27. The Fall of the Berlin Wall

New Leadership

Cracks in the Iron Curtain

The Wall Comes Down
New Leadership

On October 1, 1988 Gorbachev was selected Soviet president. Although this was largely honorary, it did make Gorbachev officially the head of the Soviet state.

In November 1988 Bush won the presidency. Bush's election suggested a continuation of Reagan's policies.

In reality, Bush was less enamored with Gorbachev than Reagan and less dedicated to SDI. He wanted to be cautious with Gorbachev.
Gorbachev’s 1988 UN Speech

In December 1988, Gorbachev made his second visit to the US and addressed the UN General Assembly.

He proclaimed a monumental shift in Soviet policy. He advocated “freedom of choice” for all nations, declared that ideology had no place in international affairs, and asserted that strong nations must "renounce the use of force in dealing with other nations."

He announced he would unilaterally reduce its overall military forces by 500,000 troops and 10,000 tanks.
Bush and Gorbachev's Approaches to the Cold War

- Gorbachev is in a hurry to get further arms agreements. Living standards in the Soviet Union continued to decline, and long-restrained ethnic rivalries and nationalist aspirations began to tear at the fabric of the USSR.

- Bush saw Gorbachev as a capable foe who might be a sincere proponent of peace or a slick-talking salesman using charm and concessions to weaken the NATO alliance and Western vigilance.
Gorbachev's Overtures

In January 1989 Gorbachev announced the details of his force reduction plan:

- He would reduce the Soviet military by 1/8th, and assured the West that the weapons withdrawn from E. Europe would be modern and not outdated weapons.

Gorbachev’s foreign minister made further concessions in the negotiations over conventional forces in Vienna.

While Bush was working to modernize the US’s nuclear weapons in W. Germany (those with ranges less than 300 miles) Gorbachev announced the Soviets would remove 500 such weapons unilaterally.
Bush's Response to Gorbachev

Gorbachev's overtures put Bush on the spot and he had to come up with an effective response to shore up his public image and alliance solidarity.

Bush agreed to negotiate tactical nuclear weapons and then delivered a speech at the NATO meeting in Brussels outlining his own proposal.
  • Both superpowers would reduce the number of troops deployed in Europe to 275,000 and the number of combat aircraft to 15% less than current NATO levels.

The plan would have required that the Soviets cut three times as many troops and considerably more aircraft.
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Gorbachev in China

In mid-May Gorbachev traveled to Beijing for a "socialist summit" with Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese leaders.

Chinese students emboldened in part by Gorbachev’s reforms, were staging a massive pro-democracy protest in Beijing’s Tienanmen Square.

Although Gorbachev’s visit was designed to improve relations, he did call openly for more democracy in China and urged a peaceful resolution to the student demonstrations.
Renouncing the Brezhnev Doctrine

In his 1988 UN address, Gorbachev had implied that the USSR would forsake the use of force in pursuing its foreign policy. The question remained: Were the Soviets repudiating the Brezhnev Doctrine?

In March 1989, Gennadii Gerasimov, speaking for the Kremlin, asserted that each E. European nation had the right to determine its own fate.

In June, other Soviet officials made similar statement, and Gorbachev officially disowned the Brezhnev Doctrine during a visit to France.
Opening the Iron Curtain

In 1988, Janos Kadar - who had ruled Hungary since 1956 stepped down. His successor, Karoly Grosz sought to emulate Gorbachev with his own version of glasnost.

In January 1989 Grosz announced constitutional changes that allowed other parties. In May, after checking with Gorbachev, he opened Hungary’s borders to the West and ripped down the barbed wire that separated Hungary from Austria.

This created a vast hole in the Iron Curtain. Thousands of East Germans entered Hungary, seeking to use that country to escape to the West.
Elections in Poland

Things were much more contentious in Poland. Since 1981, the country had been led by Wojciech Jaruzelski, the general who had declared martial law and banned the Solidarity Trade Union.

In 1987, Jaruzelski implemented perestroika like reforms to try and revitalize the Polish economy. His reforms received very little support, partially because Lech Walesa emerged once again as the effective head of Polish opposition.

By April 1989, things were so bad Jaruzelski agreed to legalize Solidarity, create a new legislative body (the Senate), and hold elections in June. The result was a humiliating defeat for the government and a huge win for Solidarity.
Effects of Poland and Hungary

The effects of the events in Hungary and Poland were profound.

In two Soviet satellites communist leaders had agreed to democratic reforms. Far from blocking these developments, Moscow encouraged them. The Brezhnev Doctrine was indeed dead.

The Soviet army had held the Easter Bloc together, however, it was now clear that Gorbachev did not intend to repeat the brutal crackdowns of the past. This led the people of Eastern Europe to challenge their rulers with growing audacity.
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Issues in East Germany

Throughout the summer, East Germans poured into Hungary, bent on traveling to the West.

Others chose to stay and fight. In September 1989, a group called "New Forum" began sponsoring anti-government rallies calling for democratic reforms.

Gorbachev traveled to East Berlin in early October. He publicly urged for all walls to come down and encouraged the government to make reforms to quell dissent.
Lifting Travel Restrictions

Soon after Gorbachev left, the regime faced massive demonstrations on October 9th in Leipzig.

Gorbachev urged more pluralistic reforms. As a result, Egon Krenz removed unpopular officials and called for free elections. But the crowds kept growing.

On November 9, 1989 Krenz took a desperate gamble. They reasoned that if East Germans knew they could travel back and forth to the West, they would be less likely to permanently on such travel.
The Wall Comes Down

The government’s spokesman, perhaps misunderstanding, announced that almost all restrictions would be lifted at once.

As rumors spread that the Berlin Wall was open, hundreds of thousands of Berliners gathered at the wall to celebrate. Before long they began destroying the wall.

The fall of the Berlin Wall unleashed a tidal wave in Germany for reunification. In December, Krenz and his comrades were forced to step down, as the country prepared for democratic elections in March 1990.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmRPP2WXXoU
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