

A black and white photograph of a large crowd gathered at night in front of a building with a glowing sign. The crowd is dense and fills the lower half of the frame. The building in the background has a prominent sign that reads "1951". The overall atmosphere is one of a significant public event or protest.

# ***A SPIRITUAL UPRISING***

*HOW TRUTH, FAITH & HOPE  
OVERCAME LIES & OPPRESSION  
TO TOPPLE COMMUNISM*

***JEFF FOUNTAIN***

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## INTRODUCTION

# *The spiritual roots of the peaceful revolution that toppled communism*

**Three decades have now passed since the Berlin Wall crumbled, unravelling communism in Eastern and Central Europe and hastening the end of the Soviet Union. A whole generation has been born and raised since then with no living memory of those events.**

Those of us who do remember the string of people's revolutions in country after country also recall the euphoric sense of witnessing the end of a system we had assumed would be around for ever and ever, amen! Although we had perhaps prayed for an end to the oppression and persecution of the church in the communist world, we found ourselves like the church in Jerusalem who, while praying for Peter's release from prison, could not believe the servant girl when she said Peter was actually standing at the front door! (*Acts 12*).

So what caused the great implosion of a system that had gained control of most of Eurasia, from East Germany to China, ruling with an iron fist and attempting to wipe out religion, especially Christianity?

Some said Gorbachev, Reagan and Thatcher were the key players. Others looked to the diplomatic impact of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the resulting Charter 77. Still others maintained collapse to have been inevitable given the technological and managerial backwardness of the command economies: it was a matter of 'delayed modernisation'. Yet others, like Francis Fukuyama, claimed that the West had won because it was 'on the right side of history' which favoured



decentralised decision-making in the market economy and in politics (democracy).

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. Several writers at the time pointed out that by ignoring the reality of evil, secular interpretations fell short of understanding the deeper spiritual revolution needed to challenge Marxism-Leninism as a doctrine and an ethic. The essence of communism was its claim of human omniscience and omnipotence, as George Weigel argues, 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.

Weigel (*The Final Revolution*), Michael Bordeaux (*Gorbachev, Glasnost and the Gospel*) and Barbara von der Heydt (*Candles behind the Wall*) were among those who pointed to the spiritual roots of the peaceful revolution that toppled communism, and the key role of the churches.

In these short stories, published in the summer of 2019 on the thirtieth anniversary of most of these events in [weeklyword.eu](http://weeklyword.eu), we tell stories revealing the spiritual dimension of these momentous months and years, including:

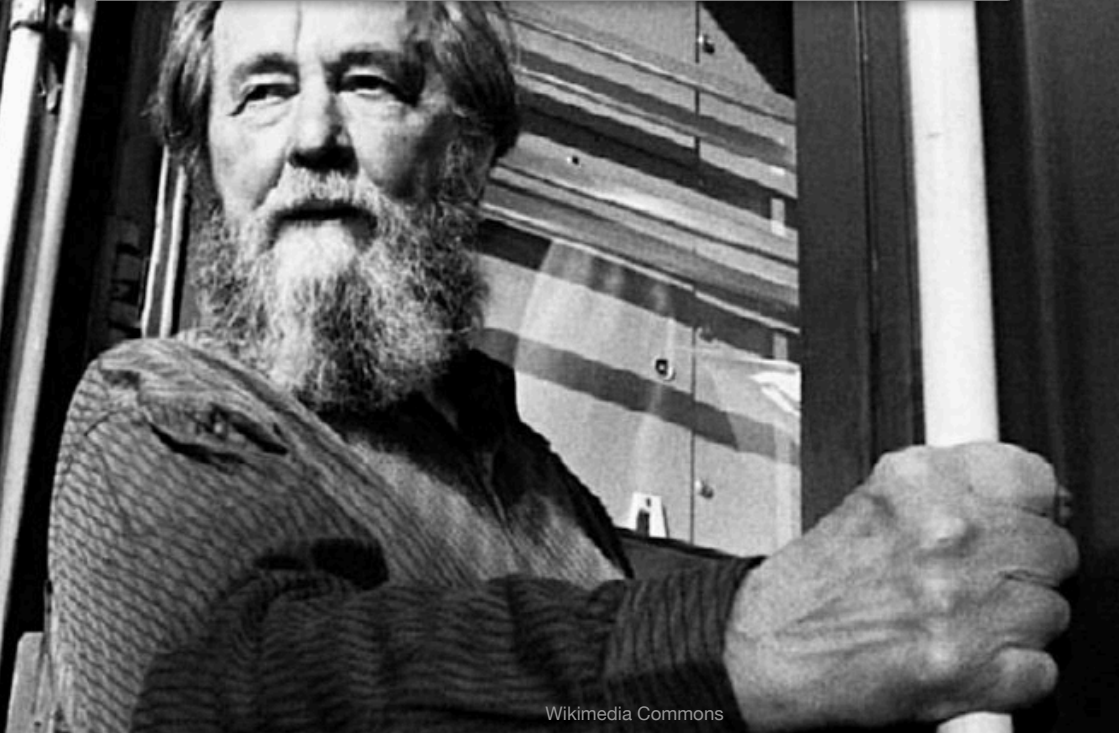
- The **election of a pope** who had experienced communism first-hand and whose inauguration address in 1978 carried to the communist world the message, ‘Be not afraid!’, was itself enough to strike fear in the hearts of communist leaders whose whole system was built on the politics of fear;
- When **Czech playwright Vaclav Havel**, calling for ‘politics of truth’ and urging his fellow citizens ‘not to live the lie’, inspired a

movement resisting an edifice of falsehood before Gorbachev, Reagan and Thatcher entered the world stage;

- The **pan-European picnic** which took place on the border of Austria and Hungary in August 1989 imagining a Europe without borders;
- The rise of **the Solidarity movement** in Poland under the leadership of Lech Walesa, who to my great surprise one day in May 1981 walked into a Warsaw hotel dining hall to eat breakfast at the table next to mine;
- The **Hill of the Crosses** in Lithuania expressing the defiance of the human spirit to atheistic oppression;
- The **Singing Revolution** in Estonia and **the Baltic Way**, the human chain formed across the Baltic states on the fiftieth anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, on August 23, 1989;
- The **Prayer for Peace movement** in the St Nicolas Church in Leipzig (where J.S. Bach had once been choirmaster), when the soft powers of peace, truth, love and prayer overcame violence and lies.
- The **People's Revolution in Romania**, which began in Timisoara when the congregation of a Reformed pastor formed a protective circle around his house to prevent his arrest, an action that swelled into a city-wide revolt against the authorities and culminated in a crowd of thousands kneeling on the frozen city square chanting, 'God exists! God exists!'

# 1. The truth teller

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN (1918-2008)



**Nearly two decades before the names of Gorbachev, Reagan and Thatcher appeared in global headlines, one Russian writer emerged from the Soviet gulags as the voice of truth and exposé of injustice.**

ALEKSANDR ISAYEVICH SOLZHENITSYN is credited with doing more than any other critic to demolish the moral and intellectual case for Communism. In 1962, this previously unknown author published a short novel in the literary magazine *Novy Mir*. The provocative undertone of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* caused a

sensation within the Soviet Union and around the world, leading many Soviet readers to conclude at the time that government censorship had been abolished. It described in clear, direct language the gross injustices endured daily by a simple prisoner, one of thousands in secret labour camps across the Union.

Born in 1918, a year after the Bolshevik Revolution, Solzhenitsyn grew up with a fervent belief in Marxism-Leninism. He served in World War II as commander of an artillery battalion, earning two medals for bravery. But in 1945, he was arrested for criticising Stalin and the Soviet Army in letters exchanged with a school friend, and sentenced to eight years of hard labour in a prison camp.

There he learnt the reality of the Soviet reign of terror and lies. Eight years stretched to eleven years in prisons, camps and exile. *One Day* was written six years after his 'rehabilitation' as a debt to the ghosts of his fellow prisoners, the first of numerous novels, plays, essays, poems and short stories attempting to expose the system which had incarcerated and murdered millions.

### ***Censored***

Blacklisted by the censors, Solzhenitsyn completed two big autobiographical novels: *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, based on his gulag experiences and his successful treatment for abdominal cancer in Tashkent respectively. Refused for publication in the Soviet Union for their ethical scrutiny of Soviet society and of government crimes, they were smuggled to the West where they became best sellers.

Solzhenitsyn was banished from the state-sponsored Writers' Union, and became outcast along with other independent writers who pioneered a new clandestine publication format called *samizdat*: poems, novels, stories and political manifestos typed and mimeographed copies secretly circulated and often sent abroad.

By the late 1960's, these writers broadened into the Dissident Movement, including academics, lawyers, scientists and engineers, unofficially led by the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Andrei Sakharov. They promoted freedom of expression and peaceful political change in the Soviet Union, and drew a global audience of readers.

In 1970, Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, “for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature”, drawing strong official criticism from the Soviets as “clearly dictated by speculative political considerations, not literary merit”. Fear of not being allowed back into his homeland prevented him from travelling to Sweden to receive the award.

### ***Banished***

Three years later, still in the Soviet Union, he smuggled abroad his three-volume masterpiece, *The Gulag Archipelago*, in a head-on challenge to the legitimacy of a Soviet state perpetuating wholesale incarceration and slaughter of millions of innocent victims on a par with the Holocaust. While many in the West were pursuing ‘*détente*’ in its relations with the Kremlin, *Gulag* demolished any claims to moral superiority communism had over its enemies.

The Soviet response was to strip Solzhenitsyn of his citizenship and banish him to the West. He spent most of the next two decades in Vermont, USA, before finally returning to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1994.

Later in life, he said: “If I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat (what I heard when a child from old people explaining the great disasters that had befallen Russia): ‘Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.’”

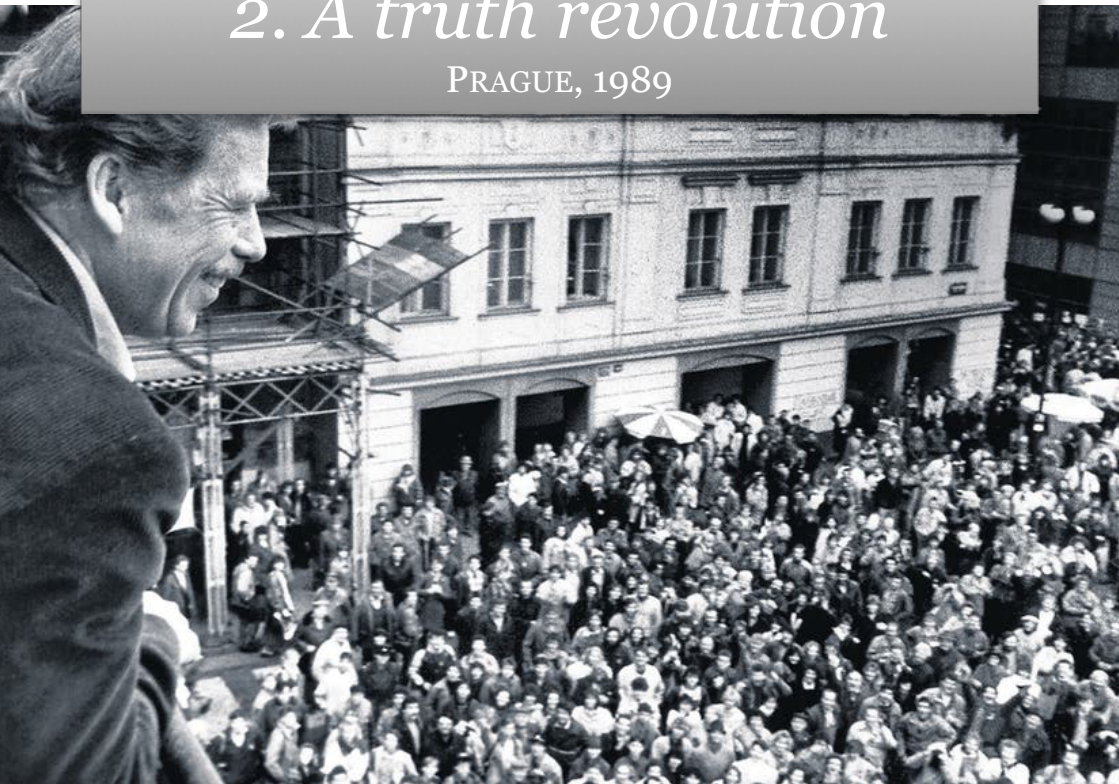
The day he was arrested in 1974 and put on a plane to Germany, he wrote: 'The simplest and most accessible key to our self-neglected liberation is this: personal non-participation in lies.... It is the easiest thing to do and the most destructive for the lies. Because when people renounce lies it cuts short their existence. Like a virus, they can only survive in a living organism.'

This exhortation to refuse to live the lie was to be echoed powerfully by the Czech playwright Václav Havel in the years immediately following Solzhenitsyn's exile, nurturing a simmering spiritual revolution which eventually ignited the Velvet Revolution.

While his support of Putin's Russian nationalism and opposition to Ukraine's independence have raised questions about his final legacy, Solzhenitsyn's heroic unmasking of the horrors of the Soviet regime was vital in communism's downfall.

## *2. A truth revolution*

PRAGUE, 1989



Petar Kujundzic/Reuters/File 1989

**Over the last six weeks of 1989, the Velvet Revolution in what was then Czechoslovakia saw the non-violent transition of power from one-party rule to a democratic parliamentary republic.**

It culminated in the surreal presidential installation of dissident playwright Václav Havel by public acclaim in Prague Castle on December 29. Thus ended forty-one years of communist rule in Czechoslovakia.

The catalyst for this revolution was the November 17 student demonstration in Prague. Riot police moved in to suppress the demonstration marking the 50th anniversary of the violent suppression of another student demonstration in 1939. That was against the Nazi storming of Charles University in Prague, which had resulted in 1200 arrests and nine killings. The 1989 event sparked further demonstrations: two days later, protestors numbered 200,000. The next day, 500,000 took to the streets. Within four days the Communist Party leadership had resigned, and on November 27 virtually the whole citizenry of Czechoslovakia joined a general strike for two hours.

With other Warsaw Pact governments collapsing around them, the Communist Party saw the writing on the wall. On November 28 it announced the end of the one-party state. Barbed wire barriers on the West-German and Austrian borders were removed early in December. On December 10, the first largely non-communist government was appointed and on December 28, Alexander Dubček, leader of the abortive Prague spring of 1968, was elected speaker of parliament.

The next day, Havel found himself transported to the Prague Castle as national president, and the Velvet Revolution was complete. In June 1990, Czechoslovakia held its first democratic elections since 1946.

### **Religious freedom**

More than a year earlier, however, on March 25, 1988 in Bratislava, a demonstration took place which is recognised as the first important public event leading to the destruction of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Instigators of the demonstration were Roman Catholic dissenters agitating for religious freedom in Czechoslovakia. Five thousand Slovaks protested in a central square with candles in their hands, with another six thousand in nearby streets. Secret police blocked the square's main entrance, using water cannon against protesters before attacking them with clubs.



Yet even earlier, the writings and personal actions of Václav Havel over the previous decade had more than anything else aroused the conscience of his own people, and of those far beyond his nation's borders. Deeply influenced by the exiled writer Solzhenitsyn, Havel too believed in the need for a spiritual dimension in politics and echoed the Russian's exhortation to refuse to live under the lie.

Havel translated into his own context Solzhenitsyn's exhortation to his readers to choose not to 'sign, write or print in any way a single phrase which in his opinion distorts the truth; ... not to 'attend demonstrations and meetings if they are contrary to his desire; ... 'to walk out of a meeting, session, lecture, performance of a film if he hears a speaker tell lies, or purvey ideological nonsense or shameless propaganda...'

### **Transcendental origins**

In 1978, Havel circulated underground his own banned essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, sharing how loose communities of individuals united in a common cause could undermine oppressive regimes using the weapon of truth. Translated into multiple languages, it was embraced as a manifesto for dissent in Czechoslovakia, Poland and other communist regimes.

Havel was a founding member of the Charter 77 movement whose motto was: *Truth prevails for those who live in truth*. Imprisoned multiple times for his stand on truth, Havel drew on a long tradition of dissent dating back to the 15th century Czech reformer and national hero, Jan Hus. He repeatedly declared Hus' words, '*Truth prevails*', later making them his presidential motto. Repeatedly in his campaign against falsehood and oppression, he declared that 'truth and love must prevail over lies and hatred'.

Havel recognised that truth and love had transcendental origins. If democracy was not only to survive but to expand successfully, he said, it had to 'renew its respect for that non-material order which is not only

above us but also in us and among us and which is the only possible and reliable source of man's respect for himself, for others, for the order of nature, for the order of humanity, and thus for secular authority as well.'

Although not an active church-goer, he decried the 'great departure from God' in our world unparalleled in history. The world's crisis was rooted in the spiritual condition of modern civilisation, the loss of an experience of the transcendental.

Havel wrote to his first wife Olga Havlová about his own 'epiphanic experience' in prison: "I sat on a pile of rusty iron and gazed into the crown of an enormous tree that stretched, with dignified repose.... I felt a sense of reconciliation indeed of an almost gentle consent to the inevitable course of things as revealed to me now... A profound amazement at the sovereignty of Being became a dizzy sensation...; an unbounded joy at being alive, at having been given the chance to live through all I have lived through, and at the fact that everything has a deep and obvious meaning... I would even say that somehow I was 'struck by love'... "

In *Disturbing the peace* he wrote: "As soon as man began considering himself the source of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything,' the world began to lose its human dimensions, and man began to lose control of it.'

In biographer James Sire's words, Havel had become the intellectual conscience of international politics.

# 3. *The beginning of the end*

WARSAW, 1979



Image from the film: 'Liberating a Continent: John Paul II & the Fall of Communism'

**The greatest, most unexpected event of the 20th century was the non-violent fall of the Soviet Empire. Mikhail Gorbachev, the eighth and last leader of that empire, readily admitted that it would have been impossible without Pope John Paul II.**

General Jaruzelski, the last communist ruler of Poland, reflected that the Pope's visit to Warsaw in 1979 was the detonator that spread a revolution from Poland to the heart of the empire in Moscow.

For Vaclav Havel, the Pope's 1979 pilgrimage to Poland was 'a miracle', more important than anything other world leaders had done. When Karol Wojtyła became Pope John Paul II on October 16, 1978, the

communist leadership of Poland had reason to fear. They knew him well.

Twenty years earlier, they had backed his nomination as auxiliary Archbishop of Krakow. They knew him as intelligent, personable, open-minded, open to compromise, and not yet political nor radical. They thought he lacked organizing and leadership qualities and would be easily influenced. For these same reasons, Wojtyla ranked only seventh on Polish Primate Wyszynski's list of candidates for the job.

Much later, General Jaruzelski admitted how much his Communist colleagues had underestimated Wojtyla by judging the bishops ahead of him on the list of candidates as not 'state-friendly'. They pushed for Karol Wojtyla. "The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways," he once joked.

## **Renewal**

Wojtyla was afraid of politics initially, say close friends. In the 70's, however, he began to see that everything was political in a totalitarian state. His career developed within the spiritual climate shaped significantly by Cardinal Wyszynski who, imprisoned in 1953 by the communists, had spent his prison years writing books and planning a national strategy for pastoral renewal. After reinstatement in 1956, Wyszynski had launched the 'Great Novena', a nine-year initiative of spiritual renewal to culminate in 1966, the millennial celebration of Polish Christianity. Each year a theme (faith, the Ten Commandments, family life, the moral life, social justice...) became a focus of teaching across the nation. In the millennial year, the cardinal had drawn crowds of hundreds of thousands across the land in an unprecedented display of devotion to the Church and a revived sense of nationhood rooted in Christianity.

The 'Great Novena' was major turning point in the country's struggle against communism. Among the renewal movements emerging to help lay moral foundations were the Oasis summer camps under the

charismatic leadership of Father Blachnicki, (where YWAMers were among the speakers in the 70's and 80's).

Wojtyla's own political journey is illustrated by the struggle to build a church in Nowa Huta, a town built by the Communists as a paradise for the workers of the Lenin Steelworks in the 1950's. As the workers were assumed to be atheists, no church was included in the town's plan. The workers thought otherwise. Wojtyla, as their bishop, fought on their behalf for their right to have a church. Year after year, he and other priests preached sermons and administered mass in the open field – summer and winter – where the church was supposed to be built. Crosses were set up in the designated area and bulldozed down at night, only to reappear days later. Eventually the authorities agreed to allow a church to be built – outside the town. Wojtyla compromised and agreed. Nearly twenty years after the first request for a permit, in May 1977, Karol Wojtyla consecrated the Ark Church, a symbol of the church saving the people through the storms of communist rule.

## **Hope**

The following year, as the first non-Italian pope since the Dutch Pope Adrian VI (1522–1523), John Paul II declared from St Peter's in Rome a message that struck fear in the hearts of Communist rulers: “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.”

While Poles everywhere lit up with hope when they heard of the election of ‘their’ pope, the Warsaw regime knew they now had a powerful enemy in Rome: able to arouse feelings of deep piety and patriotism across the whole Polish nation, able to expose the Communist lie, able to promote a true universalism, an alternative politics based on human created in God's image, and a democracy truly

representing the voice of the people. Too late they realised how much they had underestimated 'their' Karol Wojtyła.

John Paul II brought with him four personal convictions: a rejection of the artificial 'Yalta' division of east and west, as a grave injustice; a belief that west and east belonged together in a Europe as a body breathing with two lungs; a Polish patriotism, not as narrow nationalist but as an internationalist who believed Poland's suffering, 'crucified between two thieves', would carry redemptive value for the whole world; and a belief that the impending dawn of the third millennium should be the occasion for the renewal of the human spirit based on 'the truth about man'.

He planned his first pilgrimage to Poland for May 1979, the 900th anniversary of the martyrdom of St Stanislaw, personally slain by the Polish king Bolesław II the Bold. Alarmed by the symbolism, the Communist regime refused an invitation. The Pope negotiated a visit one month later, in which he preached thirty-two sermons over nine days: about respect for basic human rights, including the right of a nation to freedom; and about 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 visit, the first of several, was seen by many as the beginning of the end of the Yalta imperial system throughout Stalin's empire.

What Havel described as 'a miracle' proved to be a political, psychological, moral, spiritual earthquake, a moment when millions of Poles decided to live 'as if' they were free. Within a year, some of them were to flesh out this new conviction in a movement of solidarity called *Solidarność*.

Oxford professor Timothy Garton Ash put it this way: "Without the Pope, no Solidarity. Without Solidarity, no Gorbachev. Without Gorbachev, no fall of Communism."

## 4. A workers' revolution

POLAND, 1980-89



Reuters

**Two years after Pope John Paul II had celebrated mass with hundreds of thousands of his fellow Poles on Victory Square in Warsaw, I found myself in Poland's capital to address a student conference.**

It was May Day weekend, 1981, when compulsory participation in the annual parade had been suspended. Little attention was given to the parade. Instead crowds flocked to the events organised by the *Solidarity* trade union, a movement which had mushroomed the year before to a membership of ten million.

The pope's first pilgrimage of June 1979 had been a watershed. Nine days of public events hammering on themes of truth, dignity and human rights had released new hope for a different future. Poles had

come to realise “how many and strong ‘we’ the people were and how few and weak ‘they’ the regime were”. ‘We’ were those who would live for truth, for dignity, for solidarity. ‘They’ were those who treated humans as objects, units of production, tools of the state.

The visit had laid foundations for a moral revolution to be effected by a people with a newfound solidarity. ‘Solidarity’, a pillar of Catholic social teaching stemming from the common origins of the human race in the Creator God, implied that humans should seek the common good of the whole.

In August 1980, sharp price increases had provoked worker strikes, as previously in 1956, 1970 and 1976 when violent suppression had led to fatalities. This time in Gdansk, the workers were joined by dissident intellectuals. Led by shipyard electrician, Lech Walesa, an independent, illegal, self-governing trade union, *Solidarność*, emerged. The right to voluntary association for the organisation of economic life having been declared at Vatican II, *Solidarność* had the support of the Catholic Church.

### **Optimism**

For the communist regime, *Solidarność* was doubly threatening. Not only was it an independent union within a system where everything was state-controlled, it was a workers’ union rebelling against a so-called ‘workers’ state’. It exposed the lie of the communist claim to represent the workers.

At first the regime felt forced by public pressure to recognise the union. But Soviet bosses in the Kremlin were even less amused and pressured the Polish government to restore ‘normalcy’.

Warsaw in May, 1981, when I arrived, was still bathed in optimism and hope. Red and white *Solidariność* posters were plastered everywhere. Walesa’s face, including his walrus mustache, had become famous worldwide through the media.



When I asked the euphoric students what they would do if and when the Russian tanks arrived, they laughed and said: “We’ll just turn all the signposts around!” To my driver and me, Warsaw seemed to be doomed to suffer the fates of Budapest (’56) and Prague (’68).

Next morning as we ate breakfast in a hotel dining room, a small group of men and women entered and sat at a neighbouring table. I immediately recognised the mustache at the centre of the conversation. Here was the shipyard electrician who was shaking up the whole communist world with his circle of advisors!

## **Resistance**

I found myself wondering what would become of him. Would he be imprisoned, murdered, or simply disappear without trace? He certainly had enemies in high places. Exactly two weeks later, those enemies attempted to assassinate John Paul II in Rome.

When martial law was declared in Poland seven months later, Solidarity was outlawed and Walesa and other leaders were imprisoned. The Polish Communist Party continued to find itself on the defensive, unable to meet the moral challenge. “This was not socialism with a human face,’ it was observed, ‘but communism with a few teeth knocked out.’

Years of struggle followed in which the Catholic church grew as the resistance church, offering oases of non-violent resistance, comfort and hope. Father Jerzy Popieluszko started a monthly ‘Mass for the Fatherland’ after martial law was declared, drawing thousands not only inside the church, but up to twelve thousand standing outside sometimes in the snow. “Will you choose for good or evil, truth or falsehood, love or hatred?” he challenged his congregations.

Within two years, Father Jerzy was brutally murdered. At his funeral, Walesa, now released, urged the people not to be provoked to violence. Popieluszko's grave became a shrine for pilgrimage, a focal point for a national movement of resistance, solidarity and non-violence.

The pope's visits in 1983 (when he met personally with Walesa) and 1987 continued to agitate for the recognition of *Solidarity*, which finally came in February 1989.

The doors were now open for *Solidariność* candidates to contest and win the vast majority of parliamentary seats. Walesa's old advisor, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was appointed prime minister.

The next year, to complete the workers' revolution, Lech Walesa became the first president of a democratic Poland – something I had never dared to imagine that morning in the Warsaw dining room.

## 5. *The hill of crosses*

LITHUANIA, 1850-1985



**Exactly when the first crosses appeared on the Kryžių Kalnas—or the Hill of Crosses—in northern Lithuania, no-one really knows.**

Not far from the Latvian border, hundreds of thousands of crosses of all shapes and sizes cover this small hill which for centuries has been a sacred shrine. It has survived the repeated efforts of authorities to stamp out ‘ignorance’ and ‘fanaticism’.

Like a giant pin-cushion, it is a monument of folk art with many hand-carved crosses; some miniature, others five metres-high; some intricate

and elaborate, others crude and simple; most anonymous, and one large wooden sculpture of Christ crucified, a gift from the Pope.

While first written records of the shrine are dated 1850, some say the first crosses were erected by those mourning the victims of revolts against heavy-handed Tsarist suppression of national uprisings first in 1831 and later in 1863. Crosses were set up in memory of the executed rebels, whose burial places remained unknown.

During the Soviet occupation, Lithuanians further suffered under mass repressions. Hundreds of thousands were deported by Stalin to Siberia from 1944 to 1952, leaving whole villages totally deserted.

In 1956 Lithuanians began returning home. They erected new crosses on the hill in gratitude for their return, in memory of their torture and suffering, and as memorials for those who would never return. The hill became a place of prayer for those still suffering. Passionate and openly anti-Soviet inscriptions often adorned the crosses, making the hill an open-air museum, a record of human suffering and inhumane oppression.

In 1961, the authorities came with bulldozers to raze the hill and erase it from human memory. Wooden crosses were burned. Iron crosses became scrap metal. Stone crosses were buried. The hill was declared a forbidden place, and kept under surveillance.

### ***Defiance***

But under the cover of darkness, new crosses kept appearing. At first they were small, but then became bigger and bigger. The authorities tried more drastic measures. Again in 1973 and 1975, the hill was levelled, and the area was covered with waste and sewage.

Projects to flood the area, block the roads, and turn the hill into an inaccessible island, all failed over time. More crosses just kept appearing. Despite destruction by the authorities, locals and pilgrims

from all over Lithuania risked political danger by defiantly rebuilding their sacred site at night.

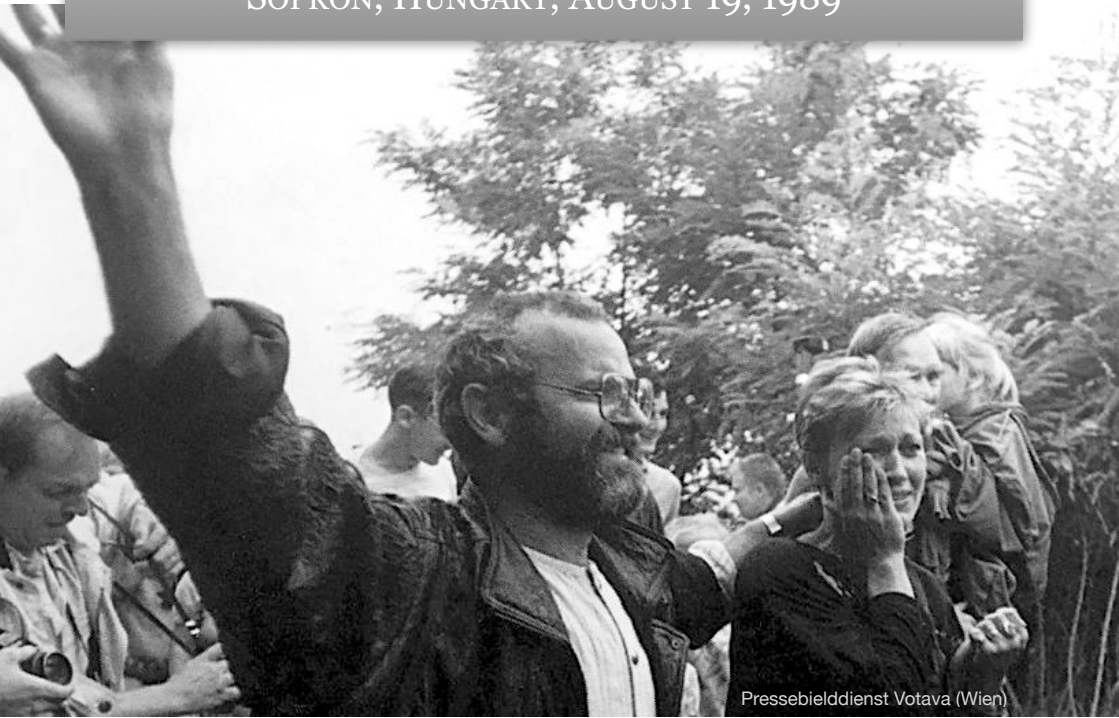
Finally in 1985, the government abandoned their hopeless task. Peace came to the Hill of Crosses. Four years later the revolution was well under way to overthrow the Soviet oppression. And in 1991, independence came at last to Lithuania.

On September 7, 1993, Pope John Paul II visited the Hill of Crosses, declaring it a place for hope, peace, love and sacrifice. He laid a stone inscribed with his word: *Thank you, Lithuanians, for this Hill of Crosses which testifies to the nations of Europe and to the whole world the faith of the people of this land.*

Today this 10-metre high hill is an unimaginable forest of hundreds of thousands of crosses, truly a powerful declaration of hope in the face of tyranny.

## 6. *A picnic of hope*

SOPRON, HUNGARY, AUGUST 19, 1989



Pressebilddienst Votava (Wien)

**On a lazy summer's day in 1989, a seemingly innocent event took place on the border of Hungary and Austria just outside Sopron which catalysed the downfall of the Berlin Wall. It was said that this event was 'the pin-prick that burst the communist balloon'.**

A sign on the unpaved road leading to a red-and-white boom marking the border between Austria and Hungary carries the words of Helmut Kohl, former German Chancellor: *History has been written on this forest road.*

A large grassy field stretches out to the left. Rising above the trees is the ominous silhouette of a border tower. Here, on August 19, 1989, over 10,000 people responded to an invitation to attend a picnic to celebrate a future Europe ‘without borders’.

The idea had been born in May that year over a dinner in Debrecen, eastern Hungary. Members of the Hungarian Democratic Forum opposition party had met with Otto von Habsburg of the European Parliament to discuss their plan.

Change was already in the air and, on this spot near Sopron, the barbed wire of the Iron Curtain had already been partially cut through on June 27 by the foreign ministers of Austria and Hungary. The rusty barrier had been in poor repair, and often the electronic alarm was set off by birds. Rather than replace it, the Hungarian authorities had decided to liquidate the obsolete Curtain, making it a ‘green border’ with patrols. The picnic celebrated this step but also aimed to demand an open border and free travel.

## **Jubilee**

An air of jubilee prevailed as the thousands—both Hungarians and vacationing East Germans—streamed towards this border crossing. They began to help pull down the barbed wire, some stuffing it in the trunks of their Trabants to take home as souvenirs. “*Baue ab und nimm mit!*” (Break it down and take it with you) became the slogan of the picnic.

A symbolic opening of the border was planned, with a brief walk on the other side of the border by a delegation. A press conference seemed to delay proceedings too long for many of the East Germans, who had begun to gather in the thousands in Hungary where without visas they could often share holidays at Lake Balaton with their West German relatives.

At about 3.20pm, as the press conference was still dragging on, several hundred East Germans began to surge against the wooden border gate, suddenly breaking through and running towards Austria. The Hungarian guards were still under orders to shoot anyone attempting an illegal border crossing. Young people with only the summer clothes on their backs and clutching hand-baggage, couples with young children, began to run with the crowd, tears streaming down their cheeks. Some jumped in ecstasy as they passed through the barbed-wire covered gate. Others stopped to kiss the Austrian soil. The moment of their dreams had unexpectedly become reality.

The guards held their fire. One stooped to pick up a small child dropped in the rush, and handed him back to his mother. Six hundred or so passed through before the guards managed to get the gate closed again.

During the ensuing confusion, according to some reports, Budapest called Moscow. Gorbachev's response was: "We will not have another 1956."

### **Abandoned**

East German Trabants and Russian Ladas, purchased after years of hard saving, were gladly abandoned in the picnic car park by their owners all too willing to pay the price of freedom. Smiling young people waved their newly acquired western passports issued by officials from Vienna.

A steady stream of some 200 East Germans successfully crossed the 'green border' nightly in the weeks following the picnic. About the 60,000 refused to go back from Hungary to East Germany, choosing instead to endure the deprivations of refugee camps in the hope that Hungary would soon open her borders.



The Hungarian government now faced pressure from East Berlin and Moscow to tighten the border. Western governments urged Hungary to continue her reforms.

Finally on September 11, 1989, the Hungarian government opened its borders for free travel. The thousands of East Germans in Hungary were allowed to cross into Austria and then into West Germany. In East Germany mass demonstrations, encouraged by events in Hungary, demanded freedom from Erich Honecker's government.

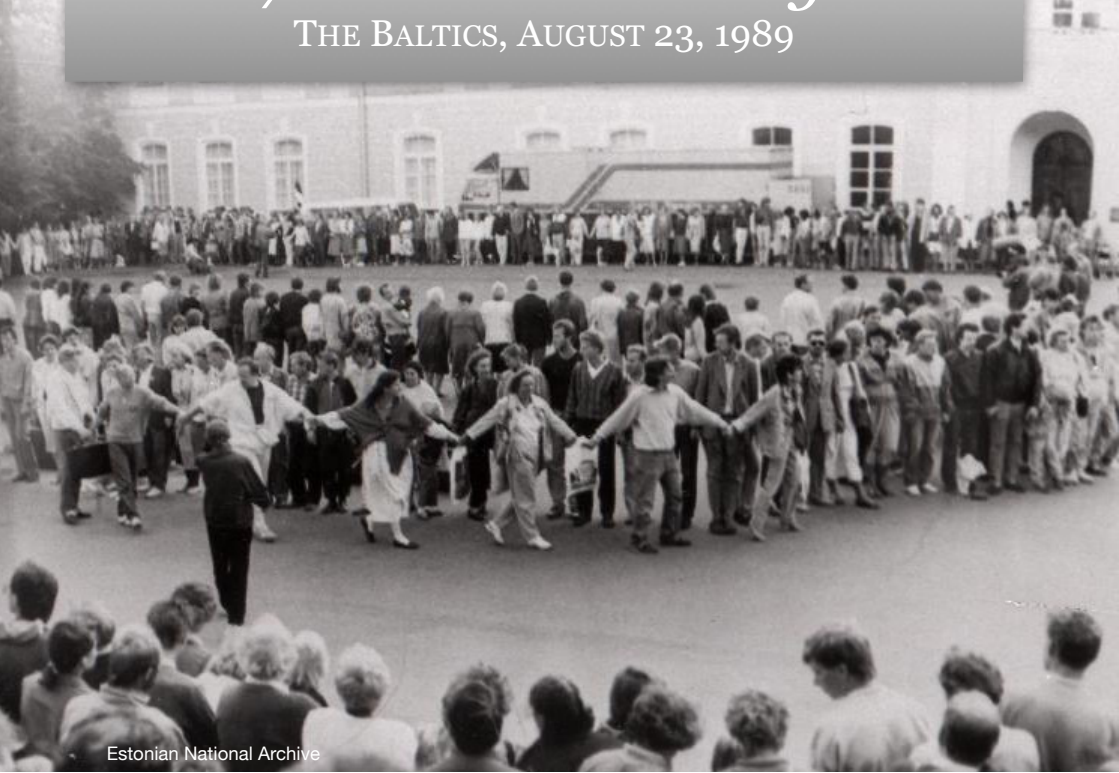
In October Honecker bravely declared that the Berlin Wall would last another hundred years. It didn't last another hundred days. On November 10, demonstrations involving several million finally pulled the Wall down.

When Germany celebrated her reunification, Helmut Kohl declared that 'the soil under the Brandenburg Gate is Hungarian soil', referring to the pan-European Picnic.

History was indeed written on that forest road that day thirty years ago.

# 7. *The Baltic Way*

THE BALTICS, AUGUST 23, 1989



Estonian National Archive

**The longest human chain in history was formed across the Baltics on 23 August 1989 as a moral protest against the illegal occupation by the Soviet Union of these lands. It stretched 675 kilometres from the north of Estonia across Latvia to the south of Lithuania.**

Exactly 50 years before, on 23 August 1939, a neutrality pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was signed secretly in Moscow by foreign ministers Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov, respectively. The infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact affected the fate of millions of eastern Europeans, dividing eastern Europe into spheres

of influence, leading directly to World War II and to the occupation of the three Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. On 1 September 1939, the German armed forces acted on the terms of the pact and triggered the war by attacking Poland.

Half a century later then, as one more expression of the rising tide of moral and spiritual protest against the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, some two million people joined their hands to form a continuous human chain across the three Baltic republics of the Soviet Union. One in every four persons participated in the chain, called the Baltic Way, holding hands for at least 15 minutes. The public protest demanded acknowledgment of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the existence of which was still denied by Soviet officials who continued to assert that the Baltic states had voluntarily joined the USSR.

The massive turnout for the silent protest was a powerful moral and emotional demand for the re-establishment of the independence of the Baltic states. Seven months later, Lithuania became the first Soviet Union republic to declare independence. Latvia gained her freedom in 1990; Estonia in 1991.

## **Violations**

Actually the event's beginnings were in Canada, where refugee communities from central and eastern Europe initiated Black Ribbon Day on 23 August 1986. The aim was to draw global attention to Soviet crimes and human rights violations, to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as well as to the Yalta Conference when Churchill and Roosevelt gave Stalin a free hand to annex states occupied by the Soviet Union. The first Black Ribbon Day saw demonstrations in many western cities including London, Stockholm, Washington DC, New York, and Perth, Australia.

As *glasnost* and *perestroika* stimulated a new openness and rising hope of freedom in the communist world towards the end of the 1980's,

several Baltic pro-independence movements—*Rahvarinne* of Estonia, the *Tautas fronte* of Latvia, and *Sąjūdis* of Lithuania—met discretely to plan the 1989 protest. In Tallinn, capital of Estonia, demonstrators in a public park spoke openly of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with the KGB observing. Names were taken, leaders were harassed, but surprisingly, no one was arrested. The organisers were emboldened to call for a massive, public, non-violence symbolic act, a human chain of solidarity among the three nations.

### **Awakening**

While the Baltic Way was the largest and most important campaign of the Baltic states aimed towards regaining their freedom, it was not the first. The Freedom Monument in the centre of Riga had been the focus of the Remembrance Day commemoration for the Victims of the 1941 Deportations on 14 June 1986. After that, the former political prisoners from the Baltic states agreed upon a joint remembrance campaign on the 23 August in all the Baltic states.

On that date in 1987, several thousand people demonstrated in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn. Police detained several hundred people. 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 campaign. The Baltic Awakening grew into a movement uniting all three countries. This display of ‘soft power’ forced the once-powerful Soviet Union to yield to the voice of the people and admit the crimes of the past, including the existence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

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

Latvians have told me in recent years how they have always felt betrayed: on the one hand by Nazis and communists, and by the west on the other. The big question for them today is how much the west is

prepared to stand up against Putin's expansionism in the light of reports of thousands of Russian troops 'on vacation' across their border over the past few years. Earlier this month, more than 10,000 Russian soldiers and nearly fifty warships took part in naval drills in the Baltic Sea, following Russian naval exercises last month in the Norwegian Sea.

Meanwhile, the 30th anniversary of the Baltic Way, on 23 August 2019, inspired thousands of protesters to form a 45-kilometre human chain across Hong Kong, protesting against the erosion of liberties under Chinese rule.

# 8. *The Singing Revolution*

THE BALTICS, 1987-91



From the film: 'Estonian Song Celebration'

**‘A singing revolution’, starting in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as early as 1987, eventually led to the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991.**

Reminiscent of Jehoshaphat’s choir leading the army of Judah into battle (*2 Chronicles 20*), the Balts deployed the ‘soft’ weapon of song against the militarised might of the Soviet Union to liberate themselves from their occupation. Estonian artist and activist, Heinz Valk, first referred to the events from 1987 to 1991 culminating in independence as *The Singing Revolution*.

The Baltic states were the first countries successfully to declare their independence from the Soviet Union, eventually to be followed by twelve other former Soviet Republics.

Events started in February 1987, when secret plans to mine phosphorite in north-east Estonia were leaked to the television, angering Estonians who were afraid of both environmental damage from the mining and the further erosion of their culture by the presence of imported Russian miners. Since World War Two, Stalin had resettled over 400,000 Russians in Estonia—more than a quarter of the total population—under a deliberate policy of Russification. This provoked many Estonians to take to the streets in protest, something which would have automatically led to imprisonment prior to Secretary General Gorbachev’s new policy of *glasnost* (openness).

Song festivals now became major expressions of protest and patriotic fervour. The first Song Festival in Tartu, Estonia, was held in 1869 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the abolition of serfdom. It was the first manifestation of Estonian identity, according to conductor Kaie Tanner: “By singing, we kept ourselves alive as a nation. Without singing, there would be no Estonia. The song celebration was one of those few places where we, Estonians, could feel like one – not part of the Soviet Union, but part of our own nation.”

## **Rebirth**

The Lutheran church was a major source of Estonian choir traditions, one of the few ways peasants could express themselves. Estonians became Lutherans even during Martin Luther’s lifetime when German nobility had ruled the land. Peasant children were brought up with choir singing long before song celebrations developed.

Also across the border at one of the largest amateur choral and dancing events in the world, the Latvian Song and Dance Festival, aspirations for the rebirth of a free Latvia were expressed in song. Latvians also began protesting plans for a hydroelectric dam across the Daugava River which they feared would cause environmental damage; they also opposed plans for a metro in Riga that threatened the city’s cultural and historical heritage. On 14 June 1987, the anniversary of the 1941

deportations (when Soviet authorities had sent tens of thousands of Latvian activists and their families to gulags and forced settlements in Siberia), many laid flowers on the Freedom Monument in Riga, an act often cited as the start of the Latvian National Awakening.

Further south in Lithuania, the largely Catholic population added Catholic hymns to their singing repertoire as they joined the swell of protest in song. At one song festival, a pre-Soviet Lithuanian tri-colour flag suddenly appeared on stage. As Soviet officials moved to confiscate the flag, they found themselves blocked by other choir members standing in stubborn solidarity.

Gorbachev also found himself blocked from suppressing choral protests and patriotic expression by his own policy of glasnost. With the world watching, how could he use the forceful methods of his predecessors to stop... singing?!

### **Joy, courage, freedom**

The Singing Revolution gained more momentum in May 1988 at the Tartu pop festival, featuring modernised choral anthems criticising Soviet oppression. Late summer saw the enormous stage and sound shell of the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds (see photo) resounding with patriotic songs before an audience of at least 100,000 singing along with the choirs.

This was the back story to the 600-kilometre human chain created by Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians linking arms right across their nations, producing the Baltic Way of August 1989. The Balts were sending a clear challenge to the Kremlin that Soviet occupation was totally illegal, having started with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union exactly 50 years before on August 23, 1939. A quarter of the total Baltic population participated, many singing the songs they had learned at the festivals.

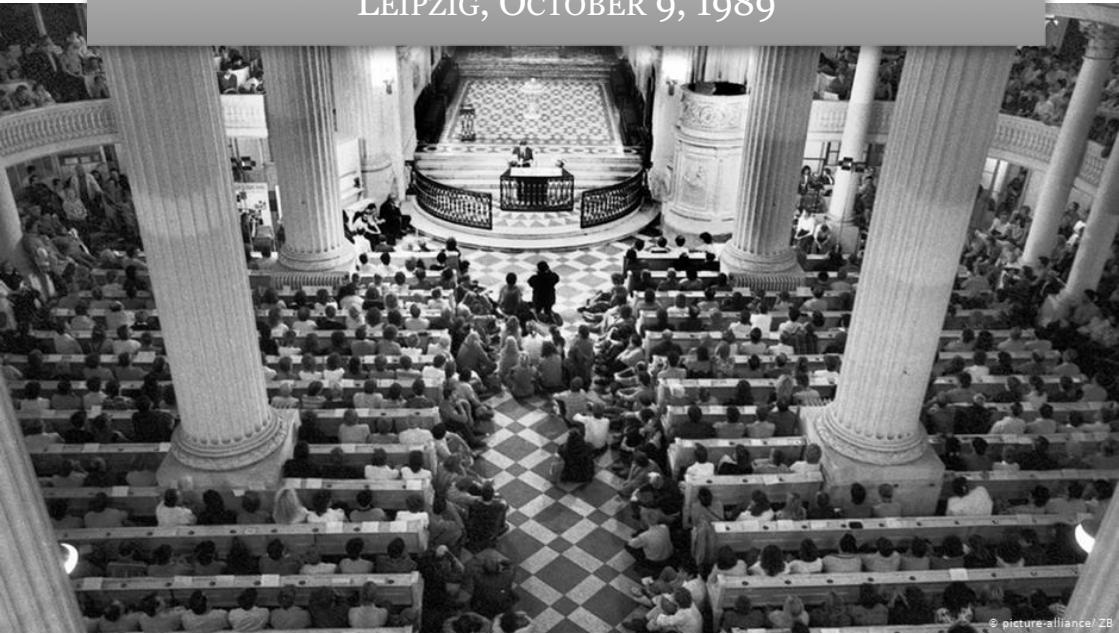


Seven months later, Lithuania declared independence from the Soviet Union, the first Soviet republic to do so. Estonia followed in August 1991 and Latvia soon after. Soviet forces tried to regain control, killing numbers of civilians and servicemen. Militia and volunteers built concrete barricades and formed human shields around key installations like parliament buildings, bridges and communication towers. Eventually Soviet forces backed down. Within a few months the Soviet Union itself became extinct.

Addressing the crowd at a recent Song Festival, the current Estonian President, Kersti Kaljulaid, said: “Singing brings Estonians joy. Singing gives Estonians courage. Singing makes Estonians free.”

# 9. *The miracle of Leipzig*

LEIPZIG, OCTOBER 9, 1989



© picture-alliance/ZB

**October 9, 1989, a remarkable event took place in the eastern Germany city of Leipzig, inspiring millions to take to the streets across the country and to tear down the Berlin Wall exactly one month later.**

The Nikolaikirche was the starting point of this movement of peaceful rebellion against the oppressive communist rule. The church was founded in about 1165 at the junction of two important trade routes, north-south and east-west, and named after the patron-saint of merchants. Luther is said to have preached here. Johan Sebastian Bach was master and organist of the choir, from 1723 to 1750. Many of his compositions were heard for the first time in this church.

The angel of peace above the altar was painted centuries before peace prayer services were begun, each Monday evening in the church in 1982. A protest movement against the arms race, and for justice and human rights, began to grow in the DDR (East Germany). The church became the focus for such discontent, including agitation for the right to emigrate. Believers and non-believers alike prayed, discussed and studied the contemporary relevance of the Old Testament prophets and the teachings of Jesus. The church was the one institution in the DDR that seemed to offer protection from the Stasi (State Security Police).

### **Radical idea**

The pastor of the Nikolaikirche, Christian Führer, relished the chance to speak to a captive audience on the Sermon on the Mount. He also publicly supported those who wished to emigrate. But by late summer 1988, a more radical idea had taken hold: stay and agitate for a free and democratic Germany.

In February 1989, police broke up a rally calling for democracy and freedom. But the *Friedensgebete* continued to grow and, by the spring, the authorities saw the prayer meetings as a threat. Access for cars to the church were blocked. Even the closest motorway exits were closed off or subjected to large-scale checks.

By the autumn of 1989, the movement was approaching its climax. The Nikolaikirche continued to be open for all: true worshippers, the discontents, the curious, the Stasi and their collaborators, all gathering beneath the outstretched arms of the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Flowers decorated the church's windows; candles multiplied throughout the building as silent signs of hope. Throughout all, a spirit of peace reigned. Crowds continued to gather at the church. 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. Police surrounded the church and began making brutal arrests. Each Monday more arrests were being

made, yet more visitors flocked to the church, overflowing its 2000 seats.

On 25th September, Pastor Christoph Wonneberger criticised state violence in his sermon and demanded democratic change through peaceful means. At the end of the service, crowds walked around the city's ring road, gathering support until they were 8,000 strong. The following Monday, 2nd October, 20,000 marched to the Thomaskirche on the far side of the city, where they were met by riot police with shields, helmets and truncheons.

### **Provocation**

October 7 was the 40th anniversary of the DDR, an occasion for widespread protest. Police waded into protesters, arresting many and hauling them off to horse stables.

Two days later, October 9, a thousand Stasi collaborators were sent to the Nikolaikirche to 'prevent provocations'. By early afternoon, 600 of them had taken up positions inside the church. By mid-afternoon the church was full and late-comers filled up seven other churches in the city centre by 5pm.

After the prayers, the 2000 congregants filed out of the building with their candles, to be greeted by 10,000 peace protestors outside. Waiting soldiers, paramilitaries and police began to move into the crowd seeking provocation, but no-one allowed themselves to react in violence.

Pfarrer Führer described what happened: 'If 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.’

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

The following Monday, 150,000 disciplined protestors walked through the city. The next week there were 300,000. 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.

In spite of Eric Honecker’s claim on October 7th—at the 40th anniversary commemorations—that the Berlin Wall would last another hundred years, it hardly lasted another month. The soft powers of love, truth and justice had finally prevailed over brick-and-mortar expressions of division, deceit and injustice.

# 10. *The wall falls*

BERLIN, NOVEMBER 9, 1989



Wikimedia Commons

**Few readers under forty years of age will remember the sense of shock and amazement that spread across western and central Europe on November 9, 1989, as television screens carried direct reports of the Berlin Wall being hacked open by euphoric crowds on both sides.**

Erected in 1961, the Berlin Wall was the iconic symbol of the Iron Curtain era and the separation of east and west, communism and capitalism. The wall 'protected' the Eastern bloc from 'fascist' elements in the west wishing to subvert the 'will of the people' from building the

socialist state of the DDR (German Democratic Republic). Communist authorities called it the *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall* (Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart). Willy Brandt, then the mayor of Western Berlin, dubbed it the *Wand der Schande*, the Wall of Shame. Only one in twenty of the estimated 100,000 who attempted to escape over the wall succeeded. Up to 200 lost their lives in the effort.

In 1987, on the 750th anniversary of the city of Berlin, Ronald Reagan had spoken directly to his Soviet counterpart before a large crowd gathered at the Brandenburg Gate: ‘General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall!’

### **‘100 more years’**

As late as January 1989, the DDR’s leader Erich Honecker had declared defiantly that ‘the Wall would stand for 50 or 100 more years if the conditions that had caused its construction did not change.’

In August, however, Austrian and Hungarian authorities had begun removing the barbed wire curtain, inspiring the **Pan-European Picnic** and triggering the escape of hundreds over the border. The **prayer-and-peace** movement in Leipzig had been building up over seven years, and by the autumn of 1989 the Nikolaikirche was overflowing with thousands standing outside.

On October 7, even as Honecker and Gorbachev celebrated together the 40th anniversary of the DDR in Berlin, civil unrest spread from the streets of Leipzig to Dresden and other cities. Stasi and police arrested many protestors. Despite his promises of the wall’s longevity, Honecker himself lasted a mere ten days before being unceremoniously dumped. His replacement Egon Krenz promised political reform in his inaugural address, using the term *Die Wende* (meaning ‘turnaround’).

This helped to open the floodgates further. First two hundred thousand, then three hundred thousand demonstrated in Leipzig, while tens of thousands protested in the streets in Magdeburg, Dresden, Zwickau, Halle and Berlin, among other cities.

### **‘No violence’**

In reaction to violent police assaults on peaceful protesters during the 40th anniversary commemorations, up to one million people gathered in the Alexanderplatz in East Berlin on November 4, demanding the authorities to uphold constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Organised by actors and theatre employers, it was one of the largest demonstrations in East Germany’s history. Demonstrators joined in from all over East Germany, carrying banners including: *‘40 Jahre sind genu’* (40 years are enough) and *‘Bürgerrechte nicht nur auf Papier’* (Civil rights not only on paper).

The Stasi, not knowing whether to ban the gathering or subvert it, had spread rumours that the protesters were planning to march toward the Brandenburg Gate at the Berlin Wall. This would have given an excuse for the authorities to move in with force. The organizers issued yellow sashes for the marshals to wear with the words ‘Kein Gewalt!’ (‘No violence!’). Live television beamed to the whole nation the jeers and boos greeting representatives of the regime who addressed the crowd during the three-hour-long demonstration.

On November 8, the whole politburo resigned and a committee was set up to draft new laws on travel. The next day, November 9, the draft was passed on to a regime spokesman, Günter Schabowski, in the middle of a press conference, who duly read the text. He heard himself reading that travel to the West would forthrightly be allowed. (In retrospect it was apparently intended that visas would still need to be issued.) When a journalist asked incredulously if that meant that any East German could cross the border, Schabowski simply agreed that that seemed to be what the text implied.



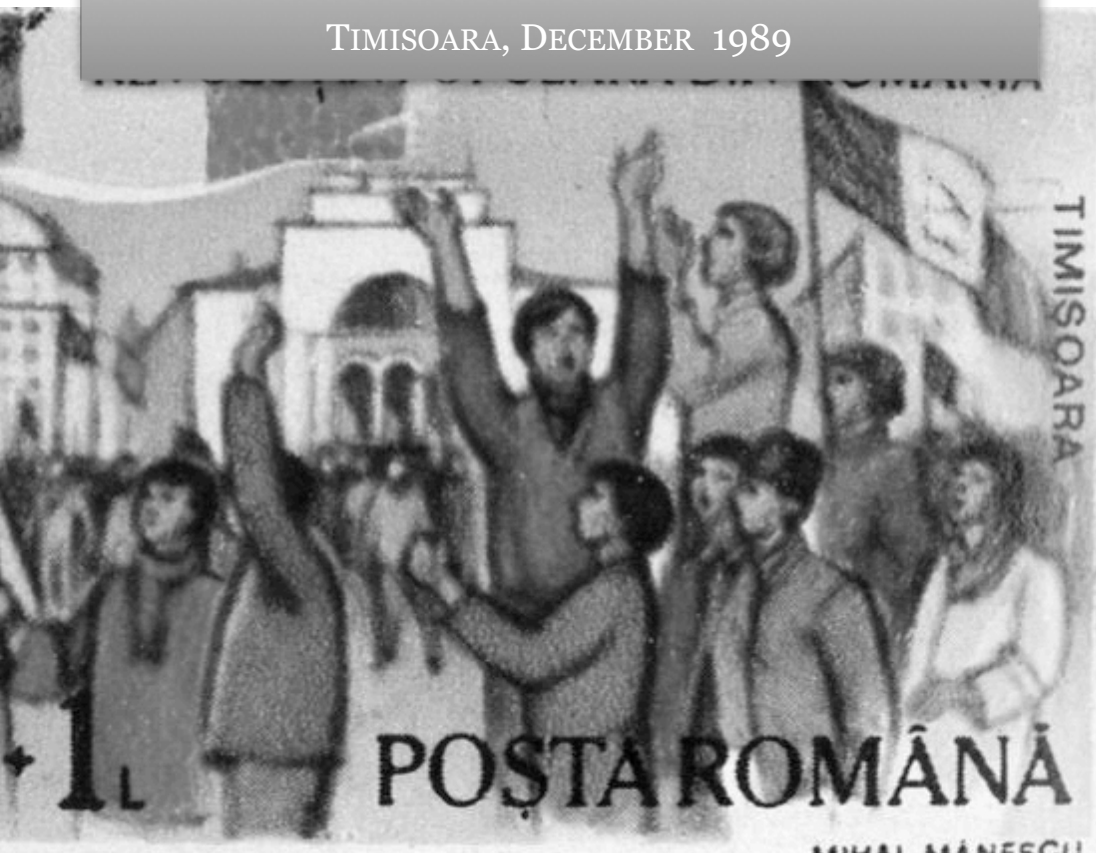
Pandemonium broke out. News spread like wildfire. People, some in pyjamas, converged in their Trabant cars on transit points in Berlin, bewildering the border guards who shrugged their shoulders, stepped back and let the euphoric crowds through.

Others climbed up on the wall and began attacking it with pick axes. People from a divided nation began to hug each other, weeping and dancing together. The Wall had fallen!

German reunification formally took place on 3 October 1990.

# 11. “God exists!”

TIMISOARA, DECEMBER 1989



**The end of dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena began in late 1989 when a Reformed pastor and his congregation stood openly against government abuse of human rights.**

Ceaușescu ruled Romania for 24 years, from 1965 to 1989. The first years saw relative liberalisation and an open attitude towards the West. Things changed dramatically in July 1971, however, after Ceaușescu visited China, North Korea, North Vietnam and Mongolia and observed first hand the personality cults there.

He returned to initiate a cultural revolution of extreme nationalism and isolation from both the West and the Soviets. Indoctrination programmes were initiated. Severe austerity followed. Soon Elena Ceaușescu became the second most powerful person in the nation. Living standards fell. Food rationing was introduced. Television streamed only two hours a day, mostly speeches by the dictator and Party officials. The Securitate, or secret police, monitored all aspects of citizens' lives, and criticism of the Party was punished with imprisonment and torture. Church meetings were illegal. Trust between family and friends was almost totally undermined.

Widespread social unrest was aggravated by extravagant and prestigious building projects while the people suffered great austerity—such as the so-called House of the People (the current Parliamentary Palace where the State of Europe Forum was held last May). Protests starting in 1987 in Brasov, and then in November 1989 in Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest, were severely suppressed.

### **Eviction**

László Tökés, a Hungarian Reformed pastor living in Timișoara, had earlier criticised the government on Hungarian television for undermining Hungarian faith and culture. The government accused him of inciting ethnic hatred and ordered him to move to an isolated village. He refused to go. Power to his house was cut off and his ration book was confiscated. Church members rallied to support him. Some were arrested and beaten; one was murdered in the woods.

News about a court order for his eviction by December 15 spread from radio broadcasts beamed in from outside the country. At the previous Sunday service, Tökés asked his congregation to come to witness the eviction. Church members began a vigil outside his flat, forming a human chain around the block and denying militia access.

*December 16:* The crowd swelled with Baptist, Catholic and Orthodox believers, along with many students joining the growing protest. Crying ‘Down with Communism!’, the crowd moved from Tökés’ apartment towards the Communist Party headquarters.

*December 17:* When riots and protests resumed, rioters broke into a government building attempting to burn it down. Securitate and police were unable to control the riots, so the military were sent in with armoured cars, tanks and helicopters. Chaos ensued. Around 100 people were killed. Militia drove protestors back with water cannons, which the crowd seized and threw into the river.

*December 18:* Soldiers and Securitate agents in plainclothes guarded the main square. Martial law was declared. Groups of more than two persons were banned. Yet thirty young men gathered at the Orthodox cathedral, waving a Romanian flag with the Communist emblem cut out. They started to sing ‘Awaken thee, Romanian!’, a patriotic song banned since 1947, and waited for the bullets to be fired. Several were killed or seriously injured, while others escaped.

*December 19:* Workers went on strike in sympathy with the protestors.

*December 20:* Workers mobilised en masse and joined with others in the city centre, to make a crowd of 100,000 in what is today *Piața Victoriei*, Victory Square. They began chanting anti-government slogans.

## **Resignation**

As Ceaușescu was himself in Iran at the time, Elena had sent the prime minister and the secretary of the Central Committee to Timișoara to meet with a delegation of the protestors, who demanded the dictator’s resignation.

Instead, authorities trained in thousands of workers from factories from out of town armed with clubs and instructions to ‘crush the riots of Hungarians and hooligans’. Quickly realising what was going on, they joined the demonstrators. The army was forced to retreat. That same day Timișoara was declared the first free city of Romania.

Back in Bucharest, having just returned from Iran, Ceaușescu held a speech to condemn developments in Timișoara, claiming the protesters were in collusion with foreign powers, and called for a mass rally in his support the next day.

*December 21:* Midway through the speech, the huge crowd bused in to give the appearance of support for Ceaușescu began booing him, live on national television. Some chanted ‘Ti-mi-șoa-ra! Ti-mi-șoa-ra!’

Realising their plight, Ceaușescu and his wife had to flee in a helicopter, only to be arrested, tried and executed on Christmas Day.

*December 22:* As news spread of the overthrow of the dictator, a crowd of 150,000 gathered in the central square in Timișoara. Baptist pastor Peter Dugulescu invited them to recite after him the Lord’s Prayer. Later he recalled his surprise at the ‘strong religious accent after so many years of atheistic education’. Kneeling on the frozen ground, they recited the prayer and shouted together, ‘*God exists! God exists!*’ – a cry spontaneously repeated throughout the day.

## *12. The failed coup*

MOSCOW, AUGUST 1991



**The celebration in 1988 of the millennium of Christianity in the Soviet Union was a major catalyst precipitating the end of both communism and the empire.**

In 988, the Grand Prince of Kiev, Vladimir the Great, converted to Christianity from Slavic paganism after consolidating modern-day Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. A large statue of St Vladimir overlooks the Dnieper River in Kiev close to the spot where traditionally he was baptised.

In April 1988, Mikhail Gorbachev, the general secretary of the Communist Party, agreed with the requests of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Pimen to return church buildings, reopen monasteries and relax restrictions on freedom of conscience and worship. In return Gorbachev wanted Christians to support his policy of *perestroika* (restructuring), which involved *glasnost* (openness) and *demokratizatsia* (democratisation).

Since his election in 1985, Gorbachev had conceded major changes in response to the flagging Soviet system, and tried to move towards a 'socialism with a human face'. He accepted also the need to end the Cold War as the Soviet Union were having to invest 20 percent of its GNP on defence, compared to 6 per cent for the US and 3-4 per cent for European nations.

In 1988 he wrote of the need to 'lift the individual spiritually, respecting his inner world and giving him moral strength'. His mother, a devout Orthodox believer, had had him baptised as a baby. His grandparents kept icons hidden behind photos of Lenin and Stalin. A 1992 interview revealed his openness to people of faith when he said: 'I am an atheist... but for a long time have drawn comfort from the Bible. Ignoring religious experience has meant great losses for society.' For *perestroika* to succeed, he knew he needed Christian support.

### **Open door**

Perhaps he opened the door further than he intended. During this commemoration year Christian leaders from all around the world, including a large Vatican delegation, converged on the Soviet Union. The world watched as President Reagan talked about religious liberty when visiting the restored Danilov Monastery, the headquarters of the Russian Orthodox Church on the banks of the Moskva River in Moscow. That summer, thousands of Baptists and other believers gathered in Kiev on the site of Vladimir's baptism. Filling churches to overflowing, believers were asked to make room for non-believers to sit

inside. Thousands marched together into the city centre to pray into the night around a statue of Lenin. Crowds packed into theatres for evangelistic events during the eight-day millennial celebration in the capital of Moldova. Many heard the gospel for the the first time being freely preached and thousands professed faith that summer.

An unofficial jubilee committee led by well-known religious dissidents called for the release of all prisoners of conscience, laws guaranteeing freedom of religion and conscience, and the right to hold seminars during the celebrations. Amazingly they were granted their requests. Christians were reinstated in healthcare services; political and religious prisoners were released; emigration was sped up for victims of religious persecution; church buildings were reopened.

Despite these new freedoms, the old violence still continued in places. The Ukrainian Catholic Church, also called the Greek Catholic Church (Catholic in allegiance, Byzantine in rite), became a focal point for Ukrainians to resist Soviet and Russian hegemony, as it had since the sixteenth century when it emerged as a buffer between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. Crowds in Kiev expressing both religious and nationalistic fervour gathered in support of the church, doubling from 100,000 in June 1989, to 200,000 in November.

That same month, Gorbachev met with John Paul II who told the Soviet leader in Russian: 'It is necessary to reach a freedom, a democracy, a society that respects human beings as the supreme value. It is necessary to give people the ability to choose, including choosing their religion.'

## **Coup**

While 1989 was the year of decisive break with Soviet hegemony for the DDR, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, independence for the Soviet republics came two years later. The Baltic states as well as Armenia and Georgia were breaking free of the Soviet



grip, and even the Russian Republic under Boris Yeltsin declared its sovereignty in June 1990, limiting Soviet control.

In August 1991, Vice-President Gennady Yanayev led a core of hard-line communists wanting to restore old-style marxist control. While Gorbachev was on holiday in Crimea, they announced he was ill and declared a State of Emergency. They ordered tanks and troops to surround the White House, the parliament building in Moscow, re-imposed press restrictions, banned demonstrations and announced curfews.

However, crowds swelling to thousands barricaded the White House, and Yeltsin ordered army and KGB units to stand down. It was a fateful moment of decision. Several Christians played key roles in persuading the army to back down. Russian Orthodox priest Father Alexander Borisov, newly elected to the Moscow City Council, convinced the council to appeal to the troops not to attack civilians: 'You are accountable to God. "Thou shalt not kill"'. Christian dissident Alexander Ogorodnikov, who had spent nine years in prison, was among the first to confront the soldiers outside the parliament with written appeals. He and others began to build a human chain around the parliament, with Yeltsin, his government members and journalists inside. Priests dispensed communion to the protestors aware they could easily be crushed by the tanks if the drivers obeyed orders. Ogorodnikov pleaded with an officer, 'Don't shed the blood of our Russian people.'

By the second day of the coup, three people had been killed by bullets or tanks. In his priestly robes, Father Alexander helped distribute thirty boxes of New Testaments to the soldiers manning the hundred tanks besieging the parliament, crossing himself as he approached each tank.

Shirinai Dossova, a dynamic evangelist and church planter whom my wife and I know personally, rapped persistently on the hatch of a tank until a bewildered soldier opened it to see a Bible being thrust towards

him. 'Are you going to kill us?' she asked. 'It says in this book that you must not kill!'

When power was cut off from the parliament building at midnight on the second day, attack seemed imminent. But when dawn broke, no attack had come. Instead, the tanks and troops withdrew. Within 48 hours, the coup leaders were all under arrest. By December, the USSR had been dissolved and replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Later the head of the prosecution investigating the coup credited Yeltsin and the unarmed defenders surrounding the White House with having defeated the coup. Conscience had prevailed over tanks.

## CONCLUSION

# *A triumph of values*

PRAGUE, 1999



**A decade after the *annus mirabilis* of 1989, which saw the Marxist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe collapse like a house of cards, the Czech President Vaclav Havel invited key leaders of that era to Prague Castle to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution.**

After he awarded them all his nation's highest honour, the Order of the White Li on, a panel discussion turned into a sharp debate among the former leaders. Helmut Kohl (Germany), Margaret Thatcher (UK), George Bush (US), Mikhail Gorbachev (USSR), Francois Mitterrand's widow Danielle (France) and Lech Walesa (Poland) shared widely divergent interpretations of the events of the 'magical year'.

For Thatcher, the fall of communism was a triumph of freedom and capitalism. Britain and the United States had shown the way, she declared, assuming credit herself for the collapse of communism. 'Freedom requires rule of law. We and America have had all of that,' she declared. The two allies would continue exporting their values and way of life abroad, she added.

Chancellor Kohl responded to her Anglo-American triumphalism in stony silence as Oxford professor and discussion moderator, Timothy Garton Ash, diplomatically suggested other European democracies also had rule of law and had also helped inspire the East's hopes for freedom.

Gorbachev, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for refusing 'to send in the tanks', admonished Thatcher for her 'communist-style rhetoric and narrow ideology'. Was she not 'stumbling down the same path' as the communists who saw everything in black and white? No single ideology at the end of the 20th century – neither liberal, nor communist, nor conservative – could answer the challenges of the 21st century and the global problems ahead, he opined.

### **Respect over disdain**

Danielle Mitterand, a human rights advocate, warned of the rise of the ideology of profit masquerading as 'globalisation'. Gorbachev agreed, observing that 'globalisation' was often viewed as a new form of Western colonialism in the non-Western world.

Lech Walesa, former Solidarity trade union leader and the first democratically-chosen President of Poland, rebuked the West for congratulating itself over the end of Communism, while failing to give sufficient aid to those nations now trying to transform their economies, as with the Marshall Plan after World War Two. Democracy, he warned, was being endangered by the failure of economic reform, crime, corruption and a nostalgia for the 'certainties' of the old regime.

Havel as master of ceremonies brought the last word: communism's collapse had not been the triumph of Western secular liberalism, 'the end of history', as some had suggested. Rather it had been a victory for human dignity and universal human values, a triumph of values, not the victory of one ideology over another, one state over another, one superpower over another. Freedom had triumphed over oppression. Respect for human dignity had triumphed over humiliation. Respect for human rights had triumphed over disdain for human rights.

But, he warned with prescience, it was one small battle in an unending chain of battles, because the war still continued.

### **Why and how**

The argument too still continues. The thirtieth anniversary of these events has been the occasion for ongoing debate about why and how the communist order had collapsed so suddenly and unexpectedly with little violence.

Many focus on economic, political or military factors, citing Ronald Reagan's branding of the Soviet Union as the 'evil empire', and his Strategic Defence Initiative. Others credit Gorbachev for being unwilling to risk a Third World War for the sake of upholding Stalin's post-war (dis-)order. Still others point to the diplomacy surrounding the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which gave leverage to human rights activists on both sides of the Iron Curtain to build moral and intellectual resistance to the Soviet system. Further voices still argue that 'history' did it: the West won because it was on the 'right side of history'; the free market and democracy would eventually become the world's consensual choice as the best of all options.

Each of the above contributed to a very complex historical development, along with modern global communications dispersing news and linking dissidents. Yet none of them alone explain the *why*

and the *how* of the moral, cultural and spiritual revolution behind the events of 1989.

For the backbone of the revolution was a ‘fifth column’ of workers and intellectuals, daring dissidents and praying protestors, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox believers (and doubters) together. Heeding Havel’s call to confront the culture of the lie and Pope John Paul II’s exhortation not to be afraid, they embraced the four norms of *truth*, *solidarity*, *responsibility* and *non-violence* in their daily lives, their prison cells, their churches and on the streets.

What had mattered ultimately was not the politics of right and left, as Timothy Garton Ash observed, but of right and wrong.

A spiritual uprising of truth, faith and hope had overcome lies and oppression.

Truth had prevailed.

# ***A SPIRITUAL UPRISING***

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