

# The History Guide

## Lectures on Twentieth Century Europe

### Lecture 16

#### 1989: The Walls Came Tumbling Down



*We have to consider seriously and analyze correctly [the crimes of the Stalin era] in order that we may preclude any possibility of a repetition in any form whatever of what took place during the life of Stalin, who absolutely did not tolerate collegiality in leadership and in work, and who practiced brutal violence, not only toward everything which opposed him, but also toward everything which seemed to his capricious and despotic character, contrary to his concepts.*

*Instead of proving his political correctness and mobilizing the masses, [Stalin] often chose the path of repression and physical annihilation, not only against actual enemies, but also against individuals who had not committed any crimes against the Party and the Soviet government. (Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech, February 25, 1956)*

*Gorbachev made plain that he himself was the leader of a particular generation with a particular vision: a man of late middle age, born into a system that betrayed his family, but one who is convinced nevertheless that **genuine** socialism was possible and still **my banner**. The tragedy of the Stalin era and the farce of the Brezhnev period represented for Gorbachev not the failure of ideology, but rather its perversion. (David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 1993)*

For the Soviet Union, [WW II](#) was yet another cruel landmark in the wars, revolutions and crises which had affected the country since 1905. After 1945, many returning soldiers hoped for a relaxation of Stalinist terror and dictatorship. After all, they had helped to defeat [Hitler](#) and the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War. It was not to be. Sixty-six years old in 1945, Joseph Stalin became even more ruthless than he had been before the war (on Stalin see [Lecture 10](#)). He was corrupted by his unlimited power and his suspicions of internal rebellion were clearly the mark of a paranoid personality.

After the war, Stalin found no reason to relax his control. Wherever he looked, he saw problems which demanded his attention and control. The government, the Party, the army, the communist ideology and the economy were all on the verge of collapse. Stalin's answer, as to be expected, was more Five Year Plans. And with the return of the Five Year Plans came the deliberate tightening of

ideological control. The target became the existence of any form of western influence upon Soviet society. So, thousands of soldiers who had seen too much of the west during WW II, were sent to the [GULAG](#) and the intelligentsia was forced into retreat by party terror at the hands of the KGB.

In his last years, Stalin drew into isolation -- he surrounded himself with loyal lackies and his suspicions of conspiracy and plot intensified. Before he died, he believed that his doctors had conspired against him. They were all tortured and one of them died as a result. When he died of a stroke on March 5, 1953, his assistants were relieved. Yet many people wept -- for millions of Russians, Joseph Stalin had been their savior. Iosef Vissarionovich Djugashvili – Koba – the Man of Steel, was now dead. What shape, what direction would the Soviet Union now take, now that its dictator was dead?

Leadership was assumed by a team headed by [NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV](#) (1894-1971) who became the Premier of the Soviet Union until 1964. It was Khrushchev who had introduced the first Soviet "thaw." Most, but not all, of the GULAGS were emptied. Ethnic groups who had been resettled under Stalin were gradually allowed to return to their homeland. And in his speech at the 20th Party Congress in February 1956, Khrushchev denounced Stalin and the crimes Stalin had committed against his own people. Khrushchev cited example after example of Stalinist terror. Without criticizing Soviet communism, Khrushchev managed to reject the excesses of Joseph Stalin. Of course, Khrushchev was also able to skillfully downplay his role in Stalinist atrocities as well.



Khrushchev's speech in 1956 caused a profound stir around the world. Card carrying communists as well as communist fellow travelers began to defect from the party in large numbers. Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, Poland was on the brink of rebellion in 1956. And in that same year a Hungarian uprising against Moscow was nearly successful had not the Soviets sent in their tanks. Again, events such as these alienated a great many Soviet sympathizers and international support for the Soviets dwindled. In foreign policy, Khrushchev proposed peace, however, he threatened the west by blocking western access to Berlin and by placing missiles in Cuba. And in 1960, Russia withdrew its offer to aid China -- communist since 1949 -- to develop and build nuclear weapons.

Khrushchev presented Russia with a new party program and pressed for reforms in industry, agriculture and party organization. Of course, such efforts on his part also managed to alienate and antagonize a great many party officials. So, in October 1964, and while he was away from Moscow on vacation, Khrushchev's Politburo comrades removed him from power. The international press reported that Khrushchev had been replaced for reasons of ill-health.



Khrushchev was replaced by [LEONID BREZHNEV](#), an elderly man who required massive doses of stimulants in order to appear alive. Under Brezhnev, the Soviet government turned from personal dictatorship to oligarchy, that is, the collective rule of a privileged minority. As a result, authoritarian control over the Soviet people was now relaxed. A "New Class" had been born in a supposedly classless society.

In the 1970s, US-Soviet relations entered a period of *detente*, or peaceful co-existence. The Soviets had achieved parity in atomic weapons with the United States. Slowly, the country was opened up to the outside world.

Authority was relaxed, young people were allowed access to Western music and fashion, issues were open to debate, there was some artistic freedom as well as a revival of religious belief and practice. For Russian intellectuals who criticized the State, however, the story was much different. [Andrei Sakharov](#), the man who helped invent the Soviet H-bomb was also a human rights activist. He was exiled from Moscow and placed under house arrest for six years. He died in late 1989,

after having witnessed the last stage of the 1917 Revolution, the collapse of Soviet communism. [Alexandr Solzhenitsyn](#), the Russian novelist and critic, was arrested by Stalin in 1947, sent to the GULAG until 1956 and was later exiled from the country. He fled to Vermont where he spent about ten years -- he returned to Russia in 1994. Other critics and intellectuals were declared insane and the KGB, despite efforts toward relaxation, was as powerful as ever.

Brezhnev and his buddies, [Kosygin](#), [Chernenko](#) and [Andropov](#), were old men who survived in office for just a brief period of time. By the 1980s, political life was suffocating and the political system had ossified. Marxist-Leninist ideology had long since turned into what one Soviet official called "stale bread." The condition of the leadership was a metaphor for a system that was itself dying. Brezhnev died incompetent at age 75 in 1982, Andropov in 1984, and Chernenko barely lasted a year having died in 1985 at the age of 73. The Soviet system was regarded by increasing numbers of people with cynicism, contempt and ridicule. As a senior official under Yeltsin put it:

*The last seven or eight years under Brezhnev were already ridiculous. Everyone knew it, and was laughing at it, not in public, but in their home or at work. Brezhnev would give a speech on television, and his jaw would be hanging out, and sometimes he would read the same page twice.*

In 1985, [MIKHAIL SERGEYEVICH GORBACHEV](#) took over. Unlike Brezhnev, who need tanks of oxygen at his side, Gorbachev had good health and relative youth on his side. At 54 years of age, Gorbachev represented a generation which had begun their political and party careers after 1953. So although they were born and raised in the Stalin years, Stalin was gone by the time they begun their political lives. A self-confident and energetic man, Gorbachev talked freely to people from all walks of life. He was keenly aware of the problems facing the Soviet Union and knew that the Party had stagnated over time. Much of this stagnation as well as inefficiency was made readily apparent in April of 1986 when a nuclear reactor at [Chernobyl](#) exploded and sent radiation 300 times normal levels into the atmosphere. The Soviet government denied any such accident and denounced it as a creation of the western media. Seventeen days after the fact, Gorbachev appeared on Soviet television and gave a speech that was wholly uncharacteristic of Soviet leadership and presented a sharp break with the way the Kremlin had always handled such issues. Instead of propaganda, he delivered a serious admission of the facts of the accident.



"For our internal progress," Gorbachev wrote in 1987, "we need normal international relations." The Soviets had to catch up to the rising prosperity and high technology of the Europe and North America. The Soviet Union had to concentrate on domestic development and promote international peace whenever possible. However, it could only accomplish such a goal by giving up any global ambitions. So Gorbachev abandoned the traditional Soviet anti-western orientation. He wanted to integrate the Soviet Union into the main currents of modern life and that meant democracy, free enterprise and a market economy. *Time* magazine went on the vote "Gorby" Man of the Year and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher pronounced that Gorbachev was "a man with whom we can do business."

Gorbachev gave the Soviet Union and the World two slogans: *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). [PERESTROIKA](#) held out the promise of reorganizing the State and society. For instance, individual initiative would be revived and there would be more technology and a higher standard of living. Soviet citizens were to become more involved at the grass roots level and participate in national affairs. *Glasnost* was the corrective held up to Stalinist excesses. Openness would permit the open discussion of the nation's problems and it would rid public thinking of propaganda and lies. Both *perestroika* and *glasnost*, as Gorbachev understood them, would transform Soviet society into a true democracy.

Academics, writers, intellectuals and artists responded enthusiastically, as did most western politicians. Sakharov rose to political prominence and Solzhenitsyn was invited home. Soviet fiction that was produced and subsequently banned in the 1920s and 30s was now published for the first time. [George Orwell's](#) novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were now published by Soviet printing houses. Some new novels not only told the truth about the past, but also tried to explain it. In many cases this amounted to speculation about Stalin's real nature and motivation, as in Anatoli Rybakov's celebrated novel, *Children of the Arbat*. Rybakov, who had won a Stalin Prize in 1951, tried to get the book published in the 1960s but failed. It was finally published in Russian in 1987. Meanwhile, historians who depended on archives had always had a more difficult time in telling the truth. Nevertheless, after a slow start, new histories began to appear and new light was shed on the recent past. In some cases, surviving participants of the Stalinist purges were interviewed, and in other cases, long-suppressed documents were published for the first time. [Trotsky's](#) works were now publicly examined but not unsurprisingly, they were condemned. [Bukharin](#), on the other hand, was finally exonerated by Gorbachev. A good deal of archival material on the Stalinist purges and the Great Terror was unearthed and published. Some statistics were located but an accurate count of those who suffered will probably never be known. And in 1989, Soviet responsibility was finally acknowledged for the [Katyn](#) mass murders of Polish soldiers in 1939. Despite all of this, not everything was cleared up. Past manifestations of anti-Semitism were revealed but in an incomplete way. Whether Kirov had been murdered at Stalin's order remained unsettled and it was revealed that some of the documents seen by Khrushchev's commission on the [Kirov affair](#) had since disappeared.

In Gorbachev's way of thinking, it was to be the Russian Communist Party that was to serve as the vanguard of *perestroika*. It was the party that would stimulate civic activity and responsibility. In 1988, a Soviet Congress was formed, including elected members, which in 1989 chose the smaller Supreme Soviet. In 1990, the Supreme Soviet elected Gorbachev as the country's president for a term of five years. At the time, Gorbachev was still the leader of the increasingly unpopular Communist Party. Economic changes accompanied these political reforms. Industrial enterprise was encouraged which in turn would foster private initiative and loosed the stranglehold of decades of central planning.

By 1990, Gorbachev was cautiously promoting a market economy including the individual's right to possess private property. Religious freedoms were restored and in 1988, the Russian Orthodox Church celebrated its 1000th anniversary. Meanwhile, contacts with the outside world, especially the west, began to intensify. However, all this seemingly good stuff -- especially from the western perspective -- had its downside as well. For instance, *glasnost* released decades of bitterness which had accumulated over the fifty years of Stalinist repression and terror. *Perestroika* and *glasnost* also revealed the widespread ecological damage the Soviets had caused on the environment. Gorbachev's reforms also polarized opinion in ways that even Gorbachev and his stalwart supporters could never have foreseen. All that restructuring and all that openness had increased the diversity of opinions and in the end, led to little more than nationalist and ethnic in-fighting. According to Anatoly Sobchak, liberal mayor of St. Petersburg:

*A totalitarian system leaves behind it a minefield built into both the country's social structure and the individual psychology of its citizens. And mines explode each time the system faces the danger of being dismantled and the country sees the prospect of genuine renewal.*

In other words, *glasnost* and *perestroika* were good things in themselves but too much too fast meant the danger of confusion amidst liberation.

In an effort to preserve unity by compromise, Gorbachev entered a bitter quarrel with his more radical rival, [Boris Yeltsin](#). The weakening of traditional Soviet authority and the release of "history" brought about by the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev, in the end, brought disunity. Meanwhile, Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians all demanded independence which in turn set off

similar demands among Ukrainians, Georgians, Beylorussians, Armenians and the various peoples of central Asia. By the late 1980s, inter-ethnic violence had escalated. And in 1990, the Russian Republic, the largest republic of the Soviet Union, declared its limited independence under Yeltsin, and an Anti-Reform Russian Communist Party broke off from the reformist party faction led by Gorbachev.

Gorbachev, caught in an avalanche he himself had helped to create, was willing to establish a new federal union of Soviet sovereign republics but remained opposed to the outright dissolution of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the transition to a market economy was too complex for ready and easy solutions. The production and distribution of consumer goods collapsed. Local governments hoarded essential commodities and the black market flourished as did the Russian Mafia. As the journalist David Remnick has written:

*the Communist Party apparatus was the most gigantic Mafia the world has ever known. It guarded its monopoly on power with a sham consensus and constitution and backed it up with the force of the KGB and the Interior Ministry police.*

Obviously, the spiritual rebirth and the revolution that Gorbachev had hoped for had not materialized. In October 1990, Gorbachev sadly remarked that "unfortunately, our society is not ready for the procedures of a law-based state."

In response to a crisis produced by Gorbachev, the liberals of Moscow and Leningrad pressed Yeltsin for even quicker modernization. This included a multi-party system, a flourishing market economy and increased civil liberties for all Soviet citizens. But, on the opposite side, were the Communist hardliners who were willing and eager to revive the old order, the Stalinist order, which depended on the army for restoring order. Gorbachev viewed all this with an eye toward compromise. But by early 1991, it was clear that Gorbachev had sided with the conservatives. On August 19, 1991, the conservative acted. They imprisoned Gorbachev in his Crimean vacation home and deposed him as president of the Soviet Union. They declared a state of emergency and began preparations for a new communist dictatorship. The problem was, the conservative faction was completely out of touch with popular opinion. Most citizens had enough of the party and thanks to *glasnost* and *perestroika*, had no intention of a Stalinist revival. Even the KGB defected over to Yeltsin's side. Emotions were high and the outburst spread to Moscow, Leningrad and other cities. The coup collapsed in three days and the chief victims, never to recover, were the Communist Party and the unity and existence of the Soviet Union.

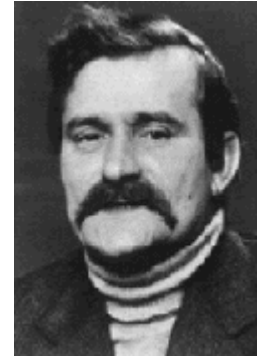
By early May 1992, twelve of fifteen republics declared their independence and the empire of the tsars and the Communists had fallen to pieces. Gorbachev had fallen victim to those forces which he had helped to release through *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The problem was that *perestroika* and *glasnost* were dynamite. They unleashed a stream of sympathetic voices at the same time that they unleashed reaction. Most revolutions have this effect. Most Russians were confused. They felt suspended between a Russia of traditional communist values and the ideals and consumer lifestyles of the west. While some favored democracy on the western model, others demanded a return to Stalinist practice.

Outside the Soviet Union, *perestroika* and *glasnost* spread among people who were resentful of Soviet domination and worried about economic collapse. In 1989 and 1990, these people showed their dislike of communist leadership and demanded what were clearly democratic reforms. Communist leaders across Eastern Europe either resigned their office or agreed to reform.

Poland took the lead. Here the population was traditionally anti-Russian. The Poles had long protested their country's economic decline. Soviet assurance to assist and massive loans from western Europe brought no relief. The slightest relaxation of Soviet control only encouraged Polish nationalism which had always been expressed with the support of the Roman Catholic Church. With the selection of Pope John Paul II in 1978, Polish nationalism surged ahead. In 1980,



workers under the leadership of a electrician, [LECH WALESKA](#), succeeded in forming an independent labor union called Solidarity. Pressured by a series of strikes, the Polish government recognized Solidarity, despite threats of Soviet intervention.



In 1981, more radical members of Solidarity began to talk about the necessity of free elections. But in December, a military dictatorship under [WOJCIECH JARUZELSKI](#) was formed and declared martial law. Walesa and others were jailed and protesting workers were dispersed by force. In 1987, Jaruzelski presented a referendum for support on economic and political reforms. Polish voters abstained or voted against him. And in 1988, Jaruzelski ended his dictatorship and started a civilian government. Meanwhile Walesa appeared on Polish television pleading for pluralism and freedom. He was, as you might expect,

supported by the Roman Catholic Church. In January 1989, Solidarity was legalized and the Communist Party retired. Solidarity triumphed in the first free election and led to a non-communist government in September 1989. Poland's economy was still poor -- inflation soared as the cost of living rose and the black market flourished. In December 1990, the Polish people elected Walesa as their president.

In May 1989, the communist bureaucracy was abolished in Hungary. By year's end there were more than fifty political parties in existence. Democracy and free enterprise were introduced and the result, as it had been in Poland, was inflation.

In East Germany, the upheaval in 1989 was even more momentous. Within a month after celebrating the 40th anniversary as a socialist workers state, and with Gorbachev in attendance as honored guest, the Communist Party collapsed.

East Germany had always been indispensable to Soviet Russia. Its industry was nationalized, its agriculture collectivized and its people regimented by the Communist Party. In June 1953, the workers of East Berlin staged an uprising. What followed was a steady exodus of skilled workers into West Germany. Three million people escaped before the East German government erected the [Berlin Wall](#) in August 1961. In 1972, *detente* allowed diplomatic relations and closer economic ties between East and West Germany. Moscow did not object. But the East Germans always looked to the West -- they wanted those jeans and televisions. By 1985, even the East Germans began to cheer Gorbachev's *perestroika* initiative. In 1989, almost 400,000 people left East Germany through the opened borders of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Meanwhile, the streets of Berlin were full of protest. On [November 6th 1989](#), the walls came tumbling down. Three days later, on November 9th, the first hole was made in the Berlin Wall and East Germans crossed into West Berlin. The East German police stood by nervously, but the Berlin wall had fallen. Gorbachev eventually approved.



The breach of the Berlin Wall had wide ramifications. In Bulgaria, the communists still maintained their authoritarian rule. [TODOR ZHIVKOV](#) was the longest-serving Communist dictator in the Soviet bloc. Under his rule, Bulgaria was a docile state until Gorbachev's message of *glasnost* and *perestroika* began to penetrate the nation. Zhivkov was vehemently opposed to Gorbachev's reform-minded spirit. But on November 10th, 1989, one day after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Zhivkov resigned. By mid-December, a multi-party system was in place.

The end of the year was the final spurt of the "revolution of 1989." Romania's [NICOLAE CEAUSESCU](#) paid no attention to Gorbachev's reforms or the past events of 1989. He imposed

poverty on his people and strengthened his power with the assistance of his wife and family. In 1988, he began to systematically level peasant villages in order to build what he called "agrotowns." Meanwhile, his government brutally suppressed all opposition in gross violation of human rights. He could have cared less about the events of 1989 -- he was the last true Stalinist hard-liner. On December 17th, 1989, he ordered his troops to fire upon anti-government demonstrators but four days later, the tide had turned against him. A mass demonstration on his behalf in Bucharest was disrupted by student protesters. The crowd followed the students -- even the army turned against Ceausescu. On Christmas Day, Ceausescu and his wife were tried and executed and the last Stalinist dictator had fallen.



It was at this time that Czechoslovakia joined the crusade against Soviet communism. The hard line Czech communists had held power since the events of the Prague Spring in 1968. But events in Poland and Hungary coupled with the nation's economic decline, increased public pressure for change. Strikes, public demonstrations and the circulation of *samizdat*, or self-printed books, made the situation positively explosive. Early in 1989, anti-government demonstrations escalated -- the government repressed them. [VACLAV HAVEL](#) was jailed. But when protests again erupted in the fall, the government faltered. Havel was released and became the leader of the opposition group, the Civic Forum. Faced with massive demonstrations in Prague -- all shown on television -- and urged on by Gorbachev to initiate democratic reforms, the Czech communist leaders resigned on November

24th. A month later Vaclav Havel was elected as president of Czechoslovakia.

Viewed in their totality, the events in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe in 1989 had taken a surprisingly peaceful course. Gorbachev himself was partly responsible for this. He was willing to admit that Soviet satellite states had to go their own way. Under the leadership of intellectuals and priests, the people were unified against foreign domination and economic turmoil. Like Gorbachev, Eastern European Communist rulers had lost all confidence in Marxist-Leninist ideology. Finally, the material plenty of the West appeared in sharp contrast to the depravity of the East. And the people knew it! Communist regimes could not offer an alternative to western television.

When all is said and done, the revolution of 1989 meant a victory for western government and ways of life. What THAT means, however, can be debated endlessly. By 1990, with the revolution over, euphoria vanished. There were now new problems. How could these nations, under the thumb of Soviet rule for four decades, adapt themselves to democratic institutions and market economies? Was it even possible? How could these nations deal with their own history, a history rewritten by the communist party? Meanwhile, *glasnost* and *perestroika* had revealed the presence of widespread corruption and environmental destruction.

Politicians found it difficult to establish consensus in the face of economic disaster. Apart from the unification of East and West Germany in 1990, all Eastern European countries faced a myriad of new problems: rising inflation, falling production, unemployment, food shortages, corruption and ethnic conflict. It was the chaos that surrounded the collapse of the Soviet Union -- a collapse unwittingly unleashed by Gorbachev -- that compounded the many problems of Eastern Europe.

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