The Warsaw Pact and Eastern Europe During the Cold War

The Soviet Union dominated Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War. After World War II, it formed the Warsaw Pact, a military alliance of European communist states meant to counter NATO. The alliance included six European countries occupied by the USSR following Nazi defeat plus Albania and is also referred to as the Eastern Bloc. Although it was ostensibly a military alliance, the Warsaw Pact was used as an instrument to keep communist regimes in power in those countries. It was dissolved after the communist regimes collapsed at the end of the Cold War.

NEW REGIMES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

By the final weeks of the Second World War, Soviet troops had advanced westward, pushing the Nazi army back to Berlin. When the war ended, Soviet troops occupied several Central and Eastern European states, including the eastern part of Germany.

During the war, the USSR absorbed the three formerly independent Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—as well as a piece of Romania, which it established as the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In the remaining Central and Eastern European states it occupied, the USSR helped establish hardline communist governments modeled after the Soviet system.

The USSR, along with the United States, Britain, and France, jointly occupied Germany and Austria. The victorious powers established Austria as an independent and neutral country but disagreed over the fate of Germany. The three Western powers established the market-based Federal Republic of Germany in the west, while the USSR established the hardline socialist state of the German Democratic Republic in the east.

Escalating tensions and fear of further communist expansion prompted the formation of NATO. In response and out of anger that the western allies had allowed rearmament in West Germany, the USSR formed the Warsaw Pact, named after the city where the treaty was signed.

The governments of the Warsaw Pact carried out repressive policies throughout their existence, including severely limiting freedom of speech, preventing opposition parties from gaining power, and establishing extensive networks of spies to monitor citizens and arrest those suspected of opposing the regimes.

The states of the Warsaw Pact generally enjoyed higher living standards than the Soviet Union but lagged far behind Western Europe.

QUICK FACTS

Warsaw Pact Members—The Warsaw Pact included the Soviet Union, Romania, Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Albania. Albania withdrew in 1968 when it split with the USSR over differing interpretations of Marxism and disagreements over regional policies.

NATO—The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed in 1949 out of fear of further communist expansion into Europe. The military alliance persists to this day and now includes many former Warsaw Pact members.

Joseph Stalin—The strongman dictator of the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953. Stalin led the USSR to victory over Nazi Germany and oversaw the establishment of hardline communist regimes in postwar Central and Eastern Europe.
**ATTACK AT INDEPENDENCE — HUNGARY 1956**

Although Soviet troops were welcomed as liberators as they pushed Nazi forces out of Eastern Europe, citizens there soon grew wary of Stalinist policy and the new communist leaders. In autumn 1956 an uprising in Hungary attempted to topple the hardline communist rulers and replace them with a freely elected government.

When student protesters were arrested in Budapest, revolution swept across the country. The government collapsed and political prisoners were freed. The interim government announced plans to withdraw Hungary from the Warsaw Pact and hold free elections. However, only days later, the Soviet Union invaded and crushed the independence movement. More than 2,500 Hungarians and an estimated 700 Soviet soldiers were killed during days of violence.

The Soviet Union installed a new hardline government, which moved quickly to arrest anyone associated with the uprising. The Hungarian Revolution demonstrated that the USSR would not tolerate any attempts to free Eastern European states from its influence.

**A SECOND ATTEMPT IS CRUSHED — PRAGUE 1968**

By the mid-1960s, more relaxed policies brought by de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union saw the proliferation of independent, underground publications and talk of change. In Czechoslovakia, a new movement sought to reform the faltering economy and to relax hardline policies.

Alexander Dubcek, who became the leader of Czechoslovakia in 1968, announced a new policy, which he called “Socialism with a human face.” He began relaxing controls on the media, tolerating freedom of speech, and liberalizing the command economy. These policies allowed public debate about the merits of communism and the country’s relationship with the Soviet Union for the first time.

Leonid Brezhnev, who had become leader of the Soviet Union after Nikita Khrushchev was ousted by his own party, had begun reversing some of the more relaxed policies of his predecessor. Brezhnev saw the reforms in Czechoslovakia as a threat to Marxist-Leninist dogma and Soviet hegemony in the region. He urged Dubcek to halt his reform program, but Dubcek refused.

In August 1968, Brezhnev ordered the Warsaw Pact armies to invade Czechoslovakia and oust Dubcek and his government. Thousands of soldiers and tanks entered the country, seizing control of Prague despite massive nonviolent protests Dubcek was replaced with a more obedient leader and reassigned to a lowly post in the Forestry Service. The event was the opening volley of what historians have referred to as the “Brezhnev Doctrine,” which meant that the USSR could use force to maintain hardline communist governments in the Warsaw Pact.

**QUICK FACTS**

**Brezhnev Doctrine**—Named after Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, the doctrine held that the Soviet Union could resort to military force to preserve communist regimes in the Warsaw Pact.

**Hungarian Revolution**—An uprising in 1956 that toppled the Soviet-supported communist government in Hungary. The short-lived interim government was overthrown and jailed after the Soviet Union invaded, leading to days of deadly street battles.

**Prague Spring**—A period of reform in Czechoslovakia headed by Alexander Dubcek. The period saw improved freedom of speech, market liberalization, and relaxed control over society by the Communist Party. The Warsaw Pact armies led by the Soviet Union invaded, replacing Dubcek and his government despite mass protests across the country.

**COMECON**—The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. It was an economic association established in Eastern Europe following the Second World War. It expanded to other communist countries during the Cold War, but it was used primarily as a tool to maintain economic cooperation among Warsaw Pact states and to deter individual states from forming trade relations with the West.

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PERESTROIKA AND THE END OF COMMUNISM

By the 1980s dissidents from the Soviet Union and the communist countries of the Warsaw Pact were gaining attention internationally. Prominent figures such as the former Gulag prisoner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, nuclear scientist Andrei Sakharov, and Czech playwright Vaclav Havel were publishing underground literature to inspire resistance to the regimes, despite heavy repression.

A Polish trade union, known as Solidarity, began gaining influence in the country after a wave of labor strikes in 1980. Although it was heavily repressed by the state, Solidarity members remained active throughout the decade and the events of 1980 energized anti-communist sentiment.

When Mikhail Gorbachev began to liberalize the Soviet economy and to allow freedom of speech through his policies of glasnost and perestroika, anti-communist movements throughout Eastern Europe gained new life. However, the hardline leadership in these countries, particularly in East Germany, resisted calls by Gorbachev to implement reform. Ironically, by 1989 the Eastern European communist states were more faithful to Soviet-style communism than the USSR.

By that time growing unrest had led to mass street protests across the region. Gorbachev, breaking with the Brezhnev Doctrine, indicated that he would not send Soviet troops to save the embattled communist regimes.

In 1989 Solidarity became the first noncommunist party to win an election in the Warsaw Pact. That same year, communists across the alliance fell from power in a wave of revolutions. Only in Romania did the events turn violent, resulting in the execution of longtime leader Nicolae Ceausescu on Christmas Day 1989.

The members of the Warsaw Pact voted to dissolve the alliance in 1991. Since then, many of the former alliance members have joined NATO, including the three Baltic states that gained independence from the Soviet Union.

Protesters tore down the Berlin Wall as the communist East German government began to collapse in 1989.

Czech dissident and playwright Vaclav Havel was elected president following the Velvet Revolution of 1989.

DISCUSSION IDEAS

What was the Brezhnev Doctrine? Why did the Soviet Union intervene when movements tried to replace communist governments? Did the policy benefit Soviet interests?

What led to the revolutions of 1989? Why did communism fall in every country of the Warsaw Pact?

What prompted the formation of the Warsaw Pact? How was the Warsaw Pact similar to NATO? In what ways did it differ?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


