

Death of Communism in Eastern Europe Activity

- The purpose of the activity is for students to examine events that occurred after World War II and during the Cold War to determine possibly causes of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe which ultimately led to the end of the Cold War.
- Students should work in groups of 2-3 to complete the activity. Since there is a good bit of reading involved in activity, you may want to assign a reader for each group and then a recorder for each group. Additionally, cut the symptom cards up so that students do not receive them all at one time and get frustrated with the length of the information.
- Groups can have one completed answer document, but all students should copy the information onto their graphic organizer when the lesson is reviewed.
- Determine a strategy for groups to share with each other or to the class about their diagnosis.

Death of Communism Activity: Student Notes

Name(s) _____

Symptom 1: Economies of Eastern Europe

Give a brief description of the symptom. _____

How might this symptom cause the death of communism in Eastern Europe? _____

Symptom 2: Dissatisfaction with Communism

Give a brief description of the symptom. _____

How might this symptom cause the death of communism in Eastern Europe? _____

Symptom 3: Mikhail Gorbachev

Give a brief description of the symptom. _____

How might this symptom cause the death of communism in Eastern Europe? _____

Symptom 4: Loosening Control

Give a brief description of the symptom. _____

How might this symptom cause the death of communism in Eastern Europe? _____

Symptom 5: Berlin Wall

Give a brief description of the symptom. _____

How might this symptom cause the death of communism in Eastern Europe? _____

Symptom 6: Break-up of the Soviet Union

Give a brief description of the symptom. _____

How might this symptom cause the death of communism in Eastern Europe? _____

Diagnosis for the death of Communism in Eastern Europe _____

Death of Communism Activity: Symptom Cards

Symptom Card 1: Economies of Eastern Europe

The Nazi military occupation and later the influence of the Soviet Union transformed and altered the economy of the region. All the countries of the region suffered a tremendous amount of damage during World War II and eventually became satellites of the Soviet Union.

The economic recovery of Eastern Europe was slow compared to other countries after World War II because the U.S.S.R. did not allow countries to accept the same aid that had been provided to other countries devastated by the war. The U.S.S.R. implemented its own economic plan for recovery.

The U.S.S.R. implemented a policy of massive industrialization, joint investment programs and complete collectivization in agriculture. All these were to be made possible by central planning through economic integration and joint cooperation. Industrialization was the main objective of the communist countries. More often than not, this was done at a heavy cost to the population.

The communist belief was that farming must be done collectively and that planning has to be made by the government who owned the agricultural equipment too. If before the war the Eastern European countries were able to support themselves in food this was not the case after collectivization.

The planned economy led to political inaction and economic bankruptcy. Even though some of the communist countries adopted a series of reforms and relaxed the centralization policies, the changes were not sufficient. There were shortages in food, clothing and other daily basics, as well as, a wide spread dissatisfaction and resentment towards Soviet domination.

Symptom Card 2: Dissatisfaction with Communism

In 1980, labor strikes in Poland paralyzed the economy. A new political party was formed because of the strikes. In 1989, the first non-communist Premier Minister in Eastern Europe was elected in Poland.

In Hungary, the government started allowing free association and assembly. It also opened its borders to the West. Hungary began political reforms and eventually adopted a new constitution which allowed a multi-party system and competitive elections.

In Bulgaria, the long-time leader of the Communist Party was replaced and the new government announced that free elections would be held in 1990.

In Romania, people protesting communist government policies were met with force by the army and police. However, protests spread to other cities and finally a new government was put into power.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, hundreds of thousands of people gathered to protest the government in Prague. On December 5, 1989, a new non-communist government was elected.

Death of Communism Activity: Symptom Cards

Symptom Card 3: Mikhail Gorbachev

On March 11, 1985, Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Strongly believing that the Soviet Union needed massive liberalization in order to revitalize both the Soviet economy and society, Gorbachev immediately began implementing reforms.

He shocked many Soviet citizens when he announced the ability for citizens to freely voice their opinions and the need to entirely restructure the Soviet Union's economy. Gorbachev also opened the door to allow Soviet citizens to travel, cracked down on alcohol abuse, and pushed for the use of computers and technology. He also released many political prisoners.

For decades, the United States and the Soviet Union had been competing with each other over who could amass the largest, most lethal cache of nuclear weapons. Gorbachev realized that the Soviet Union's economy was seriously suffering from the excessive spending on nuclear weapons. To end the arms race, Gorbachev met several times with U.S. President Ronald Reagan.

Although Gorbachev's economic, social, and political reforms won him praises from around the world, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, he was criticized by many within the Soviet Union. For some, his reforms had been too big and too fast; for others, his reforms had been too small and too slow. Most importantly, however, was that Gorbachev's reforms did not revitalize the Soviet Union's economy. On the contrary, the economy took a severe downturn.

Symptom Card 4: Loosening Control

During the "Iron Curtain" years, Soviet troops remained stationed throughout Eastern Europe as a reminder of Soviet dominance over other countries. The Soviet military often intervened when people in Eastern European countries protested communist rule.

The Soviet Union's foreign policy was known as the Brezhnev Doctrine. In short, the doctrine stated "when forces that are hostile to socialism try to turn the development of some socialist country towards capitalism, it becomes not only a problem of the country concerned, but a common problem and concern of all socialist countries."

This doctrine was announced to justify Soviet interventions in Czechoslovakia in August 1968 along with earlier Soviet military interventions, such as East Berlin in 1953 and Hungary in 1956. These interventions were meant to put an end to liberalization efforts and uprisings that had the potential to compromise Soviet control inside the Eastern bloc.

When Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union, he announced secretly to Eastern European countries and then publicly that he would not follow the Brezhnev Doctrine.

Death of Communism Activity: Symptom Cards

Symptom Card 5: Berlin Wall

The Berlin Wall was both the physical division between West Berlin and East Germany from 1961 to 1989 and the symbolic boundary between democracy and Communism during the Cold War.

Within a short period of time after the war, living conditions in West Germany and East Germany became distinctly different. With the help and support of its occupying powers, West Germany set up a capitalist society and experienced such a rapid growth of their economy that it became known as the "economic miracle."

Nearly the opposite was true in East Germany. Since the Soviet Union had viewed their zone as a spoil of war, the Soviets pilfered factory equipment and other valuable assets from their zone and shipped them back to the Soviet Union.

By the late 1950s, many people living in East Germany wanted out. No longer able to stand the repressive living conditions of East Germany, they would pack up their bags and head to West Berlin. Many of those who escaped were young, trained professionals.

By the early 1960s, East Germany was rapidly losing both its labor force and its population. Desperate to keep its citizens, East Germany decided to build a wall to prevent them from crossing the border.

There had been signs that the Communist bloc was weakening, but the East German Communist leaders insisted that East Germany just needed a moderate change rather than a drastic revolution. On the evening of November 9, 1989, an announcement was made by an East German Communist Party official that citizens were free to cross the country's borders.

The Berlin Wall was flooded with people from both sides. Some began chipping at the Berlin Wall with hammers and chisels. There were huge celebrations along the Berlin Wall, with people hugging, kissing, singing, cheering, and crying.

Death of Communism Activity: Symptom Cards

Symptom Card 6: Break-up of the Soviet Union

Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, four socialist republics were formed on the territory of the former empire. In December of 1922, these four republics established the U.S.S.R. (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). Under the constitution, the political structure of the U.S.S.R. was a Supreme Soviet body which was made up of two chambers. In elections to these bodies, the voters were rarely given any choice of candidates other than those presented by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The political system was authoritarian and highly centralized, and this applied to the economic system. The economic foundation of the U.S.S.R. was “socialist ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange” and the economy of the entire country was controlled by a series of five year plans that set targets for all forms of production.

Dramatic changes, both political and economic, occurred during the late 1980s and early 1990s. On the economic side, the planned, highly centralized command economy was replaced by the slow introduction of a market economy. The change was difficult to achieve though because at the same time there were declines in production in many areas and increasing distribution problems.

Politically, amendments to the constitution replaced the Supreme Soviet body with more freely-elected bodies. Many non-communists were elected. Conflicts developed between the U.S.S.R. and the individual republics. Nationalism and demands for independence were increasing in the individual republics.

The failing Soviet economy, the ability of citizens to criticize, and the new political freedoms all weakened the power of the Soviet Union. Soon, many Eastern bloc countries abandoned Communism and many republics within the Soviet Union demanded independence. The U.S.S.R. was officially dissolved in December of 1991 into fifteen individual republics.