the Kosovo region of Yugoslavia incited rising popular unrest in Albania, which forced Alia to react. Alia implemented top-down reforms, such as term limits, lifted travel bans, increased party transparency, and (at least partially) moved toward free markets and free elections.

By anticipating changes that the masses might demand, Alia managed to extend one-party rule, but the limited reforms he implemented ultimately were not enough to keep him in power. Stalinists still occupied Politburo seats, and opposition groups were restless. The drama associated with 1989 – crowds in the streets, symbols of power destroyed, calls for free elections – did not reach Albania until 1991. In March of that year, the first multiparty elections were held in nearly 70 years. Even then, the Communists prevailed and Alia became a democratically elected president. In a subsequent election in 1992, the democratic opposition gained power for the first time.

Romania

In Romania, the changes of 1989 were more violent. The Communist government was deposed, but the events were far from peaceful and strong doubts remained as to whether the Communists actually lost power. Although the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu was perhaps the most repressive in Eastern Europe, supported by the feared Romanian state police (the Securitate), ethnic tensions predating Communism began to rise to the surface in the largely ethnic Hungarian region of Transylvania in the spring of 1989. The regime responded to protests over these issues with mass arrests and abuse of demonstrators.

Discontent in Transylvania boiled over in December 1989. The government threatened to transfer a popular human rights leader and Hungarian Reformed Church pastor László Tőkés from the city of Timișoara to another parish. Members of the Hungarian minority protested this move and Romanian workers and students joined the chanting of anti-Ceaușescu slogans. On December 17, 1989, the frustrated Ceaușescu ordered a massacre in Timișoara, resulting in significant loss of life (the official, but disputed count is 97). Instead of quelling dissent, the massacre at Timișoara enraged the population and anti-Ceaușescu demonstrations spread.

The penultimate moment came on December 21 when Ceaușescu arranged a highly staged and mandatory mass meeting in Bucharest attended by carefully selected political leaders, workers, and security forces. Despite the careful planning, spontaneous opposition broke out, and the nation watched as state television briefly broadcast raised fists and anti-Ceaușescu slogans (you can see this video on the *1989* site). Ceaușescu and his wife Elena tried to flee Bucharest, but were captured when their helicopter was forced to land due to a faulty (possibly sabotaged) fuel line.

On Christmas Day, a tribunal found the Ceaușescus guilty of genocide in a trial lasting just hours and the Ceaușescu regime ended with their execution, an event broadcast repeatedly on television to convince Romanians that their former rulers were dead. Unlike Poland or Czechoslovakia, no long-standing members of an opposition group stepped forward to fill the power vacuum. Instead, a shadowy National Salvation Front (FSN) appeared on television and proclaimed itself as the new national government. At

its head was Ion Iliescu, a former high official of the regime, who replaced Ceaușescu with a less repressive, but still authoritarian government.

Immediately, questions arose in Romania and abroad about the FSN government. It included many former officials of the old regime and appeared to remain under control of the feared state secret police. Iliescu's status as a leading figure, albeit one out of power at the time, of the Ceaușescu government, and the fact that the National Salvation Front seemed to appear from out of nowhere, fueled speculation that the Romanian "revolution" was really little more than a palace coup.

Yugoslavia

Although the Romanian experience was the most violent moment of 1989, Yugoslavia descended into its own particular hell in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Communism across the region.

A federal state with strong traditions of nationalism and a history of ethnic violence dating back to the decades before the First World War, Yugoslavia began to splinter in 1990 as one republic after another moved toward secession from the federal state. Feelings of nationalism in the non-Serbian republics were spurred by both internal Serb-driven declarations and external incitement. The possibility of an independent relationship to Western Europe meant that Slovenia and Croatia, already historically Western-looking, could retain their economic and social advantages and rid themselves of the "burden" of Belgrade. Slovene and Croat leaders objected both to Serb desires for greater authority for the central government in Belgrade and to the state's tax system that siphoned revenue from their more prosperous republics into the coffers of the Belgrade government.

In March 1989, with attention focused on the roundtable talks in Poland, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević, a Serbian nationalist and leading figure in the Communist Party, took the fateful step of revoking the constitutional autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina, two autonomous regions of the Serbian republic. In the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, members of the local political elites saw this move as a first step by Milošević toward a unitary state ruled directly from Belgrade – an outcome wholly unacceptable to them. All three republics staged multiparty elections in the spring of 1990, leading to the victory of pro-secession coalitions.

When Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina made clear their intention to secede and declare themselves sovereign, Milošević refused to go along with their plans. The resulting civil war pitched Milošević's Serbian allies against the seceding states, introducing the term "ethnic cleansing," and reminding the world that genocide in Europe remained a real threat.

Conclusion

The results of the revolutions of 1989 were quite profound. Poland, Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Eastern Germany, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania have all joined the European Union and NATO. Former members of the Communist parties fell out of favor, but in many cases returned to office as reformed "Social Democrats." With the exception of Slovenia, the republics of the former Yugoslavia

remain outside the EU and NATO and the potential for renewed war in Bosnia and Kosovo remains a very real threat. Across the region, people still debate whether the inauguration of a capitalist economic system was the right choice, given the resulting social dislocation experienced by so many citizens who found the adjustment to a market economy very difficult.

The collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe reverberated across the rest of the Communist world. On the same day that Solidarity won the first free election in Poland in more than 40 years, the Chinese government sent its army into Tiananmen Square to put down a student-led pro-democracy movement there, effectively heading off any possibility of reform. Discontent among hardliners in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union over the “loss” of Eastern Europe was one of the main causes of an attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991. This abortive coup sparked the Russian Revolution that ended the Soviet Union and effectively brought the Cold War to a close.

Despite the negative outcomes of the events of 1989—violence in Romania and Yugoslavia and substantial social upheaval—in almost every case, the 1989 revolutions represent a triumph of popular movements over oppression and serve as inspiration to those elsewhere in the world seeking democratic reform. They also represent a challenge. The future of the story of the 1989 revolutions rests in the hands of the next generation of students and scholars. The primary sources, interviews with historians, and other resources throughout this website will allow you to explore the causes, events, and aftermath of the massive upheavals of 1989. The eighteenth-century French political commentator Alexis de Tocqueville said: “In a revolution, as in a novel, the most difficult part to invent is the end.” This website presents the tools for writing the complex ending.