



1989: The year of revolutions - a look back 20 years on

Two decades ago the Soviet empire in Central and Eastern Europe dissolved as people took to the streets and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev disavowed the use of force to rein in the protests. The countries behind the Berlin Wall have now come in from the proverbial political cold and joined the European Union in the last five years. Here we look at some of the events of that tumultuous summer of 1989.

Anti-Soviet riots in Berlin in 1953 and the Hungarian uprising in 1956 showed that the Sovietization of Central and Eastern Europe could not be achieved without a fight. It poisoned relations with the West; all economic and political cooperation ceased as the Iron Curtain split the continent.

Later, in 1968 in Prague and in Poland in the 1980s dissent would be crushed, although it left a lasting legacy of hope for change behind it. Below is a timeline of the unravelling of Moscow's empire in Europe.

1989 timeline:

February - April: Roundtable talks between the Polish Communist Party and the Solidarity protest movement.

March: About 80,000 demonstrators gather in Budapest to call for democracy. Opposition roundtable is formed in Hungary.

4 and 18 June: In Polish semi-free elections Solidarity win 99 of 100 seats in the Senate and all 161 Sejm seats allotted to Solidarity.

27 June: Austrian and Hungarian Foreign Ministers cut through the border fence on the border between Austria and Hungary.

19 August: Symbolic opening of the border between Austria and Hungary for three hours for a "Pan-European Picnic".

23 August: "Baltic Chain": Two million people join their hands to form a 600-kilometer long human chain across Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to draw attention to the fate of the Baltic countries and to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, which led to the occupation of the three states.

24 August: Solidarity's Tadeusz Mazowiecki becomes Polish PM after the Communist candidate is unable to form a cabinet. The first non-Communist government in Communist Europe is formed.

11 September: Hungarian government announces that East German refugees would not be repatriated but instead be allowed to travel to the West. 13,000 East German refugees leave through Hungary to Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany.

9 October: Over 70,000 people demonstrate in the Eastern European city of Leipzig chanting "Wir sind das Volk" (We are the people).

18 October: Erich Honecker resigns in East Germany.

Story

4 November: Over 1 million people gather for a demonstration on East Berlin's Alexanderplatz.

9 November: The Berlin Wall is breached and people stream westwards.

17 November: Czechoslovakia has its "Velvet Revolution": Mass demonstrations bring down Communist Government.

16 December: Protests break out in Timișoara, Romania as a response to the government's attempt to evict dissident pastor László Tőkés (now an MEP). Students spontaneously join the demonstrations and the protestors turn against party buildings. Later on protests spread to Bucharest; forcing Nicolae Ceausescu to flee.

25 December: Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife are executed.

The last rites of the USSR

The Soviet Union continued to spiral towards disintegration over the next two years. In 1990 Germany was reunited, whilst in Warsaw the leader of Solidarity, Lech Walesa, became President.

Finally in December 1991 the Hammer and Sickle was lowered from the Kremlin for the last time and the new flag of the Russian Federation was raised. The Soviet Union ceased to exist and the Commonwealth of Independent States was set up in its place.