

# Velvet revolutions in E. Europe – 20 years ago

1989 was a momentous year. Across the world, from Trafalgar to Tiananmen Square, voices long repressed began to be heard. Unrest became pandemic. Nation after nation began to shake off the shackles that had bound them and assert their human rights. Those were heady days – 20 years ago.

It is important to remember Mao Tse Tung's "Doctrine of Contradictions" which outlines the relationship between pressure and release. Pressure: the hammer swings down for contact with the nail. Release: the hammer is raised again in preparation for another blow. In the geo-strategic world of the Cold War these upward swings had popular names, like *détente*, *perestroika*, and *glasnost*. But they were part of the ongoing process of driving home the nail.

There was unrest in nations from the Baltic to the Balkans. Early in the year Yugoslavia showed signs of coming apart at the seams. Labor unrest and out-of-control inflation coupled with ethnic rivalries created widespread dissatisfaction with government. "The land of the South Slavs" was created after World War I from left-over remnants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It consisted of six republics, five nations, four languages, three religions, two alphabets and one political party – Communist. Josip Broz Tito was the glue that held it all together.

Mikhail Gorbachev signaled a warming trend in the Cold War as McDonald's opened in Moscow on Gorky Street. Accordingly he was the new darling in Western diplomatic circles. "He's a man I can do business with," cooed Margaret Thatcher. Gorbach's new word was *glasnost*.

By March 1989 even some Russian citizens were beginning to believe the disinformation. Critics emerged from underground ventilating unorthodox views and even organizing unofficial groups that could challenge the power and influence of the Communist Party. They made headlines in the western press, but at home their names were noted. They were brave souls who knew from experience they would be the first to disappear into a remote gulag when the hammer fell again.

The Nationalists agitated in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. An unofficial movement called "Memorial," designed to document Stalin's atrocities and commemorate his victims, spread right across the USSR with chapters in 110 cities and towns. It became a platform for all manner of unrestrained discussions on public affairs. By late spring the rising tide of dissatisfaction became a tsunami.

Some peaceful protests were brutally crushed. In the picturesque old Georgian capital of Tbilisi, along the gracious tree-lined Rustaveli Prospekt, *Spetsnaz* troops (select commando forces) were sent in the early morning of April 9 to attack unarmed demonstrators. Scores were killed and over 7,000 injured. French doctors from the respected

*Medecins sans Frontiers* group confirmed, on the basis of 16 autopsies, that the Soviet troops had used toxic CS gas (a 'suffocant' developed for battlefield use) to disperse the demonstrators. Tbilisi was then closed to foreign journalists and became a harbinger of Tiananmen Square two months later.

It was a long, hot summer. There were mass demonstrations from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Miners went out on strike across six time-zones from Siberia to the Ukraine. Estonians joined hands with Latvians and Lithuanians to protest the illegal Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 which handed their countries over to the Red Czar.

In East Germany (DDR), two-thirds of the volk watched West German TV every day. In late '88 voices were heard demanding what President Reagan had earlier suggested, "Mr. Gorbachev, take down this Wall."

The Czechs were skeptical at first. They reasoned, "If *glasnost* is for real, let Gorbachev rehabilitate Alexander Dubcek," (architect of the 'Prague Spring' in 1968). By October we were caught up in the euphoria of crowds demonstrating in Prague's Wenceslas Square. Workers in Czechoslovakia poured into streets in support of students protesting communist abuses – not exactly what Marx had in mind when he said, "Workers of the world unite!" It was all very exciting.

By November communist governments were toppling like dominoes. People power seemed to be back on the cobbled streets of East European capitals. By mid-month the Wall had cracked and there were the media anchors, Jennings, Rather and Brokaw all doing stand ups against the background of a human hemorrhage breaching the Berlin Wall.

*Solidarity* leader Lech Walesa was in America with both hands out. The MILWAUKEE JOURNAL headlined (in Polish) "Nasza ziemia znów w potrzebie" – Our homeland is again in need. Gorbachev was hoping that his Christmas stocking would be stuffed with American technology and long term low-interest (never-to-be-repaid) loans.

Romania was the last to change. Their miracle revolution took place in mid-December and Nicolae Ceausescu was executed on Christmas Day.

Before the dust settled when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, I wrote these words in *Global Glimpse*: "Islam will become increasingly militant. It will eventually replace communism as the great threat to freedom and could well be one of the 'hooks in the jaw' to bring Russia to her doom."

This is not the time to disarm; if we prematurely *beat our swords into plowshares* we may wind up plowing for those who kept their sword.

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