

CHAPTER 5

Change and Crisis in the 1960s-1970s

OBJECTIVE How did Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Poland try to change their roles in the communist bloc, and how did the Soviet Union respond?

1. Greek mythology tells the story of Sisyphus (SIS-ih-fus), whose punishment was to push a huge stone up a hill forever. Every time he came close to the top, the stone would slip through his hands and roll back to the bottom of the hill. When the Soviet Union took over Eastern Europe, it found itself with a similar problem. The Soviet Union's unending problem was maintaining communism in its Eastern European satellites. The Soviets were able to restore order when trouble started, often by using force. However, after things were quiet for a while, trouble always arose again, and once again the Soviets would have to step in to restore their control. The greatest threats came from Czechoslovakia and Poland. In Czechoslovakia, a group of reformers within the communist party threatened Soviet control of the country. In Poland, the threat came from a labor union led by a determined electrician.



▲ Leonid Brezhnev gives a speech to a meeting of the Hungarian communist party in 1966. Behind him is Janos Kadar, Hungarian communist leader.

THE SOVIET UNION UNDER LEONID BREZHNEV: What were the major goals of the Soviet leadership under Brezhnev?

2. While Nikita Khrushchev was in power (1953-1964), he tried to bring political and economic change to the Soviet Union. His reforms were opposed by many people in the communist party. Some of the reforms ran into trouble because they threatened people's jobs or privileges. Other reforms simply did not work. This opposition led to Khrushchev's removal from office in October 1964.

3. The new Soviet leader was Leonid Brezhnev. Brezhnev held power from 1964 until his death in 1982. He and his supporters were conservatives, people who wanted to avoid radical change. Brezhnev's most important goal was to protect the stability and security of the Soviet system. One way to protect the system was to raise the Soviet standard of living so that

Background: By the end of Brezhnev's tenure, corruption was almost everywhere in Soviet life. Factory managers used bribery to get the goods they needed. Policemen routinely accepted bribes not to give tickets. Teachers charged their students for good grades, and even for the right to take exams. In certain parts of the country, local party bosses, immune from public control, actually sold governmental posts.

the general population would remain content. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet government therefore spent a great deal of money to improve agriculture and produce consumer goods. At the same time, avoiding changes that might get out of control was more important to him than anything else. Brezhnev firmly opposed policies that were threatening to any powerful group in the party. For example, he was unwilling to change the Soviet collective farm system. This system was very inefficient in part because officials in Moscow rather than farmers made most important decisions about running the farms. But allowing farmers to make decisions would leave central planners with nothing to do and cost them their jobs.

4. Brezhnev also put stricter limits on artists and writers. He felt that under Khrushchev they had been allowed to spread dangerous ideas, especially ideas about freedom. Brezhnev's approach kept order in the Soviet Union, but only at a high price. Unwillingness to change for almost two decades led to increased inefficiency in the economy, and to corruption and demoralization in many areas of Soviet life.

5. To Brezhnev, protecting Soviet security included maintaining Soviet control of Eastern Europe. One method of control was to strengthen the Warsaw Pact by increasing cooperation between the armies of its member countries. Another method was to increase the activities of the Council of Economic Assistance, or Comecon (KAHM-uh-kahn). Comecon was an organization that linked the economies of all Soviet bloc nations. It had been set up by Stalin in 1949, but at first it had done very little.

6. The Soviet leadership saw that it would have to allow the governments of Eastern Europe to improve their peoples' standards of living in order to avoid even greater changes. The Soviets helped improve living standards by sending raw materials at low prices and by making long-term loans. However, it was not enough for the Soviet Union to increase its economic help to its satellites. The Soviets also would have to tolerate some expression of national feeling in Eastern Europe. Otherwise, frustration and anger would build to dangerous levels.

7. The country that went farthest in making changes was Hungary, where the Hungarian communist party under Janos Kadar reduced the

role of central planning in the economy. Officials in government offices made fewer decisions about what goods to produce, and factory managers made more. The Hungarian government also permitted the people more freedom of action in other areas. It became easier to travel abroad and possible, within limits, to criticize the government.

8. Still, the Soviet Union carefully watched any experiments and all developments in Eastern Europe. When Brezhnev became convinced that changes had gone too far, the Soviet Union reacted forcefully. The two countries that crossed over Brezhnev's line were Czechoslovakia and Poland. A third country, Romania, managed to loosen some strings tying it to the Soviet Union without getting into trouble.

ROMANIA: How did Romania manage to establish some independence within the Soviet bloc?

9. Romania's road to semi-independence began in the late 1950s and continued through the 1960s. The first step occurred when the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw its troops from Romania in 1958. Once Soviet troops were gone, Romania began to act more independently. In 1962, Khrushchev introduced Comecon, his new economic program for Eastern Europe. Under Comecon, Romania would stress agriculture. It would not build industry and so would remain economically backward. Romania refused to go along with Khrushchev's plan.

10. In 1965, the year after Brezhnev's rise to power, Nicolae Ceausescu (NEE-koh-ly chow-SHESH-koo) became head of the Romanian communist party. Ceausescu continued to edge Romania away from the Soviet Union, but carefully and gradually. His main differences were in the area of **foreign policy**. Foreign policy is a country's plan for dealing with other countries. An example of Ceausescu's independent foreign policy was his support of Israel in the 1967 war. The Soviet Union and the rest of Eastern Europe supported the Arabs. That same year, Romania sent an ambassador to West Germany, going against Soviet wishes again. In 1968, when the Soviet Union and four other Warsaw Pact nations invaded Czechoslovakia, Romania refused to participate. It even condemned the invasion.

11. Romania got away with these actions for two reasons. First, the Soviet Union had more important things to worry about elsewhere, both at home and abroad. Second, the communist party maintained tight control inside Romania. It did not allow any economic or political changes that might threaten the system. It especially did not allow any criticism of communism. To Brezhnev and his supporters, keeping tight communist control was more important than anything else. So while the Soviet Union dealt with more serious problems, it left Romania alone.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA: What led to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968?

12. For many years, Czechoslovakia had not been a country where anyone would expect reform. After Stalin's death in 1953, the Czechoslovak communist party under Antonin Novotny (AHN-toh-noon NOH-voht-nee) continued to resist change. Novotny was extremely powerful, as he was president of Czechoslovakia as well as communist party leader. It took Soviet pressure to get even small reforms introduced, such as releasing people sent to prison under Stalin.

13. Some changes finally did occur in Czechoslovakia. In the early 1960s, when the economy ran into trouble, the communist party gave up a little of its control. For example, some power was taken from central planners. Managers of individual factories were given more authority to decide what to produce and what prices to charge. Novotny disliked the reforms so much that he actually said he hoped they would fail.

14. There also was an important political development in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s. The Czechoslovakian communist party had two main branches, one for the Czech parts of the country and one for Slovakia. In 1963, reformers in Slovakia elected a new party leader named Alexander Dubcek (DOOB-chek). During the next several years, reformers grew stronger in the Slovakian branch of the party.

15. There was a symbolic change shortly thereafter. For over ten years a gigantic statue of Stalin had stood in Prague (prahg), the capital of Czechoslovakia. In 1964 the statue was knocked over and removed. Many writers and artists began to speak out. In December 1967 Novotny was



▲ Alexander Dubcek in May 1968. Unlike most communist party leaders, Dubcek enjoyed great popularity during his time in power.

removed as first secretary of the communist party in Czechoslovakia. On January 5, 1968, he was replaced by Alexander Dubcek.

PEOPLE IN HISTORY

16. **Alexander Dubcek** When he was elected first secretary of the Czechoslovak communist party, Alexander Dubcek was 46 years old. He lived in the Soviet Union for sixteen years, as a child and later as an adult student. He graduated with honors from the Soviet Higher Party School, a training ground for communist officials. During the 1960s Dubcek had advocated some changes, but none of these changes was great enough to bother Brezhnev. As far as the Soviets could tell, Dubcek's background made him an excellent choice to lead Czechoslovakia. At first Dubcek appeared to fulfill Soviet expectations. During early 1968 he stressed that the communist party would continue to dominate the country. He also repeated Czechoslovakia's loyalty to the Warsaw pact.

Background: After Dubcek was removed from office in 1969, a massive purge of the party began. About 500,000 people were purged, including many of the most able and competent people in all walks of life from the economic bureaucracy to the military. Several hundred people were put on trial, while many other supporters of reform left the country. Between 50,000 and 75,000 Soviet troops remained in Czechoslovakia.

17. Within a few months the Prague Spring began. The Prague Spring was a remarkable period of reform in 1968. Dubcek was determined to win the confidence of the people and to improve conditions in Czechoslovakia. To reach these goals, he encouraged and supported reformers in the communist party. In March, the reformers were strong enough to force Novotny to give up his position as Czechoslovakia's president. He was replaced by General Ludvik Svoboda (LOOD-vik SVOH-boh-dah). Dubcek permitted the first open discussion of Czechoslovak history since 1948. Those who had suffered or died during Stalin's terror and purges were remembered and honored.

18. In April the party adopted what it called its "Action Program." This program called for more democracy and for the creation in Czechoslovakia of a "new model for socialist society." In May the party leadership called this idea socialism with a human face. As spring turned to summer, the reform process continued to heat up. On June 20, the government officially ended censorship. That same month, the reformers in the party published a statement called the "Two Thousand Words," which called for the entire population to support their reforms. In

August the party newspaper published a new set of rules for the party, including a secret ballot in party elections and limited terms for party officials. The new rules also would guarantee the right of members to disagree with the party leadership. These reforms meant a complete change from the way any communist party had ever operated.

19. The Soviet Union soon became worried about events in Czechoslovakia and tried to stop them. The Soviets were convinced that the communist party in Czechoslovakia was about to lose control of the country. At first, Brezhnev tried to reverse events in Czechoslovakia with a series of warnings to Dubcek and his supporters, calling on them to restore censorship and to silence critics of communism. On July 29, Dubcek met with Soviet party leaders in a small town near the Soviet border. The meeting ended without an agreement.

20. On the night of August 20-21, the Soviet Union struck with force. More than 500,000 troops from Warsaw Pact countries poured into Czechoslovakia. Although most were Soviet troops, the invasion force also included units from East Germany, Poland, Hungary,

▼ In August 1968, thousands of Czechoslovak citizens jeer at a Soviet tank as it rumbles through Prague. Despite such protests, Soviet troops quickly gained control of the country.



Background: Although the official version of the suppression of Solidarity had the military doing the job, in fact the army was not considered reliable by the communist leadership. The job of applying force against civilians was given instead to the ZOMO, a force of 70,000 security police. It was a highly trained force that was hated and feared by the general population.

and Bulgaria. Romania refused to participate. Czechoslovakia's leaders told the people not to resist such overwhelming force. In less than two days, all of the country was under control of the Warsaw Pact troops.

21. Although the Prague Spring ended with the Soviet invasion, the Soviets were unable to install a new Czechoslovak leadership immediately. President Svoboda refused to agree to the Soviet demand he form a new government without Dubcek, who was imprisoned with other reform leaders in Moscow. As a result, the Soviets released Dubcek. In Czechoslovakia, the people practiced passive resistance to the invaders. Instead of fighting back, they refused to cooperate with the invaders.

22. Under tremendous Soviet pressure, the Czechoslovakian leaders signed an agreement reversing most of their reforms. Additional pressure led to a treaty giving the Soviet Union the right to keep troops in Czechoslovakia. Finally, in August 1969, Dubcek was forced out as first secretary and replaced by Gustav Husak (GOOS-tahf HOO-zahk). Dubcek and many thousands of other reformers were expelled from the communist party. For the next twenty years, Czechoslovakia quietly lived under tight communist control. Dubcek also lived quietly, working at a low-level job until he retired.

23. After crushing the Czech reform movement, the Soviet Union defended its action. It stated that under no circumstances could a country that had become communist ever be allowed reject that system. If a communist party were in danger of losing power, the Soviet Union insisted it had the right to stop that from happening. This statement came to be called the **Brezhnev Doctrine**. It was the basis of Soviet policy in Eastern Europe for the next twenty years.

POLAND: What conditions led to the Solidarity movement, and how did the Soviet Union react?

24. Poland was at once the most important and most troublesome Soviet satellite. It was the largest Eastern European country in both area and population, and it had the largest army. Although Wladyslaw Gomułka made some changes after 1956, his government became corrupt and inefficient. In 1968 Poland was rocked

by student riots. Two years later, riots by workers against food price increases brought Gomułka down. He was replaced by Edward Gierk (ED-ward GEAR-ek). Gierk survived another outburst of strikes and protests by workers in 1976.

25. During 1980, almost the entire Polish nation united in protest against the government. The trouble began in July when the government once again raised food prices. Strikes broke out all over the country. At first neither Gierk nor Brezhnev were worried. However, the 1980 disturbances were different from previous events in two ways. First, in 1980 workers, students, intellectuals, professionals, farmers, church leaders, and other groups in Polish society were acting together. Second, the events of 1980 produced outstanding leaders who were able to keep these different groups united.

26. The seriousness of the strikes and protests became clearer by August. In the middle of the month, workers in the Lenin Shipyards in the port city of Gdansk (guh-DAHNSK) went on strike. It was a non-violent sit-down strike, and it quickly spread across the country. Soon the workers in Gdansk found an outstanding leader to speak for them. He was an electrician named Lech Walesa (LEK vah-LEN-sah). Within days, the workers had a list of demands. They included free speech and the end of censorship. One demand was non-negotiable from the start: the right to form labor unions free of state control. The workers did not wait for government permission to act on that demand. They soon announced the formation of an independent union called **Solidarity**. It was the first independent trade union in the history of the Soviet bloc.

27. One of the reasons Solidarity could stand up to the Polish government is that it had such widespread support. One important supporter was an organization of intellectuals called KOR (Workers Defense Committee). Another, in a country that was 95 percent Catholic, was the Catholic Church. The Polish government quickly found itself with its back against the wall. On August 31, 1980, it signed an historic agreement with Solidarity. Polish workers won the right to form independent unions and to strike. While these rights are guaranteed in the West, until August 1980 they were unheard of anywhere in

Activity: Have students stage a debate between Dubcek and Walesa on one side and Brezhnev, Jaruzelski, and Husak on the other.

Ask: Why were the "Prague Spring" in Czechoslovakia and the rise of Solidarity in Poland considered such a threat by the Soviet Union? Why weren't the events in Romania considered as dangerous?

the Soviet bloc. The August 31 agreement also called for the release of people imprisoned for their political beliefs. Solidarity became even stronger in the months that followed. Millions of Polish farmers formed their own union. It was called **Rural Solidarity**. It cooperated closely with the original Solidarity led by Walesa in Gdansk.

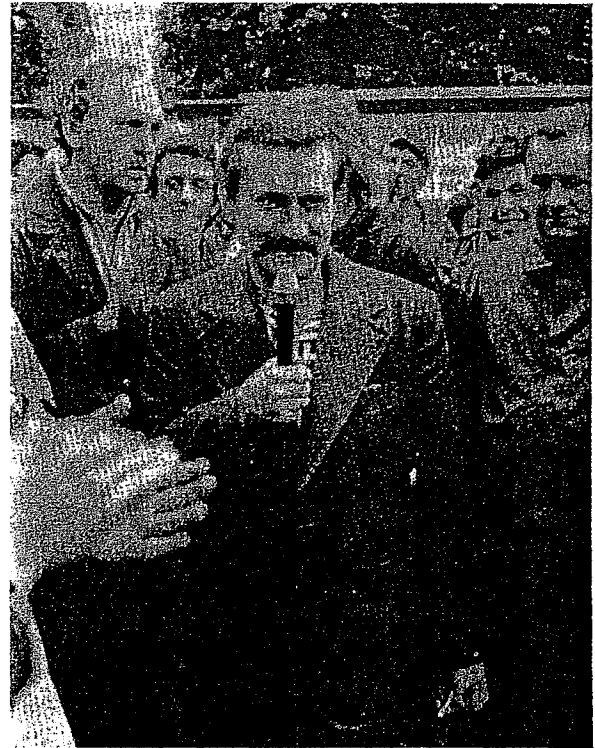
SPOTLIGHT ON SOURCES

28. In 1981, Solidarity published a program that described how it thought Polish society should look. A section of that program follows:

Democracy is not the power of a group that places itself above society, which grants itself the right to identify society's needs and to represent its interests. Society must be able to speak aloud, to express the diversity of social and political ideas, to assure to everyone a just share in the material and spiritual goods of the country.... Our objective is a self-managed Poland.

— Big Brother: The Soviet Union and Soviet Europe, Helene Carrere D'Encausse

29. By late 1980, the Soviet leadership was determined to destroy Solidarity. Communist control clearly was threatened in Poland. The Soviets also were afraid that what they called the "Polish disease" would spread to other satellites and even the Soviet Union. However, Brezhnev did not want Soviet troops to invade Poland, as they had in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The risk that all of Poland would fight invading Soviet troops was too great. Therefore, the Soviets looked for someone in Poland to do the job for them. In September Gierek was replaced by another party leader, who was himself replaced a month later by Wojciech Jaruzelski (VOY-cheech yah-roo-ZEL-skee). Jaruzelski was an army general who had been minister of defense in 1980. In February 1981 he had become prime minister. When he also became party leader, he held enormous power. After careful planning with the Soviet Union, Jaruzelski proclaimed **martial law** on December 12-13, 1981. Martial law is rule by the army according to military laws. He arrested the Solidarity leaders and took



▲ Lech Walesa speaking to his fellow workers at the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk, August 1980. Walesa quickly became leader of their strike.

away Solidarity's right to exist. Despite some resistance, Jaruzelski's troops and police soon had control of the country.

OUTLOOK

30. Although Jaruzelski controlled Poland after December 1981, he could not govern the country effectively. Most of the people hated him for what he had done. They did what they had to do to stay out of trouble, but they did nothing to help the government. Poland's economy was in shambles after years of mismanagement by Gomulka and Gierek. Without some cooperation from the people, Jaruzelski could do nothing to improve it. In fact, the Polish economic situation got worse. Similar situations existed in other Soviet bloc nations, including the Soviet Union itself. When Brezhnev died in 1982, the problems he left unsolved were beginning to reach the crisis stage. How long do you think conditions like these can last? What must governments do to have the support of their people?

5. How did Romania establish some form of independence from the Soviet Union and why were they allowed to get away with this?

6. What conditions led to the Solidarity movement in Poland?

7. How did the Soviet Union react to the Solidarity movement?