CAN CITIZENS END OPPRESSION WITHOUT A VIOLENT REVOLUTION?

1989 AND THE FALL OF COMMUNISM

DOCUMENT PACKET

Why did communist dictatorships give up power without bloodshed in 1989?

CASE STUDY: POLAND

PLEASE NOTE:
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ARGUMENT

1

CITIZENS

CITIZENS HELPED END COMMUNIST RULE WITHOUT BLOODSHED

In the 1970s, Polish opposition leaders engaged in gradual, peaceful struggle for human rights.

This model became influential in Poland and Eastern Europe.

Solidarity leaders successfully promoted nonviolence when a mass opposition movement emerged in Poland in 1980.

They sought to win civil liberties without overthrowing the state.

Solidarity leaders chose to negotiate with the Communist Party in 1989.

They negotiated power sharing, leading to the end of communist rule.

THESE STATEMENTS ARE NOT FACTS.
THEY ARE ARGUMENTS THAT NEED TO BE TESTED WITH HISTORICAL EVIDENCE.

A

DOCUMENT A: PEACEFUL STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

After World War II, Stalin gained control of Eastern Europe, and a communist government was formed in Poland under his control. By the 1970s, Stalin's brutal political repression was long gone. But the Polish government still controlled television, newspapers, and other media. It decided what was taught in schools and universities. It owned factories and other workplaces. Free speech was not protected, and civic associations were illegal.

In the 1970s, a new opposition movement emerged in Poland. It only had a few thousand activists, but scholars have argued that these activists contributed to the peaceful end of communism.

Journalist Jonathan Schell is among those who proposed this argument. He noted that in the 1970s, Polish activists did not want to overthrow the government. They also did not believe the government would willingly grant civil rights. Instead, they said that people should live as if they were free. Citizens should exercise their civil rights to show the government that it did not control everyone. Adam Michnik, one of the movement's leaders, called this a program of evolution – it was neither a revolution nor government reform.

Schell argued:

> "In 1976, in "A New Evolutionism," Michnik asserted: "I believe that a program for evolution ought to be addressed to an independent public, not to a dictatorial government. Such a program should advise the people on how to behave, not the government on how to reform itself."
>
> Michnik's words of 1976 fell on fertile ground. They anticipated (and helped to produce) a blossoming of civic and cultural activity in Poland. An early example was the Worker's Defense Committee. Its purpose was to give assistance to workers in trouble with the authorities. Independent underground publications multiplied. A "flying university" was founded. It offered uncensored courses in people's apartments. These groups paved the way for the ten-million-strong Solidarity movement that arose in 1980."

<u>Sources</u>:
Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and The Will of the People* (book), 2003, p.194-5. MODIFIED.
Adam Michnik, *Nowy Ewolucjonizm [New Evolutionism],* (essay), 1976. MODIFIED.

B

DOCUMENT B: SOLIDARITY

Polish workers created Solidarity during a wave of shipyard strikes in the summer of 1980. During the strikes, Lech Walesa and other leaders started negotiations with the government. As a result, the government granted Solidarity the status of a legal trade union. Soon Solidarity turned into a mass movement. It had 10 million members from all social groups. It advocated for workers' rights, free speech, and other civil liberties.

Sixteen months later, in December 1981, the government went back on its word. It attempted to crush Solidarity with military force. Communist generals announced a state of emergency and called it a "state of war." The government brought troops out into the streets and started arresting Solidarity leaders.

Historians have asked: was the Solidarity movement a revolution? How was it different from previous revolutions in Europe and around the world?

Journalist and historian Timothy Garton Ash studied Solidarity by using many sources. These sources included *Solidarity Weekly*, a periodical published by Solidarity in the 1980s. Referring to an incident described in this periodical, Garton Ash argued:

> "It is an indisputable fact that in sixteen months this revolution killed nobody. When an angry mob tried to lynch a policeman in a small town in May 1981, Solidarity officials pleaded with them to refrain. Adam Michnik shared his own experiences of being beaten by the police and asked the mob *not* to use violence against the police. And they refrained. The first people to be killed in the Polish revolution were workers shot by armed police in the first weeks of the 'war.' This extraordinary record of non-violence, this majestic self-restraint in the face of many provocations, distinguishes the Polish revolution from previous revolutions."

<u>*Sources*</u>:
Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*, 2002, (book), p. 284. MODIFIED.
Garton Ash's source of information about Michnik's intervention with the crowd: *Tygodnik Solidarnosc [Solidarity Weekly]*, (periodical), number 7, p. 2.

C

DOCUMENT C: PREVENTING ARMED CLASHES

To understand social movements, scholars can interview their members. In 1999, historian Brian Porter and sociologist Michael Kennedy organized a conference about 1989. They invited former Solidarity leaders, former Communist Party leaders, and others to speak. One of the speakers was Zbigniew Bujak, an electrician and Solidarity leader in the 1980s.

Michael Kennedy analyzed how Solidarity leaders helped the movement stay peaceful:

> "Bujak, a leader of the underground resistance from 1981 through his capture in 1986, described Solidarity's strategy. It was not interested in street confrontations and demonstrations. Each time they tried to 'overcome the other side with armed struggle,' they would lose. Hence, they decided that 'fighting without violence was best.' Of course there were other possibilities. Bujak described their experiences:
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> > '…in the very first days after the government declared a 'state of war' in December 1981, some young people decided to get arms. They tried to take arms away from a policeman, a shot rang, and that policeman was dead. His death was dramatic and unnecessary. Young activists were getting armed. They were buying weapons, buying grenades. But we managed to persuade them that buying weapons wasn't the right way to follow. We also knew that the government wanted to push us into the position of terrorists. But we managed to defend ourselves against this, and I'll be honest, it took a real effort. These weapons I mentioned, local Solidarity leaders actually sunk them in the Vistula River.'

Bujak identified Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. as Solidarity's models. Of course they also had their national religious inspiration. Not everyone in the Polish opposition was Roman Catholic. But the Roman Catholic Church was clearly supporting Solidarity in its peaceful struggle."

Sources:
Michael Kennedy, *Power, Privilege and Ideology in Communism's Negotiated Collapse* (essay), in *Negotiating Radical Change* (e-book), 2000, p. 79. MODIFIED.
Zbigniew Bujak, remarks at the conference *Communism's Negotiated Collapse*, U. of Michigan, 1999. MODIFIED.

ARGUMENT

2

GORBACHEV

GORBACHEV HELPED END COMMUNIST RULE WITHOUT BLOODSHED

Violent clashes between protesters and the Polish government were possible in 1988 and 1989.

Gorbachev's actions helped prevent them.

Gorbachev reduced arms and publicly announced that the Soviet army would not interfere in Eastern Europe.

This discouraged communist governments from using force against their citizens.

Gorbachev accepted the citizens' right to make political changes in Poland in 1989.

His acceptance helped make these changes peaceful.

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D

DOCUMENT D: POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE IN 1988

The Polish government ended the "state of war" in July 1983 and freed political prisoners by 1986. Solidarity did not regain the status of a legal trade union and its membership declined. But its leaders continued to advocate for workers' rights and civil liberties.

By the late 1980s, protests and strikes became widespread once again. Some scholars have argued that government crackdowns and country-wide violence became very likely. They explored various reasons why this did not happen.

Historian and political scientist Mark Kramer has argued:

> "The potential for renewed instability became clear in early March 1988 when thousands of students held large protest rallies in Warsaw and other cities. The Polish authorities responded by sending in special anti-riot police. The police clashed violently with the students and arrested hundreds. They stopped the disturbances, but the uneasy calm that followed lasted barely a month. In April 1988, crippling strikes broke out at major industrial plants and shipyards around the country. They were led by workers demanding legalization for Solidarity. The authorities again responded with force, but the crackdown did not prevent some of the strikes from dragging on until mid-May. These outbreaks of violent turmoil came in rapid succession. They suggested the potential for much wider unrest across the country. To avoid a chaotic upheaval in Poland, Gorbachev acted at crucial moments in 1988 and 1989 to ensure that the country would undergo a peaceful but drastic transformation."

Sources:
Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2003, (article), p. 192-3. MODIFIED.
For an overview of sources Kramer used to write this paragraph, please see Document E.

E

DOCUMENT E: A NEWSPAPER REPORT ABOUT STUDENT PROTESTS IN 1988

Document D provides historian Mark Kramer's analysis of the situation in Poland in 1988. Kramer based his analysis on several sources. They included two newspaper reports, two books written by Polish scholars, and Polish Communist Party briefings from May 1988.

One of the press reports Kramer cites was this article from the British daily newspaper The Times:

> "Hundreds of riot police yesterday charged students trying to march in Warsaw. The march marked the 20th anniversary of Poland's biggest postwar student revolt. Witnesses said police surrounded 300 to 400 students who had left Mass in a city church, intending to lay flowers at a monument 400 yards away. In Cracow, more than 100 students fought police, and several were injured or detained. Disturbances were also reported in Lublin and Wroclaw. The Cracow clashes began when police charged a few hundred students trying to rally at a statue of the 19th-century poet, Adam Mickiewicz. It was a ban on a Mickiewicz play which led to the 1968 riots."

In 1968, students in major Polish cities organized large protests against government censorship. Police attacked and arrested many students. Some protest leaders spent over a year in prison.

Source:
"World Roundup: Clashes as Poles remember 1968." The Times, March 9, 1988 By: Our Foreign Staff, Warsaw. MODIFIED.

F

DOCUMENT F: GORBACHEV REDUCES SOVIET MILITARY FORCE IN EASTERN EUROPE

The Soviet Union had a long history of military interventions in Eastern Europe. In the 1950s and 60s, the Soviet army crushed protests in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Soviet soldiers killed over 2,500 people in these two countries. Gorbachev became the Soviet leader in 1985. Around 575,000 Soviet troops were stationed throughout Eastern Europe at the time.

Gorbachev decided to allow political change in Eastern Europe. When did he make this decision? How did he communicate it to the world?

Historian Mark Kramer has argued that this policy change came in 1988. And Gorbachev made this change clear in a speech before the United Nations in December:

> "He said that the Soviet Union would reduce its military forces in Eastern Europe by 50,000 troops, 5,300 tanks, and 24 nuclear weapons. In purely military terms, these reductions were not very significant. But symbolically their importance was enormous. They were meant to improve East-West relations ('showing that our new political thinking is more than just words,' as Gorbachev exclaimed during a Communist Party leaders' meeting shortly after his UN speech). The reductions were also intended as tangible confirmation of the new Soviet approach to relations with Eastern Europe."

Sources:
Mark Kramer, "The Collapse of East European Communism" in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2003, (article), p. 184-5. MODIFIED.
In this passage, Kramer uses information and quotes from:
Gorbachev, Speech given before the United Nations on December 8, 1988.
Classified notes from a meeting of Soviet Communist Party leaders on December 27-28, 1988.

G

DOCUMENT G: GORBACHEV ACCEPTS RADICAL POLITICAL CHANGES IN EASTERN EUROPE

In the spring of 1989, Solidarity and the Polish government held a series of Round Table negotiations. This led to partly free elections in June 1989. The Polish parliament would now have two houses, with a total of 570 seats, 261 of them open to competitive elections. Solidarity, which became a political party, won all but one of the contested seats, a landslide victory that surprised both sides. The next questions were: How would Solidarity and the communists share power? Would the communists try to reclaim their hold on the Polish parliament? Would they use force?

Some scholars have argued that Gorbachev helped make this transition peaceful. Political scientist Vladimir Tismaneanu analyzed the Polish Round Table negotiations and other changes in Eastern Europe, and wrote:

> "In the summer of 1989, Gorbachev addressed European leaders at the Council of Europe. On that occasion, he went farther than ever in rejecting Soviet Union's military and political interference in East European politics. He admitted that social systems could change and hinted that this could take place in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev's statement was widely interpreted as a green light to reformers in Eastern Europe in their efforts to move toward a multiparty system and a market-oriented economy. According to Gorbachev,
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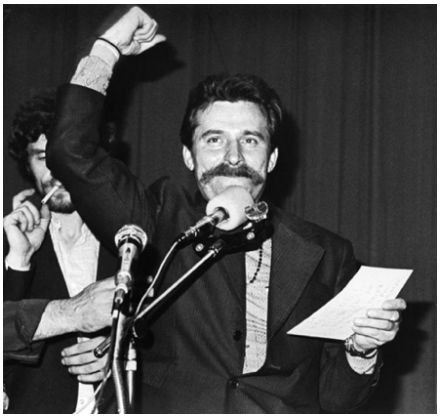
> > 'The fact that the states of Europe have different social systems is a reality. The recognition of this historical fact and respect for the sovereign right of each people to choose their social system at their own discretion are the most important steps for a normal European process. The social and political order in some countries did change in the past, and it can change in the future as well, but this is exclusively a matter for the people themselves to decide. Any interference in the internal affairs, any attempts to limit the sovereignty of states – both friends and allies or anybody else – are inadmissible.'"

Tismaneanu concluded that Gorbachev's promise made new government crackdowns on opposition groups less likely. Now, communist governments in Poland and other Eastern European countries could no longer claim that their use of force was a way of avoiding Soviet military action.

Sources:
Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, 2000, (book), p. 188-9. MODIFIED
Gorbachev's speech at the Council of Europe, July 7, 1989. MODIFIED.

SOLIDARITY LEADERS MENTIONED IN THE DOCUMENTS

Lech Walesa



Lech Walesa (born 1943) was the leader of Solidarity and Poland's first president after the fall of communism. He led workers' strikes at the Gdansk shipyard in the summer of 1980, and then negotiated with the Communist Party to make Solidarity a legal trade union. In 1983, Walesa received the Nobel Peace Prize for his activist work for a freer, more democratic Poland. In 1989, he was a leading figure during the Round Table negotiations between the government and Solidarity. He was Poland's President between 1990 and 1995. He currently lives in Gdansk.

Adam Michnik

Adam Michnik (born in 1946) is a historian, journalist and former strategist of the Polish anti-communist opposition. He spent a total of six years in prison for challenging the communist government over the course of more than two decades. He was a leader of the 1968 student protests, one of the founders of the Workers' Defense Committee in 1976, a Solidarity advisor in the 1980s, and a key negotiator at the Round Table in 1989. After 1989, he briefly served as a deputy to the Polish parliament, and then left active politics to become the editor-in-chief of Poland's largest liberal newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. He continues in this role today.

Zbigniew Bujak

Zbigniew Bujak (born in 1954) was one of the leaders of the Solidarity movement. Bujak spent his early career working as an electrician at a factory outside of Warsaw. As the Solidary protests gained steam in 1981, Bujak became the head of Solidarity in the Mazowsze region. After getting arrested his arrest in 1986, Bujak became one of the better known Solidarity leaders in Poland. After the Round Table negotiations in 1989, Bujak was active in Polish politics, serving in various organizations and as a deputy to the Polish parliament. He received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in 1986. He remains active in Polish public and political life today.

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