The Soviet Bloc Unwinds: Crash Course European History #46

Crash Course: European History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=aStaPgdvIdI
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/aStaPgdvIdI

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

===== Watch our videos and review your learning with The Crash Course app. Supplemental content is now available for these courses.

Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History. So, we previously discussed the crackdown on dissent in Czechoslovakia following the so-called Prague Spring.

Soviet tanks filled the streets, along with some 650 thousand soldiers, to ensure that Czechoslovakia and the Eastern Bloc as a whole remained communist.

But in the wake of this crackdown, both Eastern and Western Europe faced continued upheaval and, in the end, the center could not hold in Eastern Europe. Revolution was coming once more.

[INTRO SONG]

So, a lot went into this obviously. For one thing, prosperity faltered when, in 1973 and again in 1979, some of the oil-producing countries in OPEC raised prices on oil and then embargoed its sale to Europe and the United States, which led to high unemployment and inflation, a phenomenon known as stagflation.

But also, both the superpowers were facing elements of corruption and incompetence among leadership while colonial and proxy wars were draining resources. And Japan, South Korea, and other Pacific -rim nations were spending their money on innovation instead of war, so they began to outstrip the Western powers in modernization and growth.

And the result of all this was a declining standard of living and continuing civilian discontent in Europe. Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the U.K. in 1979 and addressed the aforementioned stagflation-situation by cutting back on welfare state benefits, including support for education, so that taxes on the wealthy could be reduced.

The idea was that rich people could then use their funds to innovate – restoring prosperity. Besides, she added, poor people and immigrants didn't contribute much to growth, while the wealthy did. This policy was called neo-liberalism, that is, a return to the liberal individualistic =====

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

polices of the 19th century, on which Britain's pre-welfare state prosperity had been based.

U.S. President Ronald Reagan followed Thatcher's lead, as did Helmut Kohl of Germany – although in Kohl's case without the race-baiting that Thatcher used.

The Soviet Bloc was also struggling with its economy and with multifaceted resistance**.** For example, in 1973, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published The Gulag Archipelago based on massive evidence from prisoners, including his own experience. Its detailed description of the degradation, torture, and murder in Soviet prison camps dried up much of the global support for Soviet communism.

And the publication came amidst ongoing protests across Eastern Europe. In 1970, for example, the Polish government introduced a wage freeze and an increase in food prices at Christmas.

Workers mounted strikes in response, often violent ones, and hurled anger at the government. The head of state's claim that "I am a worker just like you," did quiet the situation, but only temporarily.

Beginning in February 1971 and into the 1980s, women took to the streets to oppose government price increases. When the government asked, "Will you help us," women textile workers famously shouted their refusal.

The government borrowed funds on the international market to provide more food and appeal to people's patriotism. And the ostensibly atheistic regime even appealed to people's support for the Catholic church.

But on that front, problems arose almost immediately because in 1978 the Polish archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyla, became Pope John Paul the Second. And he endorsed Catholicism's objections to and activism against communism.

In 1980, the Polish government attempted to pay its growing foreign debt by raising prices, and that led to new strikes and to the formation of a new workers' group called Solidarity, led by crane operator Anna Walentynowicz and former employee of GdaÅ„sk, Lech Walesa.

Walesa became the leader of Solidarity and despite the massive support from women that kept Solidarity

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

alive, men saw themselves as the most important members: "Women, don't interfere with us – we are fighting for Poland," they shouted.

And then, as women struck in **[Wooch?](?~**4:10**)** with signs reading "Hungry people of the world unite" the government declared martial law in December 1981 and began imprisoning dissidents.

But the government had not heard the last of the Polish people. Czechoslovakian dissidents also took to protesting in the 1970s and beyond, issuing charter 77 that stated objections to communist rule. Hungarians protested ecologically unsound projects. And East Germans held regular weekly peace vigils, mostly sponsored by churches.

Alright, let's go to the thought bubble.

===== Thought Bubble(4:42) =====

An entirely different group was also allied with these same churches: punk rockers. Beginning in the 1970s, individual teenagers in East Germany expressed their dissatisfaction with government control and secret police informants by adopting the punk identity.

They'd first seen Punk youth in magazines and heard their music on illegal cassettes smuggled from Western Europe.
The Sex Pistols, a British band, showed these East German youths new ways of dressing and new rebellious attitudes and disrespectful behavior. Punks congregated and multiplied in large cities, like Berlin and Leipzig, as well as in smaller towns, eventually numbering in the thousands.

Their bizarre ripped clothing, and spiked and dyed hair, body piercings, and habit of squatting – that is, living in abandoned buildings – caught the eye of the Stasi – or secret police.

The Stasi beat punks bloody, fired punks' parents from their jobs, and threw punk teenagers into horrific prisons for months on end.

Churchs took punk kids in, even opening their doors to punk rock

shows, where the lyrics often articulated dissent. The East German punk band Namenlos sang,

"Minefields and barbed wire so nobody risks going over, / Walls and electric fences, they're snatching away our freedom."

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

"Automatic firing devices and minefields so we like it here / In our beautiful country, In our beautiful country."

Namenlos's members ended up sentenced to 18 months in prison for their music, which included aggressively anti-Stasi songs like "Nazis Back in East Berlin," which incidentally is a properly good punk rock song.

I'll put a link in the description.

===== NewSection (6:21) =====

Thanks, Thought Bubble. I regret that we have to leave punk rock music history and return to non-musical history.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the general secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR. Like Thatcher, he knew his economy was in trouble.

Gorbachev's parents had been poor peasants and he had spent his youth helping his family survive. And his supporters hoped that he would improve and modernize the economy and the overall quality of life in a society where life had, in many ways, stagnated.

One prominent problem was alcoholism, which was drastically cutting lives short and promoting violence, especially domestic abuse.

So Gorbachev sought out not just economic and political reforms, but also moral ones. He highlighted the need for more openness, known as "glasnost" in government and industrial dealings. Censorship, for one, needed to stop and just as important if not more so the economy needed to be updated to become competitive with other economies around the world.

Gorbachev was an expert in agricultural policy, and he had traveled widely and studied the West. And in response to what he saw, he established a policy of "perestroika," meaning the reform of economic life so that it was freer and more efficient.

Now many Soviet officials opposed the political transformations needed to bring about these reforms, but Gorbachev summarily dismissed them. He also pulled back from the disastrous war in Afghanistan and the costly arms race. The USSR spent 15 to 20 percent of its gross domestic product on its military compared to about half that in the United States.

And these new policies drew Western leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan to embrace Gorbachev

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

as a potential friend, rather than as an adversary.

Gorbachev had a keen understanding of Western celebrity culture, and so he traveled to Western capitals, including the United States, where he was feted along with his stylish and cerebral wife. Raisa Gorbachev became a darling of glossy magazines, although at home she was often scorned for her fancy dress and, as one critic put it, "well-manicured fingers decorated with diamonds bought with our money."

Gorbachev's policies also illuminated many of the unpleasant facts of life in the USSR, including the behavior of its officials. The accident at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl is probably the most famous example. It was followed by a bureaucratic cover-up that kept people from leaving the area soon enough. And all of that underscored, for citizens, the need for glasnost.

And as censorship eased, complaints about official failures grew louder. One mother of two rebelled at the cost-cutting policy of reusing syringes at hospitals, even as HIV infections were soaring in the USSR. "Why should little kids have to pay for the criminal actions of our Ministry of Health?" she asked.

Others wrote to complain of long lines at perpetually under stocked grocery stores.

Liberated politicians also began directing criticism, both at communism in general and at Gorbachev himself. In the fall of 1987, one of Gorbachev's supposed allies, Boris Yeltsin, quit the governing Politburo after denouncing perestroika as a farce.

In the past, Yeltsin's political daring might have consigned him to oblivion - or Siberia - but instead, it showed people a path to opposition. By the spring of 1989, not a single communist won a place in Moscow's local elections.

Still, to many people, Gorbachev meant freedom. Like in 1989, after his visit to Beijing, Chinese students gathered in Tiananmen Square to demand liberty and rights from the aging communist leadership. But their movement was brutally crushed with still unknown numbers killed.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Meanwhile, that spring the Polish government had legalized the Solidarity group and in 1989's parliamentary elections all Communist Party candidates were defeated, bringing their rule to an end.

In Hungary, hundreds of thousands commemorated the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, while the communist holiday of May 1st was boycotted. The Hungarian Parliament ousted the Communist Party while citizens destroyed communist symbols around the country. And the fact that Gorbachev decided *not* to send troops encouraged even more dramatic scenes as 1989 progressed.

On the borders of Hungary and Austria, officials let the assembled East German masses through, while in East Berlin, people sought to cross the wall into the Western part of the city. On November 9th, officials in Berlin let them pass as people chanted "We are one people." In greeting, West Berliners handed out bananas, a luxury few East Berliners had enjoyed.

But communism fell apart differently in different parts of the Eastern Bloc. Like Czechoslovakia had a Velvet Revolution, that is one accompanied with comparatively little violence, while in Romania, people captured and executed the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena – both of whom were reviled not just for their violence, but also for their arrogance and greed.

In Yugoslavia, politicians had long incited ethnic hatreds in order to keep oppositions from unifying. One such politician, Slobodan Milosevic claimed that Serbs were an oppressed group, a claim that helped him gain leadership of the Serb portion of Yugoslavia. But opposing Serb domination in 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared

their independence, which led to other states within Yugoslavia following suit.

During the 1990s, terrible violence followed as civilians died by the tens of thousands in a war we'll talk about in a future episode. In the USSR, perestroika's failure to rebuild the economy eventually encouraged a group of powerful communist officials to stage a coup in 1991.

===== (12:00) to (13:59) =====

The immediate cause was the Russian Parliament's election of Boris Yeltsin as president of the Russian Republic instead of a communist candidate. Yeltsin stood on a tank in front of the Russian Republic's parliament building and called for mass resistance and, in the end, the coup failed.

After that, the USSR dissolved as people ripped away at Soviet symbols, and the USSR itself ripped apart. In September 1991, the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia declared their independence after the USSR made ill-considered attempts at quashing opposition. Bloodshed flowed as other republics peeled away, until the USSR itself officially ended at midnight on December 31st, 1991.

Although 12 of the 15 former Soviet republics did come together in a Commonwealth of Independent States, which participated in – I believe – exactly one Olympics. We'll discuss the many consequences of the Soviet collapse more in future episodes but for now, I want to leave you with a personal memory of history.

I was 12 years old when I watched on TV as people celebrated atop the Berlin Wall together, sharing wine and embracing each other. It seemed utterly impossible. That wall had been a metaphor for the absolute intractability of the conflict between Eastern and Western Europe. The wall had seemed permanent.

But of course, nothing is permanent in history.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

===== Outro (13:34) =====

Thanks so much for watching Crash Course, which is filmed here in the Jaden Smith Studios in Indianapolis and made possible by all of our patrons at patreon.com/crashcourse

We got lots of other Crash Courses for you to watch. Check some out. Thanks again for watching and as they say in my home town, "Don't forget to be awesome."