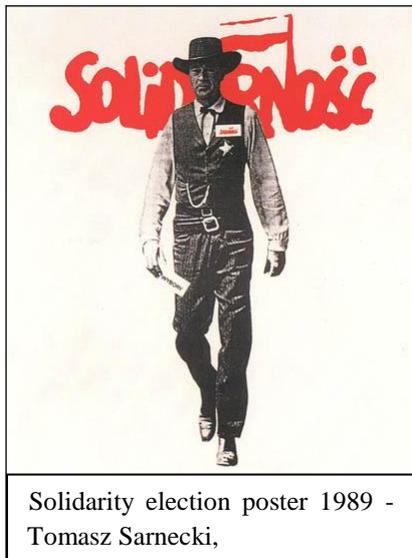


Poland and Czechoslovakia 1981-1989

IB Course Companion: 20th Century World History (edited and adapted extract)
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Poland

Solidarity may have been under political control but the social forces that had been released in 1981 would not go back in the bottle. Jaruzelski, to his credit, realised this. Political control was exercised alongside judicious reforms and concessions. Events surrounding the murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko illustrated this very well. Popiełuszko, a pro-Solidarity priest was found dead in October 1984; remarkably, Jaruzelski put the security police responsible for the murder on public trial. This allowed Jaruzelski to both win popular support and to undermine conservative opposition in the Party. In September 1986, Jaruzelski granted an amnesty to all people who had been detained during martial law. Jaruzelski quickly became Mikhail Gorbachev's most open supporter of Glasnost and oversaw the most liberalized of Eastern Bloc societies. International economic sanctions were dropped and in September 1987, Vice-President Bush made an official visit to Poland meeting both Jaruzelski and Wałęsa.



What would make Jaruzelski's delicate balancing act impossible to sustain, was the underlying weakness of the Polish economy. By 1987 the Polish economy was once again on the verge of collapse; the shortage economy was famously summed up by Adam Michnik when he said 'everybody's fondest dream was to be able to find a roll of toilet paper'. The government proposed some radical reforms including the creation of private firms, but also significant austerity measures which would result in major price rises. But most radical of all was how they planned to introduce the changes. In November 1987 the government conducted a national referendum asking the public for their approval of the changes. When the government unexpectedly declared itself defeated, Solidarity announced that Poland had entered 'a new phase' and that the 'war was over'. (Stokes: 120)

In early 1988, the Solidarity leadership fought to maintain discipline and control over the rank and file, as widespread strikes broke out. For the young strikers, many of whom were not Solidarity members, the lack of militancy of the Solidarity leadership or 'senators' as they characterized them, was a sign of weakness. In August 1988, Wałęsa was called to a secret meeting with Government ministers. If Wałęsa could get the strikes called off, the government offered to discuss the legalisation of Solidarity. Despite contrary advice from many of his closest advisers, Wałęsa agreed and after three days of cajoling, the workers went back. Jaruzelski also faced internal opposition to his plan of legalising Solidarity. The central committee plenum broke up without reaching a decision in December 1988 and only the threat of Jaruzelski's resignation in January 1989, forced the decision through.

The historic round-table discussions between the government, the Church, 'opposition' political parties, intellectuals and trade unions including Solidarity began on February 6th 1989. The most significant decisions were that Solidarity would be legally recognized and would be given minority representation in the new parliament. The elections were called for June 4th, allowing Solidarity just two months to prepare. In addition, the Communist Party coalition candidates would have the advantage of staff, offices, money and a monopoly over the media. Despite this, Solidarity prepared well; they nominated one candidate per seat, produced striking posters featuring images of Wałęsa and the famous Solidarity logo and they relied on a national network of enthused volunteers. Nobody anywhere predicted the sensational results. After the second round of voting, Solidarity candidates won all 161 seats they contested in the Sejm and 99 out of the 100 seats available in the Senate.

Solidarity proposed a coalition government, led by their prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki. After a phone call from Gorbachev and the assurance from Solidarity that Polish membership of the Warsaw Pact was not threatened, Jaruzelski accepted Wałęsa's coalition proposal. On the 21st of August, the 21st anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, 10,000 people took to the streets of Czechoslovakia. They sang 'Long Live Dubček', but they also sang 'Long Live Poland'. The success of Solidarity was about to influence the most extraordinary autumn in living memory.

'They must have known they would win! But they didn't. I sat with an exhausted and depressed Adam Michnik over lunch that Sunday, and he did not know. I drank with a nervously excited Jacek Kuroń late that evening, and he did not know. Nobody knew.' Historian and eyewitness Timothy Garton Ash – *The Magic Lantern* 1990.

Czechoslovakia

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was a new, reform minded leader, attempting to save the system by a loosening of economic and political control, tolerance of alternative opinions; the parallels with Prague Spring were obvious. Czechoslovakia's leader Husak's regime was based on a rejection of that previous effort to achieve 'socialism with a human face'; they had purged the reformers of 1968, and had clung onto power through the intervening years of 'normalisation'. The dynamic, new leadership in the Soviet Union was in stark contrast to the aging Czechoslovak apparatchiks. When asked what the difference between perestroika and Prague Spring was, he replied, "19 years." Even more threatening to the Husak's regime was Gorbachev's rejection of the Brezhnev doctrine. *"It's time to abandon foreign policy influenced by an imperial standpoint. Neither the Soviet Union nor the USA is able to force its will on others. It is possible to suppress, compel, bribe, break or blast, but only for a certain period.... That is why only one thing – relations of equality – remains."* (Gorbachev 1987) This was later summarised by Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov as the Sinatra Doctrine, each satellite was free to 'Do it their way'.

At the same time, the other pillar of Husak's regime, the fragile social contract with the workers, was being eroded by economic decline. The widening gap between East and West was impossible to hide in an age of improved communication, in which Western television and radio could endlessly demonstrate the material and cultural shortcomings of the Soviet Bloc. As the economy stalled, even the celebrated social mobility that characterised the rapid industrialisation of early state socialism and that enabled peasants' and workers' to access greater education and employment opportunities had ground to a halt. Ambitious, younger employees found promotional prospects blocked by older, long-serving political appointees. Party membership declined throughout the region and the numbers of those who genuinely believed in the parroted slogans of Leninist purity dwindled.

The Velvet Revolution, 1989

Encouraged by the fresh winds blowing from Moscow, increasing numbers of Czechs and Slovaks were prepared to voice their opposition to the regime. Some, such as the 'Bratislava Aloud' group, which in 1987 published a report criticising the government's disregard for the environment, developed from single issues. Other sources of opposition emerged from non-communist student groups. A petition formulated by the Archbishop of Prague attracted 500,000 signatures. Vaclav Havel was again arrested and imprisoned following his participation in anti-government demonstrations.

Elsewhere in the region, Soviet control was collapsing rapidly. Reform Communists in Hungary and Poland attempted to reach compromises with their opponents. In May 1989, the border between Hungary and Austria was dismantled, allowing free travel. In June, Solidarity won a share of power in free elections. In October and November, mass demonstrations in East Germany culminated in the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. On November 17th, in Prague, an officially sanctioned commemoration of Jan Opletal's death at the hands of the Nazis turned into yet another anti-government protest. The riot police violently assaulted the protesters causing many injuries. Rumours that a student had been killed lead to further outraged protests.

Havel sought to harness the strength of popular feeling, gathering like minded opponents to form Civic Forum, an umbrella organisation which articulated the people's demands. The government struggled to respond to the gathering strength of opposition and, ruthlessly purged of reformists, contained no credible alternatives to the architects of normalisation. This legacy of 1968 made it difficult for them to follow the lead of the Hungarian and Polish Parties. Another option, as attempted unsuccessfully in Romania the following month, was to adopt the Chinese Tiananmen Square example and order security forces to violently suppress the opposition. In retrospect, it is tempting to view the events of 1989 as inevitable but this threat of violence was a real risk that each individual involved in a street demonstration had to weigh up. In particular, the term "Velvet Revolution" glosses over the bravery required by those who openly confronted the state.

The rebels drew encouragement from events in neighbouring countries. Emboldened by the expanding possibilities, and legitimised by the masses of people on the streets, Civic Forum and their Slovak counterparts, People Against Violence, could demand ever greater concessions from the government. On November 24th Husak's successor as President, Milos Jakes resigned. Huge crowds greeted Dubcek and Havel as they appeared together in Prague. A General Strike on November 27th showed that the revolution had spread beyond Prague, beyond the intellectuals and students, to encompass the workers in a national rejection of the regime. In the following days, the Party renounced its right to a leading role and plans were made for free elections. Before the end of the year that had begun with his arrest and imprisonment, Vaclav Havel was elected as President of Czechoslovakia.

Question – A narrative of the events of the 1988-9 suggest a certain inevitability to the overthrow of the communist regimes. Why is this something we should try to avoid?