

# The causes of the revolutions history essay

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Described as the 'year of the avalanche', the events of 1989 proved to be some of the most surprising and 'cataclysmic' of the twentieth century. In early 1989, few would have dared to predict the unprecedented events which were to occur. In the space of a matter of months, the communist regimes across the Eastern Bloc began to crumble as the Soviet grip on the states lessened. However, the fact that the communist regimes in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania all fell with such quick succession can lead to the misconception that the revolutions shared the same causes. However, the conventional tendency to assess the causes of the fall of communism collectively is particularly unhelpful; this essay will argue that, despite sharing the same fundamental long-term causes, the salience of these causes, as well as a number of other short term factors, did in fact vary. In making this assertion, the essay will adopt a thematic approach, assessing a range of factors which contributed to the events of 1989. Whilst acknowledging that 'everything was interconnected', each factor will be evaluated with regard to the six East European countries previously mentioned.[2] Thus, economic failure, regime problems, outside influences and popular protest will all be considered.

It is important to note that the factors which caused the revolutions across Eastern Europe can be divided into both long and short term factors.

Crucially, economic stagnation and underdevelopment proved to be central to the revolutions which occurred Eastern Europe. After all, as noted by Brown, economic 'failure stimulated and consolidated societal opposition in most Eastern European countries'.[3] This view is supported by Chirot who asserts that economic stagnation and crisis was 'the most visible' reason for

the collapse of communism.[4]However, it is at this point that it is necessary to distinguish between the various Eastern European countries. Chirot describes how, although not impoverished on the scale of nations, such as Ethiopia, Romania and Poland were 'headed in that direction', while countries, such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary and East Germany were economically failing when compared to countries in Western Europe.

[5]However, all of the six nations struggled with economic inefficiency and production inadequacies and were, thus, unable to act as competitive rivals to the capitalist economies of Western Europe. Economic stagnation affected the population significantly as there was a shortage of consumer goods, while the 'commitment to full employment and low food prices' further damaged the economies of Eastern Europe.[6]

However, the failing economy in these countries was arguably linked to regime problems; economic decisions were taken with primary consideration for the maintenance of party rule and the current system, not what was best for the economy. As a result, decisions were largely based on 'political will', rather than economic necessity.[7]Thus, a strong case can be made to suggest that inherent problems with the regimes hindered economic progress. For instance, rather than using foreign loans to invest in new technology or improvements to infrastructure, the communist regimes in Poland and Hungary instead used foreign loans to 'purchase consumer goods to make people happy, [an attempt to] shore up the crumbling legitimacy of [their] regimes'.[8]As a result, it is clear that that the economic problems which gripped Eastern Europe arguably exacerbated the problems faced by the communist regimes regarding their 'fundamental ...

illegitimacy'.<sup>[9]</sup>Overall, it is clear that the countries of Eastern Europe all experienced varying degrees of economic difficulties and, thus, the economy acted as a contributing factor to the revolutions. However, the key word here is varying. The most severe economic problems were experienced in Bulgaria, Romania and Poland, while the state of the economy was arguably a less significant cause of the revolutions in East Germany and Czechoslovakia as they were more prosperous than their communist neighbours.

Furthermore, arguably one of the most crucial long term factors which contributed to the events of 1989 were regime problems and failings. Fundamentally, a strong case can be made to support the assertion that the communist regimes 'lacked legitimacy' and it was this which ultimately rendered revolution a certainty rather than a possibility.<sup>[10]</sup>Crucially, the communist regimes made a fatal error in confusing authority and legitimacy. It was the misguided belief that authority delivered legitimacy which proved ultimately disastrous.<sup>[11]</sup>After over four decades of communist rule, by 1989, citizens arguably began to realise that, not only did the regimes lack legitimacy, but that the authority which they had previously exerted was open to challenge. Thus, it is evident that the illegitimacy of the communist regimes in all of the Eastern European countries directly contributed to the rise in opposition towards communist rule.

Moreover, a strong case can be made to support the assertion that this was underpinned by an increasing realisation that the communist party could no longer use force to maintain control. After all, what little legitimacy the

regimes initially had gradually eroded over time; the years of 'repression, terror and misery of life ... created a general malaise'.<sup>[12]</sup>For instance, in East Germany, Honecker utilised repression as a tool for maintaining control; once repressive tactics had been abandoned, however, 'the system collapsed in a few weeks'.<sup>[13]</sup>Therefore, this highlights how, once fear had been removed, the illegitimacy of the regimes were exposed and their future was thus limited. Significantly, however, it is possible to assert that attempts to reform and negotiate with the opposition, as occurred in Poland throughout 1989, were an attempt at re-legitimising the communist regimes in order to preserve their power. After all, there was notable success for Jaruzelski in Poland following the total amnesty he announced in the mid-1980s. Describing the effect of this, Brown asserts that, while 'the regime gained ground, the opposition seemed to be in disarray'.<sup>[14]</sup>

In addition, the communist regimes across Eastern Europe faced even greater problems than their illegitimacy. Notably, communist leaders had to find a balance between what was best for their country as well as avoiding disapproval from the Soviet Union. However, this was arguably extremely different; each Soviet leader pursued 'different policies' towards Eastern Europe, with significant contrast between the approach adopted by leaders, such as Khrushchev and Brezhnev, and leaders, such as Gorbachev, for example.<sup>[15]</sup>This highlights the interdependence of the factors which combined to cause the revolutions in 1989; in this sense, regime problems were also dependent upon outside influences, namely the role of the Soviet Union. What is more, elderly leaders, who were increasingly 'out of touch' with the needs of their people, also proved problematic.<sup>[16]</sup>This was

arguably the case for Ceausescu, the communist leader of Romania. At the time of his fall from power, Ceausescu was 71 years-old and had been in office for 22 years.[17] Thus, a logical case can be made to draw links between his age and length of tenure and his uncompromising response to opposition and inability to sense 'the mood of the country', resulting in a rebellion which cost him his life.[18] Overall, a strong case can be made to support the assertion that regime problems and failings played a key role in all of the revolutions across Eastern Europe. However, whilst all of the European states shared this fundamental long term cause of unrest, the salience of the short term factors varied greatly between countries.

What is more, another factor which arguably contributed to the revolutions of 1989 can be collectively referred to as outside factors. This is a reference to the range of short term factors which were outside the control of the communist regimes, including geographical issues, the role of Gorbachev, the significance of the domino effect and also the increased awareness of life in the West. In terms of geography, it is important to consider the location of the East European countries as a strong case can be made to suggest that this had a bearing on the events of 1989. For instance, East Germany was a 'front-line state' due to its position bordering the capitalist West Germany. [19] Moreover, the population was also more western, with many citizens being able to remember a time when Germany was still unified. Thus, East Germany had a stronger permeation of Western culture than many of the other countries in Eastern Europe.[20] What is more, as the European continent has few natural borders, it is clear that events occurring in one country are likely to have a knock-on effect in neighbouring countries. For

instance, following the opening of the Hungarian border with Austria, East Germany was severely affected; the opening of the border triggered an emigration crisis, with 'hundreds of thousands' of East Germans attempting to escape due to their 'demoralisation and disgust' with the regime.[21] This proved highly damaging for the East German regime; the exposure of the illegitimacy of the regime proved fatal. Thus, this highlights not only the importance of the increased awareness of life in the West, but also the significant role played by geography in terms of exposure to images of both life in the West as well as western media. However, these factors are clearly more important in explaining the causes of the revolutions in those countries which were geographically close to West Europe than those which were closer to the Soviet Union.

Moreover, the role of the domino effect was arguably crucial, acting as a catalyst and thus explaining the spread of the revolution. Whilst the effect that images from the West had on frontline states was significant, a convincing case can be made to suggest that it was in fact images of life in the Soviet Union and, later, in neighbouring states which proved to be the ultimate short-term cause of the revolutions across Eastern Europe. The effect of such images arguably served to 'undermine' the regimes in the eyes of the dissenting minority and, crucially, also the loyal minority.[22] The notion that the revolutions were in some way 'contagious' is highly significant.[23] After all, the fall of communism in Poland paved the way for the overthrow of the communist regimes in Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and, finally, Romania. Whilst the argument that the revolutions were contagious is somewhat oversimplifying the intricacies and

distinctiveness of the circumstances which occurred in each of the states, it is still a useful analysis as it emphasises the importance of the spread of ideas and 'confidence'.<sup>[24]</sup>For instance, the successful non-violent overthrow of the communist regime in Poland arguably led to a growth of confidence throughout the Eastern Bloc as a precedent had effectively been established. The effect of such newfound confidence cannot be overestimated, with the contemporary example of the Arab Spring bearing similarities with events in Eastern Europe, for example. Thus, overall, it is clear that the domino effect played a crucial role in all of the countries following the precedent which was established in Poland. However, it is important not to overstate the role of the domino effect; had there not been numerous problems and rising discontent in the states, the revolutions would undoubtedly have been seen as isolated rather than contagious.

Furthermore, an additional outside factor which arguably played a key role in the events of 1989 was the attitude and policies pursued by the Soviet leader, Gorbachev. In fact, Brown goes as far as asserting that the revolutions 'could not have happened without Gorbachev'.<sup>[25]</sup>Gorbachev's policy of lessening the Soviet grip on the Eastern Bloc and effectively removing the Soviet rod which had previously reinforced the communist regimes of Eastern Europe arguably had a 'galvanising' effect.<sup>[26]</sup>Not only did it bring together opposition groups and politically-minded youths, but, in Poland and Hungary in particular, it also served to stimulate reformers within the regimes themselves.<sup>[27]</sup>Gorbachev's policy of non-intervention arguably exposed the illegitimacy of the regimes as even their authority was now in question. This was particularly the case in countries, such as Czechoslovakia,



where the communist regime did not wish to reform as, if Gorbachev was seen to be correct, it effectively validated the attempted rebellion in 1968. Moreover, a further result of Gorbachev's policy was that it increased the 'evaporation of fear' amongst the population, thus explaining the rise in the number and vociferousness of public protest and opposition movements.

[28]However, whilst Gorbachev's policy had a direct effect on those countries, such as Czechoslovakia and East Germany which had close ties to the Soviet Union, countries, such as Romania were not affected as much due to Romania's remoteness from the Soviet Union. However, despite clear variations in the importance of the role of Gorbachev in contributing to the revolutions, a convincing case can be made to support the assertion that, overall, Gorbachev played a key role. After all, previous attempts at rebellion in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, for example, had been crushed by the Soviet Union. With this threat removed, surely it was only a matter of time before the unpopular regimes faced a challenge.

Finally, popular protest and organised opposition was arguably the short term catalyst for the events of 1989. The long term factors previously discussed, including regime problems, economic failure and outside influences all combined, thus leading to an increase in opposition. However, despite the significance of popular protest, it is important not to overstate how widespread such protest was; regimes were undermined by the active opposition of a 'minority', not by the masses.[29]For instance, demonstrations were by no means universal, mainly attracting the younger generation who were more akin to western culture and also had less to lose than older generations. Crucially, the role played by protest and organised

opposition varies between countries. In Poland, for example, organised opposition was strong in the form of the Solidarity Movement. Moreover, whilst signs of protest in Hungary initially suggest that there was visible opposition to the regime, most of the protests which occurred were focussed on non-regime issues, such as ecological problems, for instance.[30] In contrast to Poland, Chirot notes how there was little organised opposition in Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria except for 'seemingly isolated intellectuals [who] had no followers'.[31] What is more, in East Germany there was only a small peace movement, but the 'regime had never been directly threatened', while in Romania, although there had been a riot in Brasov in 1987, 'intellectual protest was muted'.[32] Thus, it is clear that popular protest played a more crucial role in contributing towards the revolutions in countries where the regimes refused to initiate reform or negotiate with opposition.

Overall, it is clear that the revolutions in the countries of Eastern Europe all shared the same fundamental causes. What differed, however, was the significance of each factor, thus dispelling the conventional wisdom that a combination of popular protest and the domino effect provides for a definitive understanding of the causes of the revolutions. However, although this essay has offered a discussion of both the common causes of the revolutions as well as national differentiation, it is also important to question why 1989 was the year in which these revolutions took place. Arguably, 1989 proved to be the tipping point following the accumulation of 'decades of rot in the foundations of the communist system'.[33] Ultimately, however, Gorbachev proved to be the catalyst, 'render[ing] the revolutions in Eastern

Europe both inevitable and successful'.[34]After all, ' the tinder was already there but it needed Gorbachev to light it'.[35]