

How secure was the Soviet Union's control of Eastern Europe?



Big Picture Summary / narrative:

This is the 'big picture'

- The USSR (*Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, CCCP in Russian*) after WW2 was a collection of 15 republics, with Russia being the most important.
- After WW2, communist governments were 'elected' (salami tactics) or 'forced onto' most east European countries.
- They became '**satellite states**' in the USSR's '**sphere of influence**' – not directly ruled from Moscow, but heavily influenced, politically, economically and socially.
- Life 'behind the Iron Curtain' (As Churchill put it) was tightly controlled with censorship, secret police and industry and agriculture meeting the needs of the USSR.
- In **1955** these satellite states formed a military alliance called the **Warsaw Pact**.
- In **1956, in Hungary an uprising** against the unpopular communist government occurred. When the new leader (Nagy) said they would leave the Warsaw Pact, Khrushchev sent in the tanks.
- In **1961** increasing numbers of East Germans were fleeing communist rule via West **Berlin**. The USSR built a wall which stood for 28 years.
- In **Czechoslovakia in 1968** there were mass protests against harsh communist life – a call for reforms (the Prague Spring) was quickly put down.
- In the **early 80's** protesters in Poland complained about food shortages and high prices. A trade union, **Solidarity** was formed but a new leader imposed martial law and Solidarity was banned.
- **1985 was a turning point:** Mikhail Gorbachev became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR. He introduced two key **reforming** ideas, **glasnost** (openness) and **perestroika** (restructuring)
- Gorbachev also told the eastern European countries that the USSR **would no longer intervene in their internal affairs** of state AND he began **withdrawing Red Army** troops.
- Unsure at first, east Europeans began to dismantle the 'iron curtain' and many went to the West. The Berlin Wall was dismantled in November 1989.
- Gorbachev received the Nobel Prize for Peace (for effectively ending the Cold War) but he was not popular with hardliners in the USSR who attempted a coup.
- The coup failed and the **USSR fragmented** into 15 states – Gorbachev resigned as First Secretary on 25 December 1991.



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Focus on: The Hungarian Uprising

When was the Hungarian Uprising? What was it?

- Originated in June 1956: protests against the hard-line communist regime of Matyas **RAKOSI** (A cruel and brutal leader)
- After much rioting / protesting the leadership was changed briefly to **Ernst Gero**
- Gero was not much more popular! He was replaced by **Imre Nagy**.

What made Hungary think they could be more independent from the USSR?

- 1955 Khrushchev met with Tito in Yugoslavia and talked of '**Peaceful coexistence**' (Note that Yugoslavia was not part of the Soviet bloc – it was an independent communist state)
- 1956 Khrushchev allowed the Poles to appoint a more moderate communist leader after protests – **Gomulka**. They thought they could do the same.
- 1956 February - Khrushchev made a speech (Known as the 'Secret Speech') to the Communist Party **denouncing Stalin's regime**. (Became known as de-Stalinisation). This gave the impression Khrushchev was easing off on Soviet control over the satellite states.

Did talk of 'peaceful coexistence' mean an end to the cold war?

- No – it really meant 'peaceful competition' with the West. The arms race continued for example.
- Also – it did not mean he would allow the security of the Soviet Union to be compromised in anyway (which explains his response to the Hungarian Uprising)

What the Hungarian's disliked about communist (Soviet) control?

- The suppression of their religion – they were Catholic
- Poor standard of living / poor housing
- The presence of the Red Army
- No freedom of speech
- The secret police (The AVH) – over 100,000 in prison + 350,00 purges
- Imposition of Russian language and culture - **Russification** (Hungary was a proud nation that had fought against the Soviets in WW2)

What was the name of the much-hated Hungarian leader? What happened to him?

- Matyas **Rakosi** (Leader from 1947) – 'Stalinist' in his approach
- Moscow forced him to retire (June 1956) – replaced him with Ernst Gero

What happened on 23rd October 1956?

- Students in the capital, Budapest demanded an end to Soviet occupation.
- They called for 'true socialism'
- They chanted, 'Russians go home', 'Away with Gero', 'Long live Nagy'
- Stalin's statues were pulled down.

- The Police made arrests and opened fire on the students

What happened on 24th October 1956?

- The Soviet (Red Army) troop presence increased - Soviet troops guarded key buildings and roads.
- Soldiers and workers joined the student protesters.
- Moscow tried to ease tensions by appointing **Imre Nagy** (moderate socialist)

What did Imre Nagy call for?

- Reforms to the communist party system
- Free elections
- Impartial courts
- The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary

What did Imre Nagy do that caused Khrushchev to oppose him?

- On November 1 - He called for Hungary's removal from the Warsaw Pact (The Eastern European defensive alliance established in 1955) - this was a 'huge step'

Why was this demand unacceptable to Khrushchev?

- It would compromise the USSR's security - creating a 'hole' in the 'buffer zone'
- Khrushchev feared this would lead to other Eastern (satellite) states wanting to withdraw which would destabilise the Soviet bloc'.

How did the Soviet authorities respond to events?

- November 4 - Soviet tanks (1000) ordered in to fight the 'rebels'
- They claimed they were justified in order to defend the Soviet Bloc (He probably had a point!)

What was the outcome of events?

- Two weeks of fierce fighting
- 3000 Hungarians killed
- 200,000 fled the country
- Hungary remained a member of the Warsaw Pact
- Imre Nagy was arrested and executed 2 years later (He had tried, but failed to flee to Yugoslavia)

What was the response of the West to events in Hungary?

- It did nothing more than 'condemn' Soviet actions.
- The West was distracted by the Suez Canal crisis between Egypt, Britain and France (Fighting over control / access rights)
- President Eisenhower was distracted by the US Presidential election
- The US policy was 'containment' - they could do little as this was a satellite state of the Soviet Union, behind the 'Iron Curtain' - intervention would most likely lead to war

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Focus on: The Berlin Wall

Why was Berlin a divided city?

- After WWII at Yalta Germany and Berlin were divided into FOUR occupation zones.
- Berlin lay wholly within the Eastern zone of Germany (Controlled by the USSR)
- The ACC (allied Control Council) was meant to 'govern' Germany until they could agree on Germany's future. (They couldn't) and so it became a source of tension.
- The West merged their occupation zones (Trizonia) effectively creating a political and economic 'union' – a constitution was drawn up for a West German State (FRG)
- This resulted in the Berlin blockade and airlift.
- The Soviets responded by withdrawing from the ACC and drew up their own constitution for an East German State (GDR)

What was the Berlin Wall?

- It started as a barbed wire fence but quickly became a concrete wall around West Berlin almost 155km long.
- Its construction began August 13, 1961, and came down in 1989.
- It was protected with watch towers, barbed / razor wire, dogs, and later 55,000 land mines!

Why was the Wall built?

- East Berlin was becoming an embarrassment for the USSR by 1961 – undermining communism
- The West had created a 'democratic enclave' in the heart of the Eastern Bloc!
- Berlin was effectively an 'open border' (escape hatch) 2,000 refugees were escaping via East Berlin every day (By 1961, 3.5 million people (20% of the East German population) had fled)
- Skilled and educated workers were leaving – 'Skills / Brain drain'
- Khrushchev's ultimatum (at the Vienna Summit (June 1961), and not the first one!) that the West should leave Berlin was ignored by President Kennedy.
- To prevent East Germans from fleeing, they built a wall!

What was the impact of the Wall?

- It eased tensions between the East and West (JFK said 'it was better than a war').
- It was hailed as propaganda victory for the West and Democracy – in 1963 JFK went to the wall and made a speech declaring 'Ich bin ein Berliner' (effectively saying I am a [citizen] of Berlin)
- The Soviet's tried to defend it by calling it the 'anti-fascist rampart' (It may have led to Khrushchev putting missiles on Cuba – to try and improve his standing!)

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Focus on: the Prague Spring

When and where was the Prague Spring?

- 1968 January to August
- Czechoslovakia (Capital – Prague)

What was the Prague Spring?

- An attempt by Czechs to liberalise their lives by introducing political, social and economic reform.
- It was partly in response to growing discontent with falling living standards and more restrictive political control.

Who was the much hated leader of Czechoslovakia that Brezhnev replaced?

- Anton Novotny.
- Considered a 'hardline' communist. 'Little Stalin'
- Novotny had invited Brezhnev to Prague hoping for support: Brezhnev, surprisingly, replaced him in the hope that events in Czechoslovakia would settle.

Who replaced him?

- Alexander Dubcek: a committed member of the communist party.
- Proper title: First Secretary of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party!
- January 1968 to April 1969.

What happened between January and August 1968?

- Dubcek introduced many reforms: freedom of speech, release of political prisoners, travel made easier, non communist political parties legalised etc.

What term was given to the reforms and what did this imply?

- **Socialism with a human face**
- Meaning - retain the main principles of socialism but get rid of the oppressive elements- e.g strict censorship, powerful secret police, lack of individual liberty.
- Dubcek said he would **not** follow an independent foreign policy nor would Czechoslovakia leave the Warsaw Pact or COMECON



Why did Brezhnev order tanks and 500,000 Warsaw Pact troops into Prague on 20/21 August 1968?

- Moscow was still concerned the reforms would weaken communist control in the Eastern Bloc (satellite states). Czechs were becoming too westernized.
- + Hardliners within the Czech central committee of the communist party did not like what Dubcek was doing. They sent a letter to Brezhnev for assistance.
- This gave Brezhnev the perfect excuse / justification.

- It became known as the **Brezhnev Doctrine**: the USSR had the right to intervene militarily if the unity of the Eastern Bloc / Warsaw Pact was threatened.
- Brezhnev declared that the USSR would not allow the countries of Eastern Europe to reject communism, "even if it meant a third world war."
- To the USSR it was important to hold onto Czechoslovakia which had the strongest industry in the Eastern bloc.

How did the Czechs respond to the invasion?

- **Passive resistance**: standing in front of tanks, offering flowers to Soviet troops.
- There was no mass uprising or violence.
- They jeered and chanted at the invaders, daubed walls with anti-Soviet slogans and painted out all signposts **except** those pointing to Moscow.
- However, Jan Palach, a student set fire to himself (self immolation & became a martyr)



What was the response of the West?

- Condemnation- but nothing more.
- Events were taking place in the Soviet 'sphere of influence'.
- US policy did not include the rollback of communism.

What were the main outcomes.

- Dubcek forced to resign from power (April 1969) and **Gustav Husak** (a hardliner) became leader and restored an authoritarian government
- c.100 Czechs were killed, c 500 injured
- The reforms were suppressed (The communist called this process: **normalisation!**)

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Focus on: Poland and Solidarity

What was Solidarity?

- It was a **trade union** formed in the **early 1980s** (An alliance of workers, intellectuals and the Catholic Church)
- Originated at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, Poland
- Led by **Lech Walsea** (An electrician)
- At its height it had over 9 million members

Why was Solidarity formed?

- In response to widespread **dissatisfaction with communist rule** (similar story to Hungary and Czechoslovakia)
- The Polish economy was doing badly - Main protest over food shortages and increasing prices of food and lack of consumer goods.

Was this the first time there had been protests in Poland?

- No – there were riots in 1956
- These were 'subdued' as Khrushchev introduced a new 'more moderate' leader – Gomułka & Poland introduced a number of economic reforms moving away from rigid communist doctrine.
- There was no attempt to leave the Warsaw Pact, the Red Army remained in place and Poland continued to form part of the 'buffer zone' between the East and West. (So, no Soviet invasion needed!)
- However, between 1956 to 1980s, there were ongoing protests.
- Stalin is reputed to have said, 'communism suits Poland like a saddle suits a pig'!

What did Solidarity demand?

- **August 1980 - 21 demands**, including lower food prices but also the right to organise free trade unions and the right to strike.
- They also began a campaign for ALL workers in the Eastern Bloc.

What was the Polish Government's response?

- They agreed to the 21 demands **BUT**
- February 1981 the leadership changed to General Jaruzelski
- Under pressure from the Soviet Union (which held military manoeuvres on the Polish border) – Jaruzelski imposed **martial law** (temporary rule by military authorities of a designated area in time of emergency)
- Lech Walesa and 10,000 solidarity members / leaders were imprisoned!
- Solidarity was 'suspended'

Why did the Soviets want Solidarity 'suspended'?

- Solidarity had become more **political** ('From bread we will get freedom' was one of their slogans) – it was highlighting the **failings of communism** in Poland including inefficiency and corruption
- The economic situation was worsening – unemployment rising, wages low, rationing was in place.
- The Soviet Union felt the Polish leadership was losing control – they were concerned '**people power**,' would overwhelm and reject the communist government.

What happened in 1985?

- Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the USSR
- **He said he would not interfere in Eastern Europe**
- He had two liberal policies – **Glasnost** (openness) and **Perestroika** (restructuring)
- Poland had free elections in August 1989 + elected a non-communist government (The beginning of the end of communism)

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Focus on: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Collapse of Communism

Who was Mikhail Gorbachev?

- He was leader of the Soviet Union from 1985 (replacing Andropov)
- He was a Ukrainian Russian
- He was an educated man – he studied law
- His grandfather had been sent to prison by Stalin! (For resisting Stalin's policies)



What did he believe in?

- He was a committed socialist – but felt communism should make life better for people.
- He was a 'realist' – he saw the Soviet System and communism needed reforming.
- He was an optimist – he thought reforms would make the people of the USSR 'proud' again.
- He DID NOT set out to dismantle communism OR the USSR.

What were his main policies?

- **Glasnost** – 'openness' – which called for more open 'debate' and 'discussion' about the governments policies (Like freedom of speech where communist policies could be criticised)
- **Perestroika** – 'restructuring', of the economy. It allowed 'market forces' to be introduced. (Buying and selling for profit – capitalism)
- **Non-intervention in the eastern Bloc** – He told the leaders of the Eastern bloc the USSR would not intervene in their affairs of state. (Most hard line communists didn't believe him)
- He wanted to reduce spending on defence and the arms race – the Red Army began to shrink.

Who was Ronald Reagan and why did he matter?

- In 1981 Ronald Reagan became US President (Until 1988)
- RR was a committed anti-communist who thought he could 'win the cold war' (He thought 'détente' of the 1970s was like 'appeasement' before WWII.
- RR increased US spending on the Arms race (ending détente) and introduced the SDI (Strategic defence initiative – STAR WARS! The US developed the neutron bomb.
- In spite of this RR and Gorbachev developed a strong relationship. Margaret Thatcher, Britain's PM said of Gorbachev, 'I like Mr Gorbachev, we can do business together'

The Communists called the neutron bomb a capitalist bomb as it killed people but left buildings standing!

What happened in 1986 at Chernobyl, in the Ukraine? Why was it significant?

- In April 1986, the Ukrainian nuclear power plant at Chernobyl went into meltdown and exploded.
- Gorbachev approved a cover up that denied there had been any radiation leak but it was clear to Western powers there had been. The cost of containing and decontaminating the area was an estimated eighteen million roubles and almost bankrupted the USSR.
- Chernobyl was a powerful symbol of the problems in communism.

Why did communism in eastern Europe collapse in 1989?

- Gorbachev's reforms were applied to the satellite countries
- In 1988 he told them he was withdrawing the Red Army from Warsaw pact countries.
- He said the USSR would not intervene to 'prop up' failing / unpopular communist governments!
- This triggered changes in Eastern European countries.

What happened in the Eastern Bloc as a result of the reforms?

- In Hungary the barbed wire borders with Austria were removed.
- In Poland – free elections were held and Solidarity candidates won most of the seats
- Thousands of East German holiday makers (in Hungary and Czechoslovakia) refused to return home! They went to Austria!
- Soldiers refuse to fire on demonstrators in East Germany when ordered to by the hard-line leader Erich Honecker
- November - East Germans marched in their thousands to the Berlin Wall. The guards joined them. The Berlin wall is dismantled
- Czechoslovakia opened its borders with the West and permitted new political parties. (The velvet revolution)
- Hungary – the communist party became the Socialist Party and called for free elections
- The Baltic states declare their independence from the USSR

What happened to the USSR 1990/91?

- It collapsed – the 15 republics separated!
- Boris Yeltsin was elected President of Russia – he said the USSR should become independent republics – so they did!
- July 1990 Ukraine declared its independence.

What happened to Gorbachev and Communism?

- Hard-line communists tried to carry out a coup and arrested Gorbachev to try to restore the USSR

- Huge crowds in Moscow opposed the coup – it collapsed.
- Gorbachev was released, he went on state television **25 December 1991**, announced his resignation as First Secretary of the communist party and formally declared the end of the USSR.