

# Division and realignment in Europe, 1945 - 1992 | Sample Answer

## **What factors contributed to the collapse of communism? (2010)**

Many reasons led to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Whether it was Hungary's uprising in 1956 or the Prague Spring of 1968, the birth of Solidarity in 1980 or the unleashing of Glasnost by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev - all bore the seed of future revolution. These revolutions against the ideology were happening over a long period, but eventually, the domino effect came into play, creating huge gaps in the 'iron curtain' and ultimately leading to the collapse of communism.

By the 1980s economies of most European bloc countries were in trouble and people were beginning to demand change. An example of this can be seen in the satellite state Poland. The Polish citizens were unhappy with how their country was being run. They had a very poor standard of living, low wages, no trade unions or strikes were allowed. Additionally, prices were high for consumer goods due to their overdependence on imports. In September 1980 Lech Walesa formed a union called Solidarnosc. The union had so much support initially that the government was afraid to tackle them, 80% of the workforce were members. In 1981 the movement was banned, their leader Walesa was arrested and martial law was declared by Prime minister Jaruzelski. However, come 1983 martial law was lifted and Walesa was released. In 1988 the government tried to cut spending and strikes broke out. Jaruzelski realised that the Soviet troops will not be sent into the country because of Gorbachev's 1988 speech, his new approach of non-interference in the satellites. This inadvertently led to the collapse of communism here in Poland.

Solidarnosc, in turn, inspired reform movements in Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia. In Hungary 1987 a new group called "Hungarian Democratic Forum" formed under Joseph Antall. The communist party realising that change was only a matter of time introduced several reforms in the hope that communism would stay and people would be happy. In May 1989 travel restrictions were lifted between Hungary and its neighbour country Austria. Barbed wire on the border was taken down. The Communist Party also announced that the 1956 trial of Imre Nagy was wrong and Nagy's body was reburied and given a state funeral. Later that year Communists allowed the Forum to participate in the Free Elections. The Forum won the elections and Antall became the new Prime Minister, April 1990.

The Communist leader in East Germany, Honecker had no interest in reforms. He announced in 1988 that the Berlin Wall would stand for another 50 to 100 years! His character was out of touch and only led to protests against the government. In May 1989 once Hungary had opened its borders to Austria, East Germans could get out. By August about 200 Germans were leaving each day. In October 1989 Gorbachev visited East Germany and suggested that Honecker should have his own version of glasnost and perestroika. He also gave orders that Soviet troops were not to attack the people in East Germany. A few days later Honecker ordered that the troops fire on protesters, but they refused. Honecker power was no gone. On November 9th the Berlin Wall was torn down following the new leader of Germany policy on exit visas. Essentially what contributed to the collapse here was Gorbachev's approach of non-interference plus the fact that Honecker was completely out of touch with the ordinary people and failed to grasp the situation.

It could be suggested that the poor economy in Russia in the 1980s contributed to the collapse of communism. During this period higher wage demands forced the government to print more money which resulted in a rise in inflation. In 1988-89 the wages by 20% to keep pace with inflation and to avoid strikes. Basic goods such as soap, washing powder and food were in

short supply. By the end of 1990, a quarter of the population was living below the poverty line. It is notable that when Gorbachev won the Nobel Peace Prize it received very little attention at home and one commenter said, "Well it wasn't for his economics". A huge factor which contributed to the weak Russian economy was the cost of trying to match the US's new weapons and technologies. The Soviet Union had been involved for six years in a war in Afghanistan, which cost them 15 billion roubles. And struggling to keep up with America's spending on new military equipment every year, \$550 billion. With the economy not improving the people were beginning to repel communism.

In December 1988, Gorbachev made a speech to the United Nations, in it he announced he would be abandoning the Brezhnev Doctrine (the use of force on any uprisings). The Soviet states saw this and his policy Glasnost as a "relaxation" and it had the unintended effect of reawakening long-suppressed nationalists and anti-Russian feelings in the Soviet republics. After the satellite states broke away from Soviet control by 1989, the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) began to look for their independence. In March 1990, Lithuania declared independence. Estonia and Latvia followed in August. Gorbachev was not prepared to accept this and so sent the Red Army into Lithuania, 14 people were killed. This event was used to undermine his leadership. After Georgia declared its independence in April 1991 Gorbachev called an emergency meeting of all states.

At this meeting, it was agreed that a new union would be formed in which Moscow would not control. However, this proved too much for some conservatives and Gorbachev was placed under house arrest while a coup d'état took place in Moscow. Boris Yeltsin suppressed it, and in doing so became the real hero of Russia. Without consulting Gorbachev, Yeltsin met with the leaders of Belarus and Georgia and signed a New Commonwealth of Independent States. On 25th December 1991, Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union and the USSR ceased to exist.

Many reasons can be argued for communism collapsing in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. One being, communism had consistently failed to raise living standards for its people. The Eastern bloc could not compete economically with the West and trying to do so only left them effectively bankrupt. Through glasnost, the desire for democratic freedom was felt by increasing well-educated and better-informed people. Force had essentially kept communism in power throughout the years in countries facing reform movement and without the Brezhnev Doctrine in place, the fall of communism seemed inevitable.