

Revolution and transition

The spiritual factor of the Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe of 1989-1991

© 2020, Evert Van de Poll

Unpublished paper, in preparation of the forthcoming book *Christianity and the Making of Europe*

Exactly two centuries after the French Revolution in 1789, another revolution took place that had an equal impact on the history of Europe. Political revolutions are usually violent clashes, marked by armed conflict, bloodshed and destruction. This one was one of the very rare exceptions to that rule. Its death-toll was surprisingly low, compared to the other revolutions that we learn about in history classes. It was by and large a rather peaceful turnabout, that caused hardly any materiel damage.

The year 1989 will always be remembered as the year in which a hurricane of democratic change swept across the Communist-dominated part of Europe. Under the pressure of popular movements, one regime after the other was put aside. As the wave of change rolled over from Central-Europe to the Soviet-Union, it only took two years for this once so powerful empire to fall apart and finally disappear altogether. 'Several political and religious groups, that had been oppressed and pushed to the periphery of society in these countries, (...) found themselves suddenly transformed into the empowered, in some cases in only a matter of a few months.'¹

In this chapter we will recall the series of revolutions of 1989 and shortly look at their aftermath; the transition to democracy, market economy, and a civil society based on individual freedom. We are particularly interested in the crucial role played by Churches and their leaders.²

1 Winds of change

Since the Second World War, an 'Iron Curtain' was drawn right through the middle of Europe, separating the western half of the continent from the Communist world to the east. At the western side, most countries were members of the NATO, the North Atlantic military alliance with the United States, while most of the Communist ruled countries at the other side were part of the Warsaw Pact, led by the Soviet Union (except Yugoslavia and Albania). Both sides of Europe were engaged in a 'Cold War', with heavily armed forces and nuclear weapons being permanently stationed on each side of the frontier. All the time there was the risk of an incident turning into open, devastating warfare. The Communist regimes kept their population – as much as they could – cut off from information and influence from the West. Very few people had the privilege of travelling across the border. Besides the physical frontier there was the ideological rift between the West and the Communist Bloc, each viewed the other with distrust, criticism, fear, and much prejudice. Their political systems, their economic model, and their visions of society were mutually exclusive. The emblematic symbol of this division was the wall that ran right through the centre of Berlin.

Churches and dissidents

What about the living conditions 'behind the curtain' (a typical Western expression at that time) in a communist ruled society? Generally speaking, making a living was the prior concern of the common

¹ Stephen LAZARUS, 'Pulling the Curtain down.'

² The revolutions of 1989 and the downfall of the Soviet-Union have been described and analysed in many publications. In the following we make use of the work of two authors in particular: Constantine PLESHAKOV, *There Is No Freedom Without Bread*, and Ronald SUNY, 'Empire Falls: The Revolutions of 1989.' We shall also draw from the material provided by Jeff FOUNTAIN in a series of articles called 'The revolution behind the revolution in Eastern Europe'.

man. For many years, people managed to do this, which was almost enough to make the socialist experiment seem gratifying. But gradually, the Soviet version of Communism lost its lustre, both among the population in the East and left-wing intellectuals in the West. Many of the latter cherished the idea of a more human form of Communism without terror, and without Russian domination. What people in the East actually got was ‘goulash Communism’ – more goods, some travel abroad, less repression, but only the most muted voice in politics. By the early 1970s the regimes looked stable, relatively prosperous and likely to endure. But the command economy, managed in every detail by a centralised state apparatus, was hampering. The leaders were losing control, productivity was falling. Underneath the surface there was growing discontent, which accelerated in the 1980s.

Individuals began to contest the system, through academic criticism, acts of disobedience, a refusal to adopt the atheist ideology, or by a combination of these. For a start, there were the Churches. The registered ones (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestants in some countries) tried to make the best of the situation by keeping some level of church life going, despite the severe restrictions and the constant pressure of the militant atheism of the state. To this end, they had to accommodate to the system, and even collaborate to a certain extent with the regimes. According to some of their members, as well as many observers in the West, they went too far in making compromises. That was also the view of the nonregistered, so-called underground Churches. Their worship services were illegal. Many leaders of both registered and nonregistered Churches suffered harassment, persecution and captivity in the dreadful camps of the ‘Gulag Archipelago’ – as dissident author Solzhenitsyn named them.

There were different waves of persecution, first in the Soviet Union and later also in the Communist satellite states. In the 1920s and the 1930s they were most cruel. Most of the clergy were executed. All monasteries, theological schools and the majority of churches were closed. A less brutal period followed in the aftermath of the World War II, when some monasteries and a few theological schools were reopened. In the 1960s, a new wave of severe persecutions began, which aimed at the complete elimination of religion, in order that society should be totally non religious by the beginning of the 1980s.

In the mid-eighties, however, the Church was not only still alive but even slowly growing. As the hold of the Soviet ideological system on the population began to decay, there was an increase of Christian practice. As a consequence, some noticeable changes of the state’s attitude to religion were taking place. The Church even obtained some favours. But this was only a cosmetic change, as Orthodox Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev writes in a retrospect article: ‘One thing forever remained unchanged: religion was forbidden to come out of the ghetto into which it was driven by the atheist regime; it was always far removed from any exposure to the life of society, and society was well shielded from any possible religious influence. To be a believer meant to be a social outcast. Matters relating to faith were not openly discussed, religious views were concealed, and conversations on spiritual topics were avoided.’³

Then there were the dissidents – intellectuals, artists and sometimes also industrial workers, many of them being inspired by the suppressed Christian faith, as well as priests and pastors. These people had the courage to lift their dissident voices to openly criticise the official ideology, to call for democratic change, to seek contact with the West. In 1977, 242 dissidents in Czechoslovakia took a public stance by signing the document *Charta 77*. The most prominent of them were the playwright and novelist Václav Havel, and the philosopher Jan Patočka. Motivated in part by the arrest of members of the psychedelic band ‘Plastic People of the Universe’, the signatories criticised the government for failing to implement the human rights provisions of a number of documents it had signed, such as the Helsinki Accords between the countries of NATO and the Warsaw Pact (1975). The government’s reaction was harsh. When some leaders tried to present the document of *Charta 77* to the Federal Assembly and the government, they were arrested and put in jail. The original document was confiscated, but copies already circulated in the country and were soon published in several

³ Archbishop Hilarion ALFEYEV, ‘Christian Witness to Uniting Europe: a Russian Orthodox view’.

Western newspapers. While Charta 77 spread as an underground movement, it caught much attention in the West, also among politicians.

Decisive factors

With the resistance of Churches and dissidents, winds of change had begun to blow, that would not abate anymore. Historians generally point out three factors that made these winds swell into the storm that would blast the whole Soviet system to pieces in 1989. The first was the workers' protest movement in Poland, that began with the mass strikes of 1970 and 1976. Like earlier protests within in the Communist world, these two strikes had emerged quite spontaneously out of an incident that unleashed suppressed frustration. Usually such movements were short-lived, and crushed by the military (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968). But this time, popular protest was so strong that it forced the government to make concessions. The movement culminated in the formation of the independent trade-union *Solidarność*, in 1980, led by Lech Wałęsa. Whereas most previous Polish revolutionary movements had been secular in nature, this one was decidedly Catholic. During its meetings, the symbols of the cross, the rosary, and the Madonna were deployed. Its very name (Polish for 'solidarity') refers to a basic principle of the Church's social teaching. Historians agree that its emergence was directly related to the impact of the first visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland in 1979.⁴ In the beginning, the Communist leaders recognised *Solidarność* as an official trade-union. But as the worker's movement gained momentum, they reacted more and more strongly. In December 1981, party chief Wojciech Jaruzelski declared the 'state of war'. Thousands, including Lech Wałęsa, were arrested. Even so, *Solidarność* it could not be totally suppressed. It went on as an underground movement.

The second factor was the election of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and thereby as the leader of the vast Soviet Union, in 1985. Unlike his predecessors, he took seriously the critique of dissidents and protesters. He saw the writing on the wall, realising that the days of the empire were counted, unless drastic measures of change were taken. To the surprise of the Western world as well as many in Soviet hierarchy, he introduced a policy of openness (*glasnost*) towards the West, consisting of more travel opportunities, cultural exchange, and economic collaboration. He also used his leadership to develop a policy of economic and political reform (*perestroika*). Intellectuals and Church leaders were allowed to openly question aspects of the Communist system. Furthermore, the republics within the Soviet Union (Ukraine, Lithuania, etc.) were granted more autonomy. The dynamics of change were set in motion, and the question was, where would this lead to?

Gorbachev's radical reforms turned, step by step, into a revolution that crippled the party and dissolved state authority. His greatest gift to the USSR's satellite states was to restore their sovereignty and pledge not to interfere in their affairs. To the dismay of hardliners like Erich Honecker in East Germany, the Soviets refused to back up former client states facing popular protests.⁵

The population in the satellite states of the Warsaw Pact took advantage of the new liberties to openly criticise their Communist leaders, especially in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. People demanded freedom to travel to the West, free democratic elections, and more freedom to practice their (Christian) religion publicly. People went to the streets calling for change. Contrary to the past, these demonstrations were not crushed by military repression.

⁴ Constantine PLESHAKOV, *There Is No Freedom Without Bread*, p. 82-85

⁵ Ronald SUNY, *op. cit.*

'Fear not'

Historians are generally agreed that the most crucial factor leading to the downfall of Communism was the influence of the Polish cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła, elected as Pope John Paul II in 1978. 'The Kremlin was appalled that a cleric from within the Soviet Bloc had been elevated to a position of global influence. The pope did not have any armoured divisions at his command, but his moral and religious authority at home and abroad translated into what Marxists understood to be a material force.'⁶

This Polish pope inspired faith and hope all over Central and Eastern Europe. In 1979 he preached a message in Rome that could not be misunderstood. 'Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid. Christ knows what is in man. He alone knows it.'

'Fear not'. That was the key phrase and the essence of all his messages. In the following decades he repeated that simple but powerful message wherever he went. 'Fear not'. Everybody in Central and Eastern Europe knew what the pope was saying to them through these simple but powerful phrase: don't compromise with Marxism, ultimately, the peaceful power of faith will prevail over the oppressive power of the atheist system. He inspired hundreds of thousands of Polish civilians to be on the street or on strike. In all the neighbouring countries, his influence was palpable.

John Paul II was called 'the travelling pope'. During his pontificate he made 146 visits outside Italy, to countries all over the world. His second foreign visit was to his homeland, Poland, in June 1979. He had planned this in April, in order to take part in the celebrations of the 900th anniversary of the martyrdom of St Stanislaw, the patron saint of Poland, but the government blocked this. The pope insisted, and negotiated a papal visit some months later, in June. Over the nine days of his Polish pilgrimage, as he called it, he went to many places and preached thirty-two sermons. He emphasised respect for basic human rights, including the right of a nation to freedom; and the role of the Church to help make men and women more devoted servants of each other, of their families and of their society.

This was possibly the most significant of all his trips as it set in train a series of events that led to the establishment of the Solidarity trade union, a movement which would subsequently play a key-role in the downfall of Communism. Indeed, John Paul II publicly defended the strikers of Solidarity. In a message to Stefan Wyszyński, archbishop of Warsaw and Gniezno, he and ordered the Polish Church to support them and provide practical aid. In January 1981, Lech Walesa visited Rome to meet with the pope. At that occasion, the sovereign pontiff gave official recognition and support to Solidarity as an independent trade-union.

John Paul II repeatedly denounced the division of Europe in two halves. He called this an artificial one, contrary to the whole history of Europe, insisting that East and West belong together as the two lungs with which Europe is breathing.

Summing up the three decisive factors and how they interrelated, Timothy Garton put them in the right order when he wrote: 'Without the Pope, no Solidarity. Without Solidarity, no Gorbachev. Without Gorbachev, no fall of Communism.'⁷

2 An amazing year

As the Communist regimes were rapidly losing the last bits of confidence they had among the population, people all over Central Europe openly manifested their desire for democracy, freedom of conscience, economic change and independence from Soviet domination. This came to a climax in 1989, an amazing year, at the end of which all the Communist regimes in the satellite states of the

⁶ *Idem.*

⁷ Quoted by Jeff FOUNTAIN, *op. cit.*

Soviet Union had been driven out of power. All of this happened so suddenly and so rapidly that journalists and observers were taken by surprise, while Western politicians were constantly running behind the facts. The Germans call it *Die Wende*, the 'turnabout'. Others speak of the Peaceful Revolution. In the following review of some key events of 1989 we shall notice the important role played by Churches and their leaders.

Vladimir Lenin, the champion of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 often explained that a revolutionary situation exists when a society is no longer willing to be ruled in the old way and the ruling elites are no longer able to rule in the old way. Such was indeed the case in Eastern Europe towards the end of the 1980s. Lenin's successors in the Kremlin lacked the willpower to resist the tide. 'Efforts to preserve power by shooting bullets failed, and ultimately the party bosses lost the will and ability to rule in the old way,' as Ronald Suny sums up very well the attitude of the Soviet leadership.⁸

A common feature of these revolutions was the extensive use of campaigns of nonviolent demonstrations and civil resistance. Of all the countries touched by the wave of revolutions of 1989, only Romania witnessed violent clashes with police and army forces. Interestingly, in the same year (April–June) large scale protests took place in the Tiananmen Square in Beijing. They failed to stimulate major political changes in China. However, the images of protesters courageous defying the tanks and the army troops spread around the world and certainly helped to precipitate events in Central and Eastern Europe.

Beginning in Poland

The cascade of events that would lead to the end of the Communist regimes began, as one might have expected, in Poland. A wave of strikes hit Poland in April and May 1988. A second wave began on 15 August in the coal-mines and spread to the shipyard of Gdansk, the birth-place of Solidarity. Under mounting popular pressure, president Jaruzelski and the government agreed to have formal discussions with Lech Wałęsa and other leading Solidarity members. On 4 April the historic Round Table Agreement was signed, legalising Solidarity and setting up partly free parliamentary elections to be held on 4 June. In a momentous landslide victory, Solidarity candidates obtained all the seats reserved for them in the Lower House and 99 out of the 100 available seats in the Upper House. The Communists lost their majority, when two smaller parties that were linked to the Communist party, decided to support Solidarity. On 29 August, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a supporter of Solidarity and a devout Catholic, was nominated as the country's first non-Communist Prime Minister since the Soviet take-over after World War II. Two weeks later, the parliament approved a new non-Communist government, the first of its kind in the Eastern Bloc. In a remarkable and democratic way, the Soviet one party system had come to an end. The following year, the first free elections took place, and Lech Wałęsa became president.

Border picnic in Hungary

In the summer of that year, people in Czechoslovakia crowded before the embassies of Western states, trying to get over the wall and obtain protection. Further south, over 10 000 Hungarians and East-Germans on holidays were flocking near the Hungarian-Austrian border-town Sopron, responding to an invitation for a 'Pan-European picnic' to celebrate the bonds between Austrians and Hungarians, and anticipate a Europe without borders. It was organised by the Pan-European Union and the opposition Hungarian Democratic Forum under the sponsorship of Archduke Otto von Habsburg Austrian member of the European Parliament. The border spot near Sopron was chosen because it was there that the foreign ministers of Austria and Hungary had cut some barbed wire on 27 June, making it a 'green border' without the old Iron Curtain structures, secured only by police patrols. The picnic party demanded an open border and free travel.

On 19 August, a symbolic opening of the border near Sopron was planned, lasting three hours and including a brief walk on the other side of the border by a delegation of the picnickers. In the run-up to the picnic, its organisers distributed pamphlets advertising the event. A large crowd turned up. In the afternoon things got out of hand, as East German holiday makers pressed through the gate, and ran into Austria. Some kissed the ground. The moment of their dreams had unexpectedly become reality. That day, more than 600 East Germans fled to the West. Hungarian border guards were ordered by the Ministry of the Interior not to intervene or carry arms. In fact the border guards helped people to flee.

Despite pressure from East Berlin and Moscow to tighten the border, the Hungarian government opened its borders on 11 September. This was the first time a Central European border was opened to citizens of Eastern Bloc states. A few months after the opening, more than 70,000 East Germans had fled to West Germany via Hungary.

Baltic Chain

On 23 August, a remarkable peaceful demonstration took place, in the form of a human chain right through the Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – 675 kilometres in all. Approximately two million people joined hands for at least 15 minutes in what would be called the Baltic Chain or the Baltic Way. They sang national songs and Christian hymns. Church bells were ringing all along the route. Catholic and Protestant church services were held.

The Baltic Chain was intended to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in 1939. Its secret protocols had divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence and led to the occupation of the Baltic states in 1940. Now, the organisers wanted to draw global attention to the fact that this occupation still continued, and to their desire for independence. This popular protest forced Gorbachev to officially recognise the injustice of the Molotov-Ribbentrop. The Kremlin allowed free democratic elections in all three Baltic states, which took place in February 1990. Pro-independence candidates won large majorities. The Lithuanian Parliament was the first to declare independence, followed some months later by the other two Parliaments. Moscow accepted.

The Baltic Way was the largest and most important campaign of the Baltic states to gain independence, but not the only one. In 1987, on the same date, thousands of people demonstrated in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn to commemorate the deportation of prisoners by the Soviets in 1941. The following year, tens of thousands took part in the remembrance campaigns, while in 1989 a full quarter of the population participated in the human chain.

In 2009, the European Union recognised 23 August as the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism.

From Church meetings to pushing down the Berlin Wall

The most dramatic of these turnabouts took place in the divided city of Berlin. East Germany's government, led by Erich Honnecker, did everything to prevent the changes that were taking place in the surrounding countries. Through the Stasi, the dreaded state security police, the East German regime held its population under control.

But even here, things would change dramatically within a short period of time. In February 1989, the pastor of the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig, Christian Führer, started weekly *Friedensgebete*, 'prayer meetings for peace'. Every Monday night, people could come to the church for a prayer service and stay to discuss how to work for a change in their country. At these occasions people openly expressed their demands for freedom and democracy, including the freedom to travel to the West. Some demanded the freedom to leave the country; others declared their commitment to stay. The authorities tried to pressure the church leaders to cancel the peace prayers, but to no avail. Arrests were made after each service, but the number of visitors kept growing: believers and unbelievers, discontent people, even Stasi collaborators turned up.

During the summer the meetings took the form of a peaceful popular protest movement. In the autumn, the movement was approaching its climax. On September 25, at the end of the service, crowds walked around the city's ring road carrying banners with the slogans 'We are the people', 'For a free and democratic country'. The following weeks, the same pattern was repeated. After the service, the congregation took to the street with their candles, they were joined by thousands of peace protestors outside, soldiers and police began to move into the crowd seeking provocation, but no-one allowed themselves to react in violence. The Church leaders insisted on non-violence. Pastor Führer described what happened:

When you carry a candle, you need two hands. You have to prevent the candle from going out. You cannot hold a stone or a club in your hand. And the miracle came to pass. Jesus' spirit of nonviolence seized the masses and became a material, peaceful power. Troops, industrial militia groups, and the police were drawn in, became engaged in conversations, then withdrew. It was an evening in the spirit of our Lord Jesus for there were no victors or vanquished, no one triumphed over the other, and no one lost face.⁹

Later the head of the Stasi admitted: 'We were prepared for everything, except prayers and candles.'

On October 9, the authorities sent troops, there were rumours that they were planning to open fire and cause a massacre. Despite the risk of a violent reaction, 70,000 citizens demonstrated in Leipzig that Monday, and the police forces refused to use their guns. This victory of the people encouraged more citizens to take to the streets. The following Monday, 120,000 people demonstrated on the streets of Leipzig, a week later they numbered 300,000. Jeff Fountain summarises: 'A movement inspired by prayer, the teachings of Jesus and the courage of church leaders to stand for truth and justice was spreading across the country.'¹⁰ It also reached Berlin.

The Communist regime tried to resist the popular demand for free travel and political change, but they could no longer count on the backing of the Kremlin. Apparently, Gorbachev had come to the conclusion that it was useless 'to go against this tide of history', as he put it during a visit to the East German government, on October 6 and 7. 'The one who comes too late is punished by life', he told his stubborn hosts.

The government had closed the border with Czechoslovakia earlier that year but they were compelled to open it again on 1 November. The following days, the Czechoslovak authorities let all East Germans travel directly to West Germany without bureaucratic procedures. On 4 November half a million citizens converged on the Alexanderplatz in East-Berlin demanding freedom. Unable to stem the ensuing flow of refugees to the West through Czechoslovakia, the East German authorities eventually gave in to public pressure by allowing East German citizens to enter West Berlin and West Germany directly, via existing border points, on 9 November 1989, without having properly briefed the border guards. When a spokesman of the regime affirmed in a TV press conference that these changes were in effect 'immediately, without delay' (which was actually not true), hundreds of thousands of people took advantage of the opportunity. The border guards were quickly overwhelmed by the growing crowds of people demanding to be let out into West Berlin. After receiving no feedback from their superiors, the guards, unwilling to use force, opened the gates. Soon the people forced an opening in other crossing points in the Berlin Wall by the people. Some began to tear down the wall, while others climbed over it. The bewildered guards meekly stood by as East Germans took to the wall with hammers and chisels. Berlin Wall did not 'fall' by itself, it was broken down!

Meanwhile, Gorbachev had decided that the Soviets would not deploy their tanks to intervene. The Kremlin simply gave no orders, leaving the bewildered regime in East-Berlin alone in the midst of the upheaval. Much later, it was revealed that he himself had left for his summer residence on the Black Sea during those critical days, thus adding to the disarray in the Soviet chain of command. A few weeks later the East German government collapsed.

⁹ Quoted by Jeff FOUNTAIN, *op. cit.*, Weekly Word of October 7, 2019.

¹⁰ Jeff FOUNTAIN, *op. cit.*, Weekly Word of October 7, 2019.

A dissident for president

One week after the breakdown of the Berlin Wall, the most easy-going of all turnabouts began in Czechoslovakia. It is called the Velvet Revolution – velvet because it was so peaceful. The catalyst was the November 17 student demonstration in Prague, marking the 50th anniversary of the violent suppression of the student demonstration in 1939, when Nazi troops stormed the Charles University in Prague. The event sparked further demonstrations: two days later, protestors numbered 200,000. The next day, 500,000 people took to the streets. Within four days the Communist Party leadership resigned, and on November 27 virtually the whole working population of Czechoslovakia joined a general strike for two hours. Under the pressure of the protest, and alarmed by the changes in the surrounding countries, the government were forced to negotiate with Vaclav Havel and the other leaders of the protest movement. On November 28 the prime minister announced the end of the one-party system. Meanwhile, troops were ordered to remove the barbed wire barriers on the West-German and Austrian borders. On December 10, a largely non-Communist government was appointed and on December 29, Vaclav Havel found himself transported to the Prague Castle as national president. In June 1990, Czechoslovakia held its first democratic elections since 1946.

A Pastor versus a dictator

And then there was László Tökés, a Reformed pastor in the Romanian city of Timisoara. He belonged to the sizeable Hungarian minority in the western part of Romania. Before 1989, Tökés had already protested many times against the actions of the secret police (Securitate) against churches, against the discrimination of the Hungarian minority, and against the violation of human rights. Police had frequently harassed him. Tensions culminated when a law court ordered Tökés' and his family to be evicted from his flat on December 15. The parishioners assembled outside his flat to prevent the eviction. Militia arrived but were unable to gain access to the pastor's flat. Tökés thanked the crowd and advised them to leave, but several hundred stayed in groups in the vicinity of his apartment.

The following days many young Romanians joined the Hungarian parishioners. Fearing a violent reaction of the militia, Tökés urged the crowd to disperse, but they stayed. More and more people joined them, including students from the local polytechnic university. They formed human chain, sang church hymns, but then launching into the patriotic song 'Awaken thee, Romania', that had been banned since 1947. Cries were raised, 'down with Ceausescu' (the communist dictator of the country). The crowd headed for the city centre where they threw stones at the Communist Party headquarters. Militia tried to drive them back to the church vicinity, but people seized the cannons, broke them up, and threw the parts into the river Bega. The following day, Tökés was arrested, which triggered off serious rioting. By now, the situation had become insurrectional.

During a new demonstration, on December 17, the army fired bullets on the crowd. Several people were killed. The news of the Timișoara revolt and the violent crackdown spread quickly across Romania and triggered protests in many other cities. On December 21, the regime organised a mass meeting in Bucharest, where Ceausescu held a speech to condemn the uprising in Timișoara. However, Ceaușescu was out of touch with his people and completely misread the crowd's mood. The people remained unresponsive, and only the front rows supported Ceaușescu with cheers and applause. About two minutes into the speech, some in the crowd began to jeer, boo, whistle and yell insults at him. Some started shouting 'Ti-mi-șoa-ra! Ti-mi-șoa-ra!', which was soon picked up by others in the crowd. The rally turned into a massive protest demonstration. A revolution was brewing right in front of the dictator's eyes. The entire speech and the interruptions were being broadcast live nationwide. Censors attempted to cut the live video feed and replace it with Communist propaganda songs and video praising the Ceaușescu regime, but parts of the riots had already been broadcast and most of the Romanian people realised that something unusual was in progress.

At first the security forces obeyed orders to shoot protesters. However, on 22 December, the Romanian military suddenly changed sides. Most rank-and-file soldiers joined the protesters. Army

tanks began moving towards the Central Committee building with crowds swarming alongside them. The rioters forced open the doors of the Central Committee building, but Ceaușescu and his wife Elena managed to escape via a helicopter waiting for them on the roof of the building. The next day they were abandoned by their body guards and arrested. On Christmas Day, Romanian television showed the Ceaușescus facing a hasty trial, and then being executed by firing squad.

An interim National Salvation Front Council led by Ion Iliescu took over and announced free elections for April 1990. During the week that transformed the country vary, some 1000 people fell victim, not only among the demonstrators but also among the police and army forces, due to chaos and infighting. Romania was the only country in the Warsaw pact that paid a heavy price for the overthrow of the regime.

3 Germany united – when enemies strike a deal

After the opening of the Berlin Wall, the old guard the East German regime had to make place for reformist politicians, during the first free elections in 1990. Meanwhile, the West German government, headed by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, pressed for the reunification of divided Germany. As history accelerated in 1989, leaders in East and West generally felt that reunification was inevitable. But the Kremlin was opposed. Surprisingly, in the Summer of 1990 the Kremlin gave up its opposition, and on 3 October 1990, the two Germanies were officially reunited.

What had caused the Kremlin to change its position? The key was the personal relationship between the German Chancellor and his Russian counterpart. We are reminded of the words of Condoleza Rice, at that time Director of the Soviet and East European Affairs for the US National Security Council, Condoleza Rice. As such she was an inside witness of the changes that were taking place. Several years later, when she had become US Secretary of State, she looked back at that time:

In a period of rapid change like the end of the Cold War, the time from early 1989 really through to 1991, personal relationships meant a great deal more than they might have at any other time.¹¹

Gorbachev and Kohl were very much opposed. Yet they came to trust one another and they struck a deal. How this happened has for a long time been concealed to the public, but since the archives of the Kremlin have become accessible, in 2010, we can reconstruct what happened behind the scenes.¹²

In his private diary, Anatoli Cherniaev, Gorbachev's closest aide, describes several personal experiences of the General Secretary during his meetings with Western leaders.¹³ With most of them he got on quite well, except with Helmut Kohl. The latter, a staunch anti-Communist, did not trust Gorbachev when he introduced reforms. 'I will not let myself be fooled,' he told a Newsweek reporter in 1986. Antipathy was reciprocal, because Gorbachev viewed Kohl as a mediocre provincial politician, just a mouthpiece of the Americans. For years, he had deliberately bypassed West Germany during his trips to Europe. But he came to the realization that he could not get around the Chancellor if he was to succeed in his policy of open relations with the West. So, he invited him to come to Moscow in 1988. At first, Kohl refused, saying that he would not 'take orders to travel there.' Gorbachev insisted, and Kohl gave in. In October 1988 they met for the first time personally, in an icy atmosphere.

However, both realised that they needed each other in order to get certain things done, so they met again, together with their senior ministers, on 13 June 1990 in Bonn. The Soviets were prepared to let

¹¹ Interview, 1997, quoted by Matthias VON HELLFELD, *op. cit.*

¹² In this paragraph, we follow the description of the events by Christian Neef, *op. cit.*, and Matthias VON HELLFELD, 'How Kohl and Gorbachev sealed the deal on German reunification,' published on the Website of *Deutsche Welle*, 14 July 2010.

¹³ Jean-Marie CHAUVIER, 'How Mikhail Gorbachev allowed the downfall of the Berlin Wall and the DDR' (Communist East Germany), in: *Global Research*, 12 November 2011. Article based on the personal diary of Anatoli Cherniaev, member of the Politburo of the Soviet Union and a personal aide of Gorbachev.

East Germany, the most prosperous Soviet country, leave the Kremlin's sphere of influence and join West-Germany. But the asking price was that a reunited Germany would no longer be a member of NATO, the Western military alliance. For a hardliner like Kohl, this condition was out of the question. He had always been in favour of a strong, heavily armed NATO as a shield against the Soviet Bloc. He simply didn't believe the Soviets had really given up on their old ideal to expand their influence to the West, so no agreement was reached, except that they would continue their discussions in Moscow, on 14 July. That would become a turning point in their relationship, perhaps because their spouses got on so well. One evening, two went to a concert of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra in the Kremlin. A journalist reported:

The atmosphere became friendly. Mikhail Gorbachev recalled later: 'this was a wonderful evening; we have talked quite frankly about general questions and problems.' And Helmut Kohl did his best to relax the atmosphere, stating that he would follow the example given by the General Secretary and that he wanted to open a new chapter in German-Soviet relations. He emphasised the common destiny of these two nations. The two men who had grown up during the Cold War, now agreed that they wanted to establish a relation of trust. Later, Gorbachev told one of his aides that he was 'impressed' by the approach of the Chancellor.¹⁴

Two days later, the two met in Stavropol, the birth-town of Gorbachev. 'Already during the first conversation Gorbachev agreed in principle to not stand in the way of a reunified Germany being part of NATO and regaining its full sovereignty,' recalls Horst Teltschick, deputy head of the German Chancellery who took the minutes at the meetings. Kohl convinced him that Germany within the NATO would not be a threat to the Soviet-Union. And so, the two struck a deal on 17 July

Kohl had obtained all that he wanted, but what did Gorbachev get in return? The Soviet Union was faced with an enormous foreign debt, due to costs of the arms race with the US, and the war in Afghanistan (1980-1985). Its economy was in a dire state, there was a food shortage due to failed grain harvests. He simply needed money. Kohl agreed to pay the costs of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany and their resettlement at home. He also promised financial aid to the ailing Soviet economy. The total amount West Germany ultimately paid is estimated at between 50 and 80 billion Deutsch marks (25 to 40 billion Euro). From the German point of view, this was a profitable deal. Afterward, Kohl admitted that he would have been prepared to pay even twice as much. Gorbachev later regretted, in conversations with his aides, that he hadn't asked for more.

Hardly three months later, Germany was reunited, without one bullet being shot. The bottom-line of it all is that two enemies buried their battle axes, crossed the border that separated them and became partners for a common cause, namely peace and freedom in the whole house of Europe. In so doing, they put in practice the Biblical principle of peace-making, to the benefit of their peoples.

4 The end of an empire and the new political map of Europe

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union itself was crashing down like a house of cards. In the course of 1991, the parliaments of all the republics within the Soviet Union voted for independence: Ukraine, Moldavia, Belarus, the Baltics (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia), the Caucasian republics Georgie, Armenia, Azerbaijan, as well as the Russian Federation, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin. Having lost its member states, the Soviet Union became devoid of its substance.

In December 1991, a group of hard-liners in the top of the Red Army plotted a coup d'état while Gorbachev was abroad. They sent troops to occupy the centre of Moscow and the Parliament buildings of the Russian Federation, in a desperate attempt to restore the old Soviet order. But hordes of people took to the streets, many climbed on the tanks. Leading the popular resistance, Boris Yeltsin persuaded the soldiers to give up their attempts, and so the army retreated. This was the last nail to the coffin of

¹⁴ Eike FRENZEL, in an article written in connection with the television documentary *Je t'aime, moi non plus – une amitié à la portée historique*, broadcast by the German-French channel *Arte*, 29 December 2009.

the Soviet-Union and the Soviet Communist Party. On Christmas Day 1991, both were formally dissolved. Having lost his function, Gorbachev was relocated in an apartment paid by the Russian Federation. The Soviet empire, for all its military might and its impressive territorial size, had come to an end.

Western leaders have praised Gorbachev for having allowed the democratic process towards independence, and for not having used full scale military force to prevent the Soviet empire from falling apart. However, some twenty years after these events, when researchers gained access to the archives of the Kremlin, it became clear that this leader was not as benign as the West had thought. In 1991 he has indeed to crush the independence movements with armed force. Red Army units were deployed to crush these movements by force, in Azerbaijan 143 people were killed, and fourteen in Lithuania. There were also violent confrontations in other Soviet republics. In the night of 8 April, a tragedy unfolded in the Georgian capital Tbilisi as Russian soldiers used sharpened spades and poison gas to break up a protest march in the city. During the following days twenty people were killed.

Be this as this may, military reaction to the independence movements was limited and given up rather quickly. The number of casualties is extremely low indeed, considering the enormous political change that was obtained.

New states

The political map of Europe had completely changed. While the German Democratic Republic had disappeared in a reunited Germany, the downfall of the Soviet Union led to the creation of ten new independent states (not counting the five Soviet Republics in Central Asia that also became independent).

Figure 10.1 New states in the former Soviet Union¹⁵



Even more states would emerge in the following years. Czechoslovakia, which was a federal state, fell apart in 1993, after the population of Slovakia had voted for independence in a referendum. The remaining western part became Czechia. The democratic and peaceful manner in which this split up took place, stands in sharp contrast to the way in which another federal state, Yugoslavia, disintegrated. This process began in 1990 with independence referendums in the two northern regions Slovenia and Croatia, but it soon turned into a violent conflict between ethnic and religious people

¹⁵ Source : Public domain, Mestisovoice <https://mestisovoice.net/about/former-soviet-union/>
Published 4 October 2012.

groups. Between 1991 and 1999 a series of wars were fought all over the country, the most dramatic one in terms of destruction, human suffering and numbers of victims was the war in Bosnia. These military conflicts are a dark page in the history of Europe post 1989 that raises serious questions, to which we shall return in the next chapter. At this juncture it suffices to mention the new states that emerged out of former Yugoslavia: besides Slovenia and Croatia also Serbia, North-Macedonia and Montenegro. Bosnia was split up in a Muslim and an autonomous Serbian zone. The independence of the former Serbian province of Kosovo is still a diplomatic issue. Serbia has never accepted it, and several other European states have not recognised it.

5 Struggles of transition

The triumph of the year 1989 remains a triumph of democracy, liberty, and of human rights. Churches regained their freedom to transmit the faith, organise church life, and express their view on moral issues in society. Former dissidents participated in the transformation of the political system of society. Some of them were elected to high offices. In Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel was nominated president in 1990. Lech Walesa, the emblematic leader of the Solidarity movement, won the presidential elections in the same year. As for László Tőkés, he did not remain silent in the face of nationalism and corruption in post-communist Rumania. Because of his double nationality, he could become a Member of the European Parliament for Hungary. He served this parliament as Vice President from 2010 to 2012.

As the countries of Central and Eastern Europe entered in the post-Communist era, they were faced with the challenge of transition from the old system to a new one. This implied three interlocking areas of change.¹⁶ To begin with, the political transition to a liberal democracy and the rule of law after the Western model. Generally speaking, there were four patterns in which this change took place:

- Roundtable negotiations between the Communist regime willing to reform the system, and leaders of the opposition (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia)
- Coups d'état of reformists within the Communist circles (East Germany, Bulgaria)
- Popular mass movement that forced insiders of the regime to unseat the leader (Romania).
- Internal change of the regime, changing from a Communist to a nationalist position, claiming independence from the Soviet-Union, and introducing multiparty democracy which allowed oppositional movements to take part in elections (Baltic states and Eastern Europe)

Whatever the mode of the political change, all these countries were faced with the fact that many former Communists remained in place. Even though they changed their political colours, they often continued old practices. It is one thing to introduce democracy, the emergence of a new generation of politicians mindset takes far more time and effort.

Secondly, the transition from a state administered economy to a market economy with free enterprise. This change took much longer than the political one, and it was a very painful one. Some countries applied a shock therapy, others organised a gradual change, but in both cases, a considerable part of the population suffered from impoverishment and unemployment. The gap between higher and lower incomes became ever wider. Taking advantage of the privatisation of public services, some became very rich (the so-called oligarchs), to the dismay of the general population. Most people were worse off than before, which nourished feelings of deception, and among some even nostalgia towards the old Soviet regimes. Many younger people migrated to Western Europe hoping to find better living conditions there. This aggravated the demographic decline, especially in the Baltics, Belarus and Ukraine. During the 1990s the Gross Domestic Product of all post-Communist countries dropped rapidly. In the following decades this was followed by gradual recovery and considerable economic

¹⁶ Rolf DAHRENDORF, 'Essay on the Revolution in Europe', quoted by Jacques RUPNIK, 'On Two Models of Exit From Communism', in and in many other academic publications on the transition in post-Communist Europe.

growth in Central Europe. At the same time, the countries of the former Soviet-Union continued to wrestle with economic stagnation. Lowest on the list of GDP is Moldova

Thirdly, the development of a civil society, i.e. the intermediate level of society between the individual and the state level. Civil society consists of educational institutions, health care, cultural and social activities, trade-unions, non governmental organisations, voluntary associations, and so on, including churches and Christian organisations. All of these belong to the private sector, i.e. independent from the state. Some also include the private economic sector in civil society. In the Communist system, there was no private sector. All economic, educational, social and cultural activity was controlled by the party and the state apparatus, that even extended their control to churches. In a free or liberal democracy, the civil society is vital.

Compared to the first two transitions, the transition to a civil society has proven to be the most difficult one. Shortly after the collapse of the Communist regimes, political analyst Rolf Dahrendorf argued, convincingly, that without the development of a civil society, the democratic transition would not be sustained. In a much quoted sentence he also wrote that the change to political democracy and the rule of law will take six months, the conversion to a market economy six years, and the emergence of a civil society sixty years. Of course, this was not meant as a precise timetable but as an indication how much time one transition takes, compared to others.¹⁷ Looking back on the thirty years since 1989, this indication has proven to be right. Why did it take so long for a civil society to emerge? Analysts usually point to the legacy of Communism, which did not allow the self-organisation of society, and created a deep-seated mistrust in the use of taking social and political action. Even so, three decades after the revolutions civil society is thriving in the countries of Central Europe, whereas countries in Eastern and Balkan Europe have more difficulty in leaving the legacy of Communism behind.

6 The spiritual factor

Here is another timetable: it has been said that the Revolutions of 1989 required ten years of struggle in Poland, ten weeks in Germany, ten days in Czechoslovakia and ten hours in Romania.¹⁸ Although this observation describes the quickness of the political change that transformed Europe, it understates the struggle of resistors in many of these countries.

What was the background of this all, what were the forces behind this sudden implosion of a system that ruled a large part of the world? We have already mentioned the counter-currents within the Communist world: dissidents, Churches, the Polish free trade union movement, as well as Gorbachev's policy of openness and reform. Besides these internal forces we also mentioned the influence of Pope John Paul II. Analysts and historians usually add other factors, such as economic stagnation in the Eastern Bloc and the astronomical costs of keeping up the arms race with the United States and its Western allies. Some argue that the diplomatic rapprochement between West and East paved the way for the Kremlin to , especially through the Helsinki Agreement on Peace and Security (1975).

However, as Jeff Fountain points out, 'while each of these factors may have played important roles, none really explains why it was at this particular time that this revolution of the human spirit was able to triumph'. He goes on to say that 'by ignoring the reality of evil, secular interpretations fall short of understanding the deeper spiritual revolution needed to challenge Marxism-Leninism as a doctrine and an ethic'.¹⁹

¹⁷ This thesis was first argued by Ralf DAHRENDORF, in his 'Essay on the Revolution in Europe' published shortly after the collapse of Communism. In this essay he identified the three interlocking areas of transition, and the thesis that *Essay on the Revolution in Europe*

¹⁸ Niels NIELSEN, *Revolution in Eastern Europe*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Jeff FOUNTAIN, 'The revolution behind the revolution in Eastern Europe', *Weekly Word*, August 12, 2019.

The role of churches and their leaders

Several authors have emphasised this spiritual factor, and notable the role of churches and their leaders. Georg Weigel, for instance, argues that the resistance of the Churches was the single most important that led to the downfall of the regimes, because they hit the ideology in its core:

The essence of Communism was its claim of human omniscience and omnipotence,... with a millennial hope of establishing heaven on earth and offering salvation in a political movement. This utopian ideology had to be confronted with spiritual truth, not merely a secular politics which had forgotten its own moral presuppositions.²⁰

Members of Christian churches – Protestant and Catholic — became key political actors in these historical events. The Church was the main institution to provide an alternative worldview to the Marxist ideology that was taught in the schools, in the workplace and in mandatory indoctrination sessions. In his analysis of the role of religion in the downfall of Communism, Niels Nielson speaks of a fundamental conflict between church and state, which he describes as follows:

...it must be said that the stereotype of a group of steadfast true believers giving unqualified prophetic witness against a brutal system is all too easily invoked. Such situations existed, and there were faithful martyrs, but the larger problem was the conflict between religion and culture, church and state in the Communist setting. Religion is a social phenomenon, not simply a matter of individual belief. It exists in community. Even religious communities that were compromised under communism stood apart from totalitarianism, challenging it. The continued life of the churches in spite of state control indicated that Marxist atheism had not won fully... ‘Tearing down the curtain’ was not just the work of movements and ideas; it happened because courageous men and women resisted apathy and fear.²¹

This is all the more significant since Churches and their leaders were unlikely political actors in a Communist state. Nevertheless, they generated among the people an incredible amount of motivation for political change. In East Germany, the Lutheran Church were at the forefront of the Revolution. Stephen Lazarus has documented its role, showing that Church leaders conducted dialogues between citizens and government leaders, in which they spoke up for the voiceless. They organised protests and emphasised the necessity of non-violence, following Christ’s example. Furthermore, they provided a safe meeting place for diverse activist groups, which united some of the most vocal dissenting elements in society that challenged the government’s authority. He concludes:

One certainly oversimplifies the Revolution to conclude that the overwhelming activism of the Church was the only factor determining the historical changes. To assert such, in fact, would be to apply a reductionist logic similar to that of the Marxist dialectical materialism against which the masses revolted. But definitely, the mass engagement of East German citizens with strong connections to the Church helped assure the success and peaceful nature of the Revolution.²²

After the *Wende*, East German Christians were politically engaged in establishing a forum to debate the future shape of society and the government. Several church leaders held important positions in the new coalition government. The fact that Churches have played a key role in the *Wende* in East-Germany, was demonstrated by a banner across a street in Leipzig, hung up by unchurched people, towards the end of 1989. It read: *Wir danken Dir, Kirche* (‘We thank you, Church’).

²⁰ George WEIGEL, *The Final Revolution*

²¹ Niels NIELSEN, *op. cit.*, p. 9

²² Stephen LAZARUS, ‘Pulling the Curtain down.’

Prayer

Last, but certainly not least, countless Christians in the West stood with their brothers and sisters in the Communist world, through prayer, and by providing Bibles and Christian literature. Open Doors, an organisation that reached out to the persecuted Churches, started a campaign in several countries in the West called 'seven years of prayer', in order that God would intervene to change the situation in the Communist world. This is just one of the many examples of such spiritual solidarity that could be given. All of that must surely be taken into account, when we believe in a living God who intervenes in history as an answer to the prayers and aspirations of his people.