



Language

This section focuses primarily on the nationwide civil resistance movements in Eastern Europe, the Baltic States and the Soviet Union's subordinate ally, Mongolia, in the period 1989-1991. These 'velvet revolutions' led to the demise of Soviet-style Communism and of the military, political and economic bloc dominated by the USSR, and to the disintegration of the USSR itself.

The process was initiated by the 1980-81 Solidarity Movement in Poland, one of the most significant of recent movements of civil resistance. Under threat of Soviet military action, in December 1981 General Jaruzelski declared martial law. Solidarity weathered a period of severe repression, and in 1988 entered 'round table' negotiations with Jaruzelski, who offered to hold 'semi-free' elections in June 1989. Solidarity won all 35% of the seats it was allowed to contest, and – while Jaruzelski remained president – a non-Communist became Prime Minister.

In Hungary the (relatively reformist) Communist regime had allowed a degree of pluralism and dissent, including the formation of opposition parties in 1988. The mass nonviolent movements in the German Democratic Republic (GDR-East Germany) and Czechoslovakia toppled their hard line regimes, and there were less dramatic reverberations in Bulgaria. An uprising in Romania began with nonviolent protests in Timisoara in December 1989, but soon spread to Bucharest, where armed clashes broke out, the head of state, Nikolai Ceausescu, and his hated wife were shot, and the secret police played a sinister role in overthrowing the regime.

The 1989 revolutions were greatly assisted by Mikhail Gorbachev becoming General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985 and launching a process of 'glasnost' (openness) and 'perestroika' (transformation) culminating in 1989 elections to the Soviet that offered an unprecedented opportunity for autonomous participation and choice of candidates. Alongside his internal reform programme, Gorbachev initiated a major change in relations with the West, encouraging detente and arms control. As a result the threat of Soviet military intervention – which had ended the 1956 Hungarian Uprising and (eventually) the 1968 Prague Spring – was no longer a factor in 1989. On the contrary, Moscow helped to restrain the GDR politburo from using armed force to stem the growing resistance.

The easing of controls from above in the USSR encouraged growing protests from below relating to a range of issues including human rights, the environment, opposition to nuclear power (after the Chernobyl reactor explosion) and peace. In many non-Russian republics, such as Armenia, Georgia and the Ukraine, nationalist demands (expressed earlier in forms of dissent that was often suppressed) were strongly re-asserted. For an analysis focusing on the growing pressure from below see:

- , [The Awakening of the Soviet Union](#) [1][1990] Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, , 1991, pp. 256 .

The growing momentum of movements for independence in the three Baltic republics posed a particular challenge to Gorbachev, uncertain how far to use force to prevent secession. The likelihood of nationalist secessions was one factor in the abortive coup attempt in August 1991 by hard line party officials and figures in the military and security services. The defeat of the coup, which included popular resistance (see references under A.4a), and the role of the Russian republic under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, precipitated the dissolution of the USSR.



[bloc-1980-1991](#)

Links

[1] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/1991/awakening-soviet-union>