Why Did Communism Fail in the 1980’s?

**Long Term**

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| **Moral Degradation** | **Technological Standstill** | **Economic Stagnation** |
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**Short Term**

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| **Gorbachev’s Reforms** | **Polish Solidarity** | **Eastern Europe** |
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**●** Brezhnev had initiated a policy of ‘stability in cadre’ whereby all party officials and members of the bureaucracy retained their positions for life, which led to a Gentocracy of men in their sixties and seventies ruling the Soviet Union. The widespread corruption and bureaucratic privilege, created a mood the ranged from outraged to merely deep cynicism.

● In 1979, in order to support Socialism in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union got involved in its own Vietnam. However the Soviet Union could not afford a war with impossible objectives and it placed great stress on Soviet society.

● Gorbachev knew something was wrong but he never embraced a market economy in the same way that Deng Xiaoping was doing in China.

● From the 1970’s the Soviet Union had to start importing grain, which showed the inefficiencies that existed within the agricultural system.

● In Hungary, in 1989 there was a mass commemoration of the 1956 uprising, with no opposition from Moscow. Nameth the Prime Minister then removed the barrier between Hungary and Austria. 130,000 East Germans escaped over the border, but Hungarian officials did little to stop them. The German leader Honecker was quickly becoming an embarrassment and Gorbachev received a rapturous welcome when he attended the 40th anniversary of the GDR. The next day protests broke out in Leipzig and Honecker was forced to resign. On November 9 in an attempt to release tensions, passage to West Berlin was granted. The soldiers having no instructions decided to allow the gathered crowds to pull down the Berlin Wall. Eight days later protests in Prague saw the creation of a new democratic government under Dubcek and Vaclav Havel. On December 17 Ceaucescu, had soldiers fire on protesters in Romania. Eight days later he was executed by a firing squad having tried to flee by helicopter.

In Poland, Jaruzelski allowed the still illegal Solidarity to contest elections for a new parliament. To the astonishment of everyone the Solidarity won all but one seat.

● The new American President – Ronald Reagan, did not accept that the Cold War was permanent state of international affairs referring to the Soviet Union as an ‘evil empire’. Between 1980 and 1985 he doubled the Pentagon budget, and in 1983 he rejected the notion of MAD by announcing the building of the STI system of missile defence, which would destroy all incoming missiles from a series of satellites.

● Gorbachev was no longer prepared to intervene in Eastern Europe, he felt it would overstretch the Soviet Union’s resources and discredit its ideology. In December 1988, he announced at the UN General Assembly that the Soviet Union would be cutting its troops in the Warsaw pact by 500,000 men.

● The sudden drop in world oil prices in the early 1980’s, meant the Soviet Union was now achieving zero economic growth.

● Eastern Europe was quickly becoming an ecological disaster with stifling air pollution, groundwater contamination, acid rain and nuclear fallout after 1985.

● In all measures of development, Communism was failing infant mortality was rising and the life expectancy was actually dropping (largely due to rampant alcoholism) and 60% of Poland lived below the poverty line.

● Gorbachev may have been admired internationally, but in the Soviet Union by 1990 he was a figure of derision and ridicule. The Soviet Union was breaking up and he was under pressure from Boris Yeltsin to submit to a popular vote. On August 18, 1991 a reactive coup was carried out by Communist hardliners. The coup was ill thought out and had little support, but Gorbachev was under arrest for three days. Yeltsin signalled he was the new leader of Russia when he stood on a tank outside the Kremlin and demanded Gorbachev’s release. Yeltsin then abolished the Communist Party and dissolved the USSR.

● In December 1979, the Polish army opened fire on striking workers in Gdansk and Gdynia, but the Brezhnev doctrine was not invoked. Instead western goods were imported to stifle discontent, again revealing the weakness of the socialist system.

● Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and issued a policy of *Glasnost* (openness). This was a very candid admission of the stagnation of Soviet Society and the need for substantial changes that gave the impression of a national crisis. The cumulative effect of all this was to destroy what legitimacy the government still had.

● In 1989, Gorbachev encouraged multi-candidates for a new parliament, which saw many old bosses lose decisively. Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution was repealed, which allowed other political parties.

● GNP spending on the military was around 20%, which drained the economy and meant there was a shortage in consumer products, despite the promises of the party.

● The centrally planned economy was not well suited to the growing technological revolution, which required decentralised decision making and creativity to succeed.

● In August 1980, strikes were again taking place at the Gdansk shipyard. An electrician, named Lech Walesa began organising workers and formed the first non-alligned trade union in the Communist world – the Solidarity. This movement had the approval of the new Polish pope John Paul II. Who was nearly assassinated by a Hungarian agent.

● The Soviet Union had always succeeded when it was threatened, or its leaders created the impression of being threatened. The accommodation with the USA ‘Détente’ in the 1970’s meant that opposition to the regime was no longer un-patriotic.

● The policy of Glasnost, opened up longstanding grievances in the former republics, particularly Latvia, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan.

● There were few incentives to work hard in a system where wages were relatively fixed, jobs secure and goods in short supply. Among workers there was a belief that ‘we pretend to work and they pretend to pay us’.

● As threatening as the Solidarity was in Moscow, it could not afford to intervene militarily in Poland. It was already bogged down in the war in Afghanistan and it was clear that if they west imposed sanctions following intervention in Poland then, it could not afford to support Eastern Europe.

● Gorbachev reduced the role of the central planning bureaucracy, increased the power or managers, permitted partnerships with wester firms and allowed land to be leased on a long term basis. In this climate Gorbachev became very open to the criticism of either goring too far or not going too far enough.

● The Soviet Union was far different from that of Stalin or even Khrushchev. It was now far more urbanised and educated. These people sought far greater freedom than they were being allowed, thousands of rock groups were formed and banned manuscripts were passed relatively freely.