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Historical Security Council *RESEARCH REPORT*

Political Turmoil behind the Iron Curtain: Addressing the 1989 Crisis of
Eastern European Regimes and the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

Definitions

Eastern Bloc: “refers to the group of communist states in Eastern Europe that were aligned with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, primarily from the end of World War II, until the collapse of communism in 1989. This bloc included countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany, Romania, and Bulgaria, which were subject to Soviet influence and control, affecting their political, economic, and social structures.”¹

USSR: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics refers to a former communist country in Eastern Europe and northern Asia, that was a highly centralized union which grew to sustain 15 constituent republics.²

The Cold War: The Cold War was a period of global geopolitical rivalry between the United States (US) and the Soviet Union (USSR) and their respective allies.³

Warsaw pact: The Warsaw Treaty Organization (also known as the Warsaw Pact) was a political and military alliance established on May 14, 1955 between the Soviet Union and several Eastern European countries.⁴

NATO: “North Atlantic Treaty Organization a political and military alliance between countries in North America and Europe that was founded in 1949. Its main purpose is to guarantee the freedom and security of its members through political and military means, with a core principle being that an attack against one member is considered an attack against all”.⁵

Western bloc: “The Western Bloc refers to the group of countries aligned with the United States and NATO during the Cold War, primarily in Western Europe and North America. This bloc was characterized by capitalist economies, democratic governments, and a commitment to opposing communism, especially as represented by the Eastern Bloc led by the Soviet Union. The Western Bloc played a crucial role in shaping post-World War II Europe, influencing political alliances, economic recovery, and military strategies against the backdrop of global tensions.”⁶

The Iron Curtain: “The Iron Curtain was a barrier that divided capitalist and communist nations. This barrier was not physical but instead economic and political. On one side of the curtain, most countries were communist, and on the other side, most were capitalist.”⁷

The Berlin Wall: was a barrier that surrounded West Berlin and prevented access to it from East Berlin and adjacent areas of East Germany.⁸

Capitalism: “an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market.”⁹

¹ [Soviet-controlled Eastern Bloc - \(AP European History\) - Vocab, Definition, Explanations | Fiveable](#)

² [SOVIET UNION Definition & Meaning | Dictionary.com](#),
[Soviet Union - Definition, Meaning & Synonyms | Vocabulary.com](#)

³ [COLD WAR Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)

⁴ [The Warsaw Treaty Organization, 1955.](#)

⁵ [North Atlantic Treaty Organization \(NATO\), 1949.](#)

⁶ [Western Bloc - \(AP European History\) - Vocab, Definition, Explanations | Fiveable](#)

⁷ [Iron Curtain Overview, History & Collapse - Lesson | Study.com](#)

⁸ [Berlin Wall | Definition, Length, & Facts | Britannica](#)

⁹ [CAPITALISM Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)

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Communism: “political and economic doctrine that aims to replace private property and a profit-based economy with public ownership and communal control of at least the major means of production (e.g., mines, mills, and factories) and the natural resources of a society.”¹⁰

Socialism: is a form of government in which most forms of property, including at least the major means of production and natural resources, are owned or controlled by the state. The aim of public ownership is to ensure that production is responsive to the needs and desires of the general population and that goods and services are distributed equitably. Socialism was the first step in the USSR toward achieving full communism. Which explains why during that era both terms were used substitutability, even though they have different meanings, they just share basic principles.¹¹

Background 1922-1989

The USSR was established in 1922 by the Communist Party in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Transcaucasia. The first leader of the Soviet Union was Vladimir Lenin who believed in a classless and communist society. After his death in 1924, Joseph Stalin took over and enforced brutal policies that transformed the USSR. He introduced a series of five-year plans to prompt economic growth and evolution in the Soviet Union, revolutionising it as an industrial and military superpower. Stalin wanted to ensure his state’s independence from Western nations so he industrialized the USSR on a massive scale, in addition to the collectivization of agriculture with the goal of increasing agriculture’s productivity; however, this goal was not achieved but instead caused fatal food shortages leading to millions of deaths and a widespread famine in the early 1930s.¹²

After WW2, the Soviet Union expanded its influence into Eastern Europe, establishing communist-leaning governments in Eastern European countries that were liberated from the Nazi control during the cold war. These nations’ governments were independent yet followed the USSR’s political stance and relied heavily on them.

In 1949 the United States and its allies in Western countries formed the NATO alliance. In response, the USSR created the Warsaw pact in 1955.

These initiatives further heightened tensions between the two blocs and caused what is known as the “Iron Curtain,” which was an “invisible” barrier, made up of strict border control and cultural restrictions, separating the capitalist and communist nations.¹³

After WW2, Germany was split between the Eastern and Western blocs; the Western side divided and controlled by the United States, the United Kingdom, as well as France. Eventually, they were allowed to self-rule and became the Federal Republic of Germany (also known as West Germany). Meanwhile, the Eastern side that was under the Soviet Union’s control became the Democratic Republic of Germany (Also known as East Germany).

The capital of Germany, Berlin, was located on the Eastern side; however, it was also divided, with West Germany receiving West Berlin. This division of Germany led millions of East Germans to flee to the West through West Berlin between 1949 and 1961; as once they got to West Berlin, they were able to ask for West German Citizenship and were able to go onto the

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/communism>

¹¹ [Socialism | Definition, History, Types, Examples, & Facts | Britannica Money](#)

¹² [Soviet Union - Countries, Cold War & Collapse | HISTORY](#)

¹³ [Iron Curtain Overview, History & Collapse - Lesson | Study.com](#)

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Federal Republic of Germany. Most wanted to leave because of the harsh living conditions under the communist system and collapsing economy that led to food shortages as well as the lack of consumer goods and basic services. Political repression also played a role as East Germans were oppressed by their own East German government who cracked down on liberal rights and personal freedoms: restrictions on freedom of speech, or the right to vote to non-approved parties, or to even leave the country with a permit. This was in addition to constant supervision, and merciless punishments for anyone opposing the regime. While the Western side offered freedoms and opportunities that east Europeans could only dream of, fuelling their desire to escape, supporters of East Germany emphasized the positive role of the state in creating good social support that was able to provide a good living for many families, in addition to the promotion of the arts, sciences and culture. However, due to actual repression by the East German government and due to more opportunities in the West, many decided to leave the East. The loss of that many people caused an economic and power crisis for the East German government. Which prompted them to build a huge wall in 1961 across Berlin, known as the “Berlin Wall” that prevented people from crossing and migrating from East Germany to the Western side or vice versa to prevent their citizens from arriving to West Berlin and claiming West German Citizenship and consequently the chance to leave East Germany for good. This Wall became a symbol of the Cold War’s division of Eastern from Western Europe.¹⁴

After Stalin’s death, Nikita Khrushchev rose to power in 1953, he had a less repressive approach and aimed to bring back stability and socialist legality. He revoked many of Stalin’s policies, and gave the citizens of the Soviet Union more freedoms they hadn’t experienced in years. However, these reforms triggered revolutions all across Eastern Europe, causing chaos within the region specifically in Poland and Hungary. In addition, Khrushchev launched many industrial and agricultural initiatives that were not successful, halting economic progress and worsening the living conditions of the citizens. The Communist party leadership saw all of this as failure on Khrushchev’s part and forced him to resign in 1964.¹⁵

Then, a new collective leadership took place with Leonid Brezhnev in charge as the party’s first secretary. Brezhnev reinforced stronger censorship, and dramatically expanded the Soviet military, fuelling the arms race with the USA even more. One of his main reforms was allowing the Soviet’s military to intervene in all of Eastern Europe. All this further aggravated the economic situation and caused more instability. It was during his premiership that the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan to assist their Socialist allies, pulling them into a war that drained lives and resources and that slowly made many to question the decision making process in their regime.¹⁶

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power with a new mindset. He introduced two main reforms, the first was “Glasnost” which means openness. This reform allowed for more freedom of speech and reduced censorship. The second was “Perestroika” which means restructuring, which included attempting to fix the economy, to reduce the state’s control over business, and to allow limited private enterprise and foreign investment. Gorbachev dismissed Brezhnev’s policy of military intervention in Eastern Europe and allowed a more positive approach to human and political rights within the region. He called for the need of Western technology and credits. The Western bloc saw these steps as the beginning of the end of the Cold War. While some in the Eastern bloc feared that these reforms would weaken their

¹⁴ [Berlin Wall | Definition, Length, & Facts | Britannica.](#)

¹⁵ [De-Stalinization | Khrushchev, Cold War, Reforms | Britannica,](#)
[Soviet Union - Cold War, Communism, Collapse | Britannica](#)

¹⁶ [Leonid Brezhnev | Biography, Cold War, & Facts | Britannica](#)

regime and threaten their authority and power.¹⁷

By the late 1980s Gorbachev's "Glasnost" reform, which aimed to revive hope in the Soviet system, had caused the opposite as serious divisions in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc generally appeared. Many people took advantage of the limited freedoms Glasnost offered to criticise and go up against it and the whole system. Movements calling for independence for ethnic and nationalist groups arose in many regions, and calls for liberation and open borders became a popular rallying cry to youths and city dwellers and others. Years of activism and strikes especially in Poland and Hungary culminated, and in May of 1989 the borders between Hungary and Austria opened up. This revolutionary moment was the first physical rupture in the Iron Curtain in history. As a result, thousands of Eastern citizens escaped to the West, causing tensions and pressure against the Soviet Union. By August 1989, mass peaceful protests calling for independence, free travel, and human rights had started to break out all over Eastern Europe. First to fall was the Socialist Republic of Poland who now had the first non-Communist government in centuries. Hungary was able to pass laws allowing for non-Communist parties to be part of the government in October 1989. All eyes now rest on the protests taking place elsewhere but especially in Eastern Berlin, making the East German government more fragile, more divided, and feeling more and more alone.¹⁸

Current situation

By November 9, 1989, the protest in East Germany had reached its peak, with over half a million people gathering in central east Germany demanding the fall of the wall. The East German government planned on allowing some form of crossing the borders to calm down the protest. However, as this plan was being announced by East German spokesman Günter Schabowski on national television, a miscommunication led him to say that "East Germans would be free to travel into West Germany, effective immediately." Failing to clarify that regulations such as requiring a visa are necessary.

This announcement led massive crowds to storm to the borders of East Germany that were guarded, the guards had not received any news about the borders opening, but with the huge number of people gathered, the handful of guards present were overwhelmed and had no chance at containing them; so the barriers between East and West Germany were opened for the public for first time in decades. Thousands of people flowed through celebrating their freedom and calling for reunification with West Germany.¹⁹

During this time, the entire Soviet bloc was facing reforms and unrest much like East Germany. These reforms began with the pressure from the solidarity movement in Poland on the government calling for political freedom resulting in the first partially free elections in decades. Followed by Hungary dismantling its one party system which stopped the communist party's total control of the region after extreme pressure calling for change. Additionally, the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were part of a larger nonviolent movement known as the Singing Revolution, which demanded independence from the Soviet Union. These rising movements criticizing the Communist party and the citizens' clear dissatisfaction with its system caused more instability and friction within the Soviet Union.²⁰

¹⁷ [20th-century international relations - Gorbachev, Soviet, New Thinking | Britannica](#)

¹⁸ [Fall of Berlin Wall: How 1989 reshaped the modern world](#)

¹⁹ [Fall of Berlin Wall: How 1989 reshaped the modern world, What Was The Berlin Wall And How Did It Fall? - The Cold War | IWM](#)

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutions_of_1989

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United Nations (Historical) Security Council
This simulation begins on: 10 November 1989.

Please note:

This committee will make use of special rules of procedures. They will be published on the website soon.

Treaties and Organizations

The Helsinki Final Act: “The Helsinki Final Act was an agreement signed in 1975 by 35 nations that concluded the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, held in Helsinki, Finland. The multifaceted Act addressed a range of prominent global issues and in so doing had a far-reaching effect on the Cold War and U.S.-Soviet relations.”²¹

The Brezhnev Doctrine: “is a foreign policy put forth by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in 1968, calling on the Soviet Union to intervene, including militarily, in countries where socialist rule was under threat.”²²

The Sinatra Doctrine (1988): “The Sinatra Doctrine refers to the policy adopted by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s, which allowed Eastern European countries to determine their own political systems and pursue reforms without direct interference from Moscow. Named after Frank Sinatra’s song, ‘My Way,’ this doctrine represented a significant shift from the Brezhnev Doctrine, which emphasized strict Soviet control over its satellite states. It marked a new approach that encouraged independence and political pluralism in Eastern Europe, reshaping the relationship between the Soviet Union and its satellite nations.”²³

NATO: is a political and military alliance whose purpose is to guarantee the freedom and security of its members through political and military means. It promotes democratic values, and helps all its members cooperate on defence and security-related issues. It is committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes; however, if diplomatic efforts fail, it has the military power needed to defend every one of its members; as stated in Article 5, the collective defence clause of NATO’s founding treaty, if one member is attacked it should be considered an attack against all members, and other members shall assist the attacked member, with armed forces if necessary.²⁴

The Warsaw Pact: is a military alliance of communist Eastern European countries, led by the Soviet Union. It functioned through a collective security agreement, where an attack on one member meant all others would provide defense. The pact also served to unify member militaries under Soviet control, and was used by the USSR to maintain political and military dominance over its members.²⁵

²¹ [Helsinki Final Act, 1975](#)

²² [Brezhnev Doctrine | Definition, Significance, & Facts | Britannica](#)

²³ [Sinatra Doctrine - \(European History – 1945 to Present\) - Vocab, Definition, Explanations | Fiveable](#)

²⁴ [What is NATO?](#)

²⁵ [The Warsaw Treaty Organization, 1955.](#)

Critical Events and Timeline

13th of August 1961: Constriction of the Berlin wall between East and West Germany to prevent the people moving.²⁶

1st of August 1975: The Helsinki Accords agreement was signed, leading to better cooperation between the Eastern and Western blocs. Including humanitarian matters, allowing groups of the Eastern bloc to stand up against their leaders for the first time for breaching the agreements of the accords.²⁷

1985: A new leader for the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, introduces a new way of thinking to the Eastern bloc, “Glasnost” (openness) and “Perestroika” (restructuring).²⁸

1988: The end of Sinatra Doctrine. The USSR allowed Eastern European countries to determine their own political systems, making protests and reforms advocating for change possible.²⁹

May 1989: The first dismantlement of the Iron Curtain. Hungary opens its borders with Austria, allowing thousands of East Germans to escape through Hungary.³⁰

October 1989: Mass protest in East Germany reaching up to 100,000 protestors against their regime, with no intervention from the authorities, ultimately leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall.³¹

18th of October 1989: The leader of East Germany for over 18 years, Erich Honecker, was forced to resign, due to criticism from the communist party, indicating the collapse of the GDR.³²

9th of November 1989: Miscommunications made people believe they were free to cross the wall of Berlin, ultimately leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

²⁶ [The construction of the Berlin Wall](#)

²⁷ [Helsinki Accords | Cold War Diplomacy & Impact on International Relations | Britannica](#)

²⁸ [20th-century international relations - Gorbachev, Soviet, New Thinking | Britannica](#)

²⁹ [Sinatra Doctrine - \(European History – 1945 to Present\) - Vocab, Definition, Explanations | Fiveable](#)

³⁰ [Snipping away at the Iron Curtain: when Hungary opened its Austrian border - archive, 1989 | Cold war | The Guardian](#)

³¹ [The Peaceful Revolution: The Fall of a Wall and the Rise of Democracy – The Nonviolence Project](#)

³² [Egon Krenz, Last General Secretary of the SED Central Committee \(late October 1989\) | German History in Documents and Images.](#)

Questions to Consider

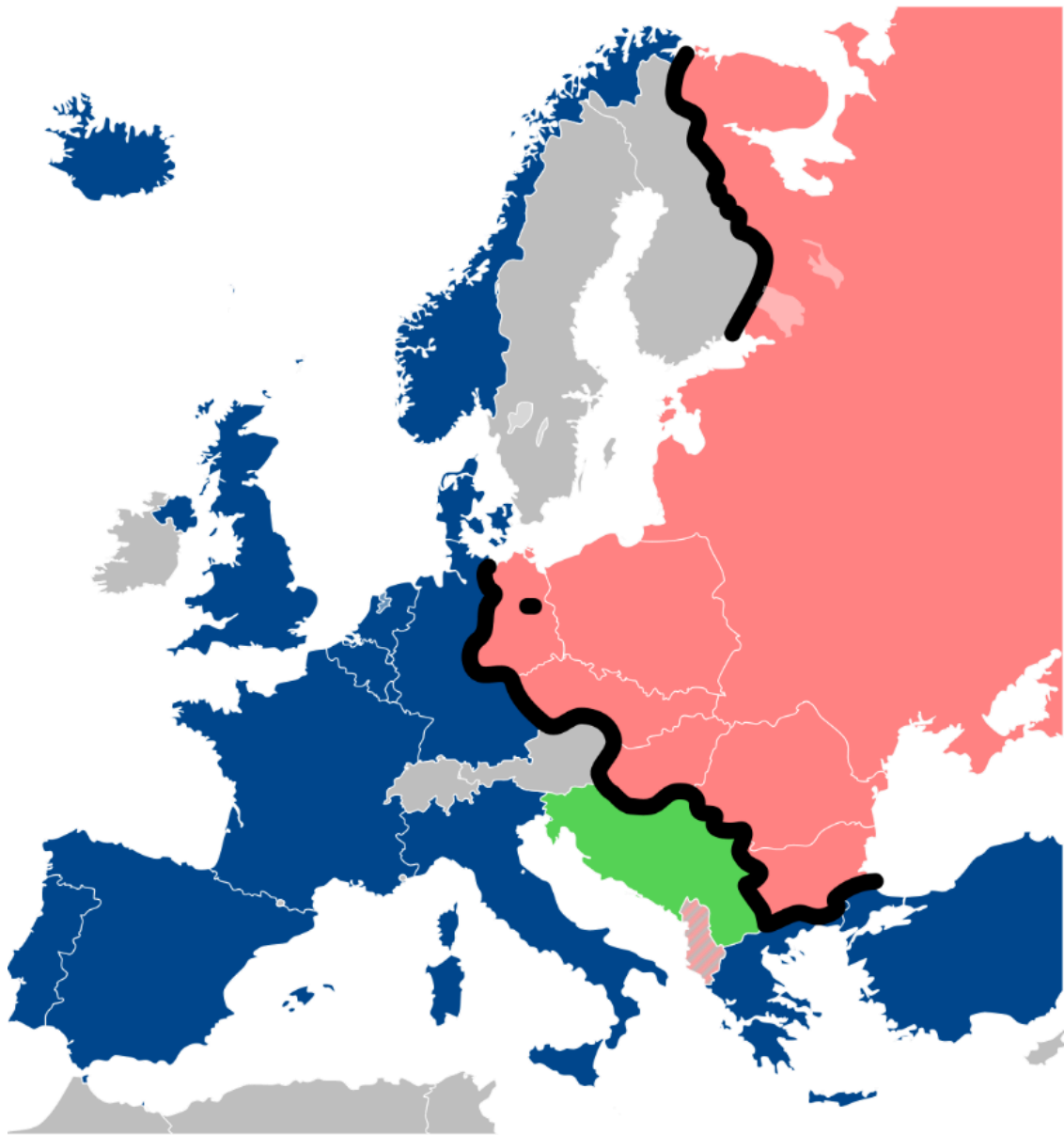
- How should the international community respond to the sudden collapse of the Berlin Wall?
- What are the security concerns created by the collapse of border controls in East Germany?
- How does your country view the future of East and West Germany?
- How should the UN respond to rising protests and revolutions in Eastern Europe?
- What are the implications for NATO and the Warsaw Pact?
- How should human rights abuses in Eastern Bloc countries be addressed?

Relevant Media



the division of Berlin (East/West sectors)

<https://www.dreamstime.com/stock-image-divided-berlin-image18070951>



The Iron Curtain: the divide between NATO and the Warsaw Pact
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Curtain

Helpful Resources

[Perestroika & Glasnost \(The End of the Soviet Union\)](#)

[Ten Minute History - The Decline and Dissolution of the Soviet Union \(Short Documentary\)](#)

[Soviet Union | History, Leaders, Flag, Map, & Anthem | Britannica](#)

[Soviet Union - Cold War, Communism, Collapse | Britannica](#)

[Fall of Berlin Wall: How 1989 reshaped the modern world](#)

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