
UNIT 14 DISINTEGRATION OF THE SOCIALIST BLOC

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to examine the reasons which led to the disintegration of the Socialist Bloc and to trace the sequence of events which culminated in the end of the bipolar world order. After going through this unit should be able to

- identify the internal and external factors, that have led to the collapse of Socialist bloc, and
- explain the manner in which each country of the Socialist bloc witnessed the decline and fall of communist parties.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

The events of 1989, which culminated in the disintegration of the Socialist bloc, have been described as "an earth quake" in world politics. Indeed, the sheer speed of those events left those who were observing the same as well as those who participated in them absolutely stunned. In fact, the pace with which the communist regimes in the socialist bloc fell one after another itself became a crucial part of the process of change. From mid 1989 and especially in the last quarter of 1989, almost every day there were reports of demonstrations, strikes, protests, fall of leaders and Governments. The entire atmosphere was charged with excitement and expectancy and high drama which cannot be fully conveyed in its description and analysis. The other aspect of this integration was that while the end result of the upheavals was the same, i.e. the fall of the ruling classes, there are a number of differences among the various countries as regards the

manner in which they fell. Thus, for example in Poland, the revolutionary changes were the result of prolonged and sustained resistance of solidarity, supported by the Catholic Church, in Hungary, they were the result of power struggle within the political elite; in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the regime was overthrown by peaceful mass demonstrations but in Romania, the government of Ceaucescu was toppled by a bloody revolution and in Bulgaria the changes came about slowly sluggishly.

14.2 INTERNAL REASONS FOR THE DISINTEGRATION

14.2.1 Historical

Although the final disintegration of the Socialist bloc took a few months in the latter half of 1989, the basic reasons for the collapse can be traced to the period when, more than forty years earlier, communist rule was imposed in these countries during Stalin's time. This fact of forcible imposition of a system of government and an ideology, and the lack of democratic means in this had alienated the citizens of these countries and the feeling grew stronger with the passage of time.

14.2.2 Cultural

The countries of the Socialist bloc could neither compete in the new fields of consumer culture, the third industrial revolution and the speed of information technology, nor could they constitute an alternative block which could insulate itself from the capitalist world as was possible at one time in history when the "iron curtain" descended across Europe after World War II. They simply lagged behind, condemned to only copy from the west. In the most crucial field of all, communications, it became more and more possible for people in the Socialist bloc countries to hear and see what was happening in the outside world. The impact of West German television in much of East Germany and Czechoslovakia is an example of this. Pop music provided a direct means of reaching the young in the Socialist world. With higher levels of education and increasing opportunities for travel, the comparison between living standard and political conditions in the socialist and advanced capitalist countries became more obvious. It was this comparative, rather than absolute failure that provided the basis for the collapse; not only did it generate discontent with the Socialist system which was increasingly seen as bankrupt, but it also destroyed the belief that the Socialist system could in any way catch up with the capitalist West, let alone overtake it.

14.2.3 Political

The discontent generated by this failure led to a widespread discrediting of the ruling Communist parties and its leaders which in turn led to an erosion of their legitimacy to rule. The fact that, historically, these regimes had been imposed forcibly during the post World War II period, and that they had not been democratically elected, formed the basis for the simmering discontent among the people. The economic failures brought their discontent into sharper focus and the authoritarian nature of the rule made the people generally question the legitimacy of the Communists parties to govern and dictate. Economic failure not only stimulated but also consolidated the societal tensions and opposition in most of the East European countries and it finally erupted in a major upsurge of nationalism in the different countries. It brought together workers and intellectuals, many young people and all sorts of underground organisations, and this unity

proved to be an extremely effective and strong threat to the ruling elite. It must be kept in mind that in different countries, there were different degrees of unity and cooperation among these sections. Even those groups which had formerly supported the communist regimes now joined ranks with the opposition.

In some countries, such as East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland for e.g., as a result of all these pressures and lack of support, and in the face of mounting economic crisis, the ruling party began to lose confidence in its ability to rule. Whereas, in the sixties and seventies, whenever there had been mass demonstrations or opposition, the Communist Party had not hesitated to use force to suppress the threat to its rule, now in the late eighties, most of these ruling elites found it difficult to use force to maintain its rule. This inability to use force had both internal and external causes.

14.2.4 Economic

It has been pointed out that the most fundamental and all-encompassing reason was the failure of these countries to live on to their promise of "catching up with and overtaking capitalism" in political and economic terms. It was a multifaceted failure in which the most crucial aspect was a pervasive economic failure. Not only were these countries unable to catch up with the West in narrow, quantitative terms such as industrial output, technological changes and food production, but also, in more general terms were unable to raise standards of living and meet the rising popular expectations, especially in the newly arisen consumerism and popular culture where the contrast with the capitalist West became more pronounced.

Undoubtedly, this was the most important cause and it has been argued by many experts that if drastic economic reforms had been initiated, the other problems could have been contained to some degree. Economic success could have possibly made the sociocultural and political issues less acute and could have made the management of the discontent somewhat easier.

Uptill now, we have been discussing the domestic causes. Now we shall turn to the external factors.

Check Your Progress 1

Note : i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answer with the model answers given at the end of this unit.

1) Which was the most important internal factor in the disintegration of the Socialist Bloc ?

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2) How did cultural factors generate and increase opposition in the countries of Eastern Europe ?

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14.3 EXTERNAL REASONS FOR THE DISINTEGRATION

14.3.1 Role of the USSR

The most significant of the external factors was the role and politics of the erstwhile USSR. More than six years after the disintegration of the Socialist Bloc and five years after the break up of the Soviet Union, it is possible to state that Gorbachev's policies of **Glasnost** and **Perestroika** in the Soviet Union, made the upheavals in East Europe both possible and successful. Of course, we cannot say that Gorbachev had known or anticipated the chain reaction that took place – but certainly, he was totally incapable of stopping or controlling what he had started. Gorbachev wanted to reform socialism and he was indeed successful to the extent that a great many changes came about in the Soviet Union. He was responsible for introducing political reforms and greater democracy in the political system of the Soviet Union and countries of Eastern Europe. On the one hand democracy – of the Western capitalist kind – produced a great enthusiasm among the youth, the opposition groups and associations and those sections of political and social groups which were desiring reforms. On the other hand it dealt a blow to the more conservative elements. The demand for reforms soon snowballed into a demand for an all-embracing, extensive reform of the Communist political system.

There can be no doubt now that the most crucial decision on the part of the Soviet leadership, particularly Gorbachev, which had the greatest demoralizing effect on the Communist regimes in East Europe, was the decision to revoke the Brezhnev Doctrine. Certainly, in the ultimate analysis, the ruling regime of the Socialist bloc was overthrown or replaced by powerful mass movements, but they would never have taken place without the change in Soviet policy towards its satellite states. In November 1988, Gorbachev announced in the United Nations the decision to unilaterally reduce the size of the Soviet armed forces and to withdraw 50,000 troops from the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The Soviet troops would no longer intervene in these countries whenever there arose any threat to the Communist regimes in power. These regimes could now no longer depend on external support in times of crisis. Gorbachev's change of policy became the indispensable precondition for the changes to occur, since the regimes could now no longer go on ruling in the old way and the opposition groups would not have to fear the use of external force.

From the above it should not be understood that there was no opposition to dissent in East Europe during the Communist Party rule, before Gorbachev's November 1988 decision. There was opposition, but it was fragmented and not very strongly organised. Moreover, the Communist Party was in complete and strict control of the country. During the second half of the eighties, opposition acquired form, purpose and some order. And ultimately the Gorbachev factor became responsible for strengthening the forces of change and bringing them together, inspired by his role as a radical reformer of the system. Poland had already had a long period of opposition movements led by Solidarity; there was some opposition in Hungary but it was not very significant; in Czechoslovakia and the GDR, opposition had existed for a long time but it was mainly confined to intellectuals and its links with the larger masses were very weak. In Bulgaria and Romania, where the regimes had been most repressive, there was hardly any active opposition. But in the latter half of 1988 and 1989, the dissent movements and opposition became very active, began multiplying and in a surprisingly short

period, became a tidal wave which speedily and conclusively swept away the old regimes. As we mentioned in the first paragraph, both the time in which these events took place as well as the manner in which they occurred, were different in all the countries. What took a year in Poland and Hungary, took a few weeks in the GDR, a few bloodless days in Czechoslovakia and a few bloody days in Romania, while in Bulgaria, the orthodox Communist rulers went quietly in a couple of months. Looking back we can see that the rapid expulsion of the Communist Party and the total rejection of its role in society (which had been one of complete domination) was the one common factor in all these countries – and also the most remarkable. For it was with the weakening of these parties, that the popular forces and pluralistic elements came to the front. And, by withdrawing the support of Soviet troops, Gorbachev greatly facilitated this process of the weakening of the ruling Communist parties.

14.3.2 Role of the West

Yet another important international factor was the role of the Western capitalist countries. As the people in Eastern Europe began to get more and more organised in their demand for systemic reform, greater democracy and removal of the Communist Parties, they received a lot of encouragement and welcome from Western Europe and the U.S.A. There was widespread belief among the people of Eastern Europe that they would receive financial, diplomatic and even military assistance from the capitalist West. In this way, the expectation of support also worked as a stimulus in the gathering protest.

14.3.3 The Demonstration Effect

There was also what one may call the demonstration effect which we mentioned in the first paragraph of this essay and which we can consider in the category of external factors. The success which these movements of democracy and reform were achieving in the different countries, had a greatly encouraging effect on other similar movements and protests of the Socialist bloc and each victory took the entire process a step further towards the eventual disintegration of the Socialist bloc. Thus, people first witnessed liberalisation measures initiated by the government in Hungary, then the election of a Solidarity government in Poland. Then, all of a sudden, mass migrations began taking place from the GDR in the summer of 1989 followed by mass demonstrations. Events acquired a faster momentum now and Czechoslovakia witnessed upheavals and finally, the curtain came down with the sudden, violent and bloody change in Romania.

Check Your Progress 2

Note : i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of this unit.

1) What was Gorbachev's contribution in beginning the process of change in the Socialist Bloc?

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14.4 THE FALL OF THE COMMUNIST GOVERNMENTS AND PARTIES IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

Now let us make a more detailed examination of the manner in which the Communist regimes were opposed and overthrown in individual countries of the Socialist Bloc.

14.4.1 Poland

In the second half of 1989, changes first began in Poland and Hungary. In August, the Polish United Workers Party – which was the official title of the Communist Party headed by Gen. Jaruzelski – ceased to form the government, and Solidarity, headed by Lech Walesa as President, formed the government.

14.4.2 Hungary

In September, the Hungarian Government took an unprecedented foreign policy decision : they opened their borders and permitted several thousand East German citizens (who were spending their vacation in Eastern Europe and who refused to return to the GDR) to cross over into Austria and from there to West Germany, i.e., the FRG. While this decision obviously had the approval of the Soviet Union, it meant that for the first time, a country of the Socialist bloc was declaring its preference for the West during a time of crisis. As the future Czech foreign minister later commented, it was this action that signalled the beginning of the end of the Soviet Bloc. An agreement was also reached between the Hungarian government and the opposition parties on the creation of a multiparty system and finally, in October 1989, the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (as the Communist Party was called) renamed itself the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) and abandoned Leninism as its ideology. The HSP also declared its country to be a 'republic' – and not a "people's republic" – in which bourgeois democracy and democratic socialism would apply and we can see the degree to which this decision influenced public life – as many as 51 parties were expected to contest the parliamentary elections scheduled for 1990.

14.4.3 GDR

The regimes in the GDR and the Czech Republic were the next to crumble. Erich Honecker was removed as party leader and head of the State of GDR in October 1989 and widespread public demonstrations for democracy took place. The emigration of the country's youth and other professionals also continued in large numbers so that finally, in November, the GDR announced an end to travel restrictions for its citizens and threw open its borders with FRG, allowing direct emigration to the West. The Berlin Wall – which was the most important symbol of the East-West divide for so long – came crashing down, as thousands of people poured across – most of whom did not return. The entire Politbureau and the government resigned in December and the leading role of the Communist Party was scrapped and its name was also changed. In early January 1990, the official name of the party became party of Communist Democratic Socialism and all the time, the mass exodus of East Germans into the West continued. More than 4000 people were leaving every day, creating serious problems for both the GDR and FRG.

Increasingly, reunification of the two Germanies was seen as the only solution to the problem and finally as the East German crisis depended, both Moscow and the wartime allied powers of the West – United States, Great Britain and France – agreed to hold meetings and conferences to discuss all the aspects of reunification of the two Germanies.

14.4.4 Czechoslovakia

The Czech government tried unsuccessfully to suppress the popular demonstrations and rising opposition in October, and finally in November, 1989 the government and party leadership were overthrown. On 27 November a two hour general strike took place in cities and towns all over the country which finally resulted in the rejection of the leading role of the Communist Party. And on December 29, a special joint session of the Czech Federal Assembly unanimously elected Vaclav Havel – the man who barely eleven months earlier was arrested with 800 others for human rights protests in January 1989 – as the first Czech non-Communist President since 1948.

14.4.5 Bulgaria

Problems in Bulgaria erupted next. The first independent demonstration by more than five thousand people (after forty years of the Bulgarian Communist [BCP] rule) outside the National Assembly occurred on November 3, 1989 and a week later, the Bulgarian Central Committee accepted the resignation of the 78 year old BCP Secretary - General Zhikov. The new Bulgarian Party Politburo condemned the 1968 Soviet led invasion of Czechoslovakia and in this manner tried to reverse the then existing view of history. In early December, nine independent organisations joined together to establish the Union of Democratic Forces in Bulgaria (UDF). The UDF later announced that it would campaign for political pluralism, a market economy and follow the rule of law. Finally, in January 1990, in an extraordinary Bulgarian Communist Party Congress, the orthodox conservatives were totally defeated, the Central Committee and Politburo were abolished and replaced with a 153 member Supreme Council.

14.4.6 Romania

In Romania, the Communist Party regime continued to resist the popular uprisings and also attempted to organise "joint action" with other socialist countries to crush the opposition movements. Here, the downfall of the ruling elite was the bloodiest. At the 14th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party in November 1989, Nicolai Ceaucescu strongly resisted the idea that reform was necessary. At a time when the entire Socialist Base was in turmoil, this resistance to change is truly surprising. The critical point came in December when the government's attempts to seize a priest who defended the rights of ethnic Hungarians in Romania led to massive demonstrations, which quickly turned into anti-government protest. Security and army troops were ordered to open fire on crowds in two cities and when the Defence Minister refused to cooperate in this killing of innocent people, he was executed. This led to the Army joining ranks with the demonstrators, which ended with the fall of the government. A short but bloody civil war ensued which ended with the capture and trial of Nicolai Ceaucescu and his wife by a military tribunal after which they were executed by a firing squad. National Salvation Front, which had been created earlier, was recognised by the Soviet government, which promised a return to democracy.

Check Your Progress 3

Note : i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answer with the model answers given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Give the reasons for the differences in the manner in which the Communist Parties fell in Poland Romania.

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- 2) Describe the events which led to the reunification of the GDR and FRG.

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14.5 LET US SUM UP

Thus it was that the old order, represented by a bipolar world structure, came to an end. The new world order did not immediately get established – in fact, we can say that in many ways, it still has not been born – we are living in a period of transition. Many problems are in the process of being solved – many will continue to be there well into the next century. We can also say that the overthrow of the Communist government in the countries of the Socialist Bloc was only the first step in a long march towards reform and democracy. Not these countries, but the Western Bloc and the rest of the world as well were trying to understand the implications of this dramatic transformation of the world order. Our purpose was to examine the reasons and the manner in which the disintegration of the Socialist Bloc took place. How the individual countries attempted to tackle the political, economic, social, cultural and moral issues arising out of this disintegration would be the subject of another lesson.

14.6 KEYWORDS

Disintegration	:	The process by which an entity come apart, breaks up.
GDR	:	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)
FRG	:	Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)
BCP	:	Bulgarian Communist Party
Socialist Bloc	:	The term was used to designate the countries in the Soviet camp, or the Warsaw Pact countries.
Glasnost	:	Russian word for Openness
Perestroika	:	Russian word for Restructuring
Solidarity	:	The Polish Workers Party formed under Walesa's leadership.

14.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Brown, J.F., 1991, **Surge to Freedom : The End of Communist Rule in Eastern Europe**, Duke University Press, London.

Arnason, Johann P., 1993 **The Future that Failed : Origins and Destinies of the Soviet Model**, Routledge, London and New York.

Ash, Timothy Garton, 1989, **The Uses of Adversity : Essays on the Fate of Central Europe**, Random House, New York.

14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The economic factor was the most important internal factor in the disintegration of the Socialist Bloc.
- 2) With technological changes, communication revolution, increased education levels and greater travel and interaction, the people in the countries of Eastern Europe had greater and greater access to the happenings in the outside world. The impact of television and pop music and life-styles in the West propagated consumerism and increased the dissatisfaction with the way of life in their own countries.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Gorbachev's policies of **Glansost** and **Peresfroika** opened the process of change by attempting to reform socialism, introducing political reforms, democracy and economic reforms. It checked the conservative elements and inspired similar movements in Eastern Europe. Finally, in revoking the Brezhnev Doctrine in November 1988, Gorbachev paved the way for the changes by removing the main support of authoritarian regimes in power.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) In Poland, Solidarity had evolved as an effective political force over more than a decade and had managed to get many concessions from the Communist government – but in Romania, the authoritarian government of Ceaucescu refused to make any concessions and also tried to suppress the demonstrations most brutally. So the people revolted.
- 2) The continuing migration and refusal of the people to return to the GDR, creating enormous economic and infrastructural problems, the breaking of the Berlin Wall and the psychological factor of being essentially one people eventually led to the reunification of the two Germanies.