

Chapter 18: The Promises and Realities of Decolonization: 18-5b The Collapse of the Socialist Bloc
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18-5b The Collapse of the Socialist Bloc

In 1980 protests by Polish shipyard workers in the city of Gdansk led to the formation of [Solidarity \(Polish trade union created in 1980 to protest working conditions and political repression by the Polish communist government allied with the Soviet Union. It began the nationalist opposition to communist rule that led in 1989 to the fall of communism in eastern Europe.\)](#), a labor union that grew to 9 million members. The Roman Catholic Church in Poland, strengthened by the elevation of a Pole, Karol Wojtyla (**KAH-rol voy-TIL-ah**), to the papacy as John Paul II in 1978, gave strong moral support to the protest movement. The Polish communist government imposed martial law in 1981 in response to the growing power of Solidarity and its allies, giving the army effective political control. Seeing Solidarity under tight controls and many of its leaders in prison, the Soviet Union decided not to intervene. But Solidarity remained a potent force with a strong institutional structure and nationally recognized leaders. As Gorbachev loosened political controls in the Soviet Union after 1985, communist leaders elsewhere lost confidence in Soviet resolve, and critics and reformers in Poland and throughout eastern Europe were emboldened.

Beleaguered Warsaw Pact governments vacillated between the relaxation of control and the suppression of dissent. Just as the Catholic clergy in Poland had supported Solidarity, Protestant and Orthodox religious leaders aided the rise of opposition groups elsewhere. This combination of nationalism and religion provided a powerful base for opponents of the communist regimes. Communist governments sought to quiet the opposition by turning to the West for trade and financial assistance.

They also opened their nations to travelers, ideas, styles, and money from Western countries, all of which accelerated the demand for change, rather than stabilizing the communist regimes. By the end of 1989 communist governments across eastern Europe had fallen. The dismantling of the Berlin Wall vividly represented this transformation. While communist leaders in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria decided that change was inevitable, dictator Nicolae Ceausescu (**nehkoh-LIE chow-SHES-koo**) of Romania refused to surrender power and was overthrown and executed. The comprehensiveness of these changes became clear in 1990, when the Polish people elected Solidarity leader Lech Walesa (**leck wah-LEN-sah**) as president and the people of Czechoslovakia elected dissident playwright Vaclav Havel (**vah-SLAV hah-VEL**) as president in 1989.

The Fall of the Berlin Wall

The Berlin Wall was the most important symbol of the Cold War. Constructed to keep residents of East Germany from fleeing to the West and defended by armed

guards and barbed wire, it was the public face of communism. As the Soviet system fell apart, the residents of East and West Berlin broke down sections of the wall.



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Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, a tidal wave of patriotic enthusiasm swept aside the once-formidable communist government of East Germany. In the chaotic months that followed, East Germans crossed to West Germany in large numbers, and government services in the eastern sector nearly disappeared. The collapse of the East German government led quickly in 1990 to the reunification of Germany. Soviet leaders knew that similarly powerful nationalist sentiments existed within the Soviet Union as well. The year 1990 brought declarations of independence by Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, three small states on the Baltic Sea that the Soviet Union had annexed in 1939.

The end of the Soviet Union then came suddenly in 1991 (see [Map 18.4](#)). After communist hardliners botched a coup against Gorbachev, disgust with communism boiled over. Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian Republic, emerged as the most powerful leader in the country. Russia, the largest republic in the Soviet Union, was effectively taking the place of

the disintegrating USSR. In September 1991 the Congress of People's Deputies—the central legislature of the USSR—voted to dissolve the union. Then in December a weak multistate successor with little central control, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), was created and Gorbachev resigned. Facing economic and political challenges, Boris Yeltsin resigned the Russian presidency in January 2000. His successor, Vladimir Putin, still dominates Russia. While efforts to achieve democracy and a modern capitalist economy have stalled, Russia has modernized its military and continued to assert an aggressive foreign policy under Putin.

Map 18.4

The End of the Soviet Union

When communist hardliners failed to overthrow Gorbachev in 1991, popular anticommunist sentiment swept the Soviet Union. Following Boris Yeltsin's lead in Russia, the republics that constituted the Soviet Union declared their independence.



Why was nationalism a greater threat to the Soviet Union than to NATO?

The ethnic and religious passions that fueled the breakup of the Soviet Union also overwhelmed the Balkan nation of

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Yugoslavia. In 1991 it dissolved into a morass of separatism and warring ethnic and religious groups. Slovenia and Croatia, the most westerly provinces, both heavily Roman Catholic,

Explain how the rise of extremist groups in power led to acts of genocide and ethnic violence.

became independent states in 1992. The population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was more mixed: 40 percent were Muslims, 30 percent Serbian Orthodox, and 18 percent Catholics. Following the declaration of Bosnian national independence in 1992, the nation's Orthodox Serbs attempted to rid the state of Muslims in a violent process called [**ethnic cleansing**](#) ([Effort to eradicate a people and its culture by means of mass killing and the destruction of historical buildings and cultural materials. Ethnic cleansing was used by all sides in the conflicts that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.](#)). After extensive television coverage of atrocities that included mass murders and wanton property destruction, the United States intervened and eventually brokered a settlement in 1995 that effectively created two ethnically separate political entities.

In 1999 new fighting and a new round of ethnic cleansing occurred in the southernmost Yugoslavian province of Kosovo. Seen by Serbs as their homeland, Kosovo had a predominantly Muslim and Albanian population. When Serbia refused to stop military action, the United States, Britain, and France acted on behalf of NATO by launching an aerial war on Serbian targets in Kosovo and in Serbia itself that forced the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo. Serbia's president during this violent period, Slobodan Milosevic, was forced from power and turned over to a war crimes tribunal in The Hague, where he died in prison.

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