## The collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe

By the end of this spread you should be able to:
1. Explain the reasons for East European discontent with Soviet control in the 1980s.
2. Describe Gorbachev’s policies and their impact in Eastern Europe.
3. Describe the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe.

### Discontent with Soviet control

By the 1980s there was widespread discontent in Eastern Europe. Although the exact circumstances of each state varied, the main sources of dissatisfaction were common to them all:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life under Soviet control</th>
<th>What people wanted instead</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party rule</td>
<td>Political parties and free elections. Open discussion about politics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police state</td>
<td>Abolition of secret police forces. Freedom to criticise the Government.</td>
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<tr>
<td>State controlled economy</td>
<td>More freedom to own and run businesses without State interference. Farms and factories to produce sufficient food and responsive to the demand of consumers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low standard of living</td>
<td>Improved living standards.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious belief</td>
<td>Freedom of religious belief.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communist loyalty</td>
<td>The right and opportunity to express their national identity. A nation state free from outside control which would act in the interests of its citizens.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Mikhail Gorbachev

In 1985 Gorbachev became Secretary-General of the Soviet Communist Party. At 54 he was a relatively young Soviet leader committed to carrying out reforms.

**His impact on Eastern Europe**

1. A food of popular demands for similar changes.
2. A changed relationship between the USSR and Eastern Europe:
   - Gorbachev wanted a more equal relationship between them.
   - The USSR was no longer prepared to use armed force to get its own way.
3. Difficulties for Communist leaders who had to adjust to Gorbachev’s declarations that Marxism had proved a failure.
4. The Party was not always right.
5. The leadership was more open to new ideas and change.

### How the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe collapsed

**Poland**

- **1980**
  - Severe economic crisis. Strikes and revival of Solidarity.
- **1989**
  - Jaruzelski agrees to legalize Solidarity.
  - Free travel permitted to Austria and the West.
  - Free elections, free press, freedom of belief allowed.
- **1990**
  - Non-Communist government elected.

**Czechoslovakia**

- **1989**
  - Demonstrators call for economic and political reform.
  - Government uses force against them.
  - News of changes in Poland and East Germany encourages demonstrators to continue.
  - Gorbachev urges Party to respond to the people’s demands.
  - Opposition leader, the author Václav Havel, elected President.

**Bulgaria and Romania**

- **1989**
  - Hardline regimes overthrown.
- **1990**
  - Communists win free elections.

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**His inheritance**

1. The Soviet standard of living was even lower than in most Eastern European states.
2. The USSR's wealth was not sufficient to bear the weight of the Government's military expenditure.
3. The USSR suffered severe food shortages and had to import grain from the USA and other Western countries.
4. Standards of health and housing were poor and declining.

**His plan**

1. Restructure the Soviet economy (perestroika).
2. Listen to public opinion and be more open about Government policy (glasnost).
3. Continue to keep real power in the hands of the Communist Party but allow some elections.
4. Reduce Party control of the economy.
5. Reduce military expenditure.
6. Encourage Western firms to invest in the USSR.