

## 'When the ice breaks up ...' from Der Spiegel (1 January 1990)

**Caption:** On 1 January 1990, the German daily newspaper Der Spiegel describes the accelerated pace of revolutionary events taking place in the Eastern European countries during 1989.

**Source:** Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. AUGSTEIN, Rudolf ; Herausgeber FUNK, Werner; KILZ, Hans Werner. 01.01.1990, n° 1; 44. Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "Wenn das Eis bricht", p. 93-97.

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## ‘When the ice breaks up ...’

### **The revolution and self-liberation of the peoples of Eastern Europe in 1989**

*The damned clergy are to blame for the revolution*

Saying at the Court of Versailles 1789

*The rat has gone, Dracula is dead*

Romanian freedom fighter Christmas 1989

*I am a Communist, a convinced Communist!*

Mikhail Gorbachev in late 1989

The naked corpses of the tortured victims were pierced by the sharp points of barbed wire shackles. Clots of blood on their skin were like those below the crown of thorns placed on the head of Christ the Saviour, whose birth believers were now able to celebrate again for the first time in decades.

They celebrated the occasion in exuberant mood on the streets of Bucharest. Even people who did not have much time for religious beliefs were shouting out for the whole world to hear their sheer joy at their victory, their freedom, even though the many thousand dead had not yet been buried and people were still being senselessly massacred.

These were heart-rending pictures to have to look at over Christmas, yet, at the same time, they brought a sense of relief. After all, the Romanian people, who had long appeared to be buried alive, had suddenly risen up against their tormentor, whose ‘Communism’ had long ago corrupted into the most dreadful form of political cretinism. Within a few days, the people managed to shake off a reign of terror such as Europe had not experienced since Hitler and Stalin, although they did so at a horrific sacrifice.

In the end, Nicolae Ceauşescu was dead. He was executed following an eerie trial before a secret military tribunal whose members did not even dare show their faces, whose defence counsel wanted to see his clients punished, and whose authority was vehemently contested by the ‘Conducator’. Never mind that, by imposing martial law, he himself had created the basis for a summary trial.

As the old year ended, thousands of millions of deeply moved television viewers throughout the world saw history being made live in Bucharest. It could not have been more vivid, since the TV studio itself had become the focal point of the revolution.

Nevertheless, this final act of the year marked just the conclusion of a tremendous struggle that had escalated since the summer. Nations had been fighting for their freedom and had achieved what they had been fighting for against almost all the odds.

This made 1989 a year like no other. Never before had the world been turned upside down without a war. Never before had ancient peoples — one after the other and with increasing alacrity — thrown off the shackles that had held them captive since Hitler’s war and Stalin’s late imperial mania, freeing themselves from an imposed ideology that had given them nothing of what it had promised.

Some did not succeed at the first attempt. In Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, the uprising was again quelled by a bloody massacre. In eastern Europe, on the other hand, the Poles secured a government of their choice, the Baltic peoples won their freedom, the Hungarians tore down the Iron Curtain for themselves and others, the East Germans opened the gate to the West, the Bulgarians ousted their long-standing dictator, the Czechs and Slovaks completed their Prague Spring after 21 years and, lastly, the tormented Romanians threw off

their chains.

Between the Rivers Elbe and Bug, between the Baltic and the Black Sea, all the peoples who had been deprived of their rights, humiliated, exploited, and largely robbed of their identity and culture won freedom for themselves in a revolution that was peaceful — apart from the last days of killing between the Danube and the Carpathian mountains. In East Germany, the historian Golo Mann even called it the most joyful revolution in history.

They went on endless marches in their free time. Their other weapons were humour, strikes, ridicule, steadfastness, courage, and human chains thousands of kilometres long. Their secret? After all the years of numb terror, the citizens had simply lost their fear.

Their most powerful slogan was ‘We are the people’: four words that suddenly proved to be more dangerous than any weapon.

This revolution was entirely comparable with the French Revolution, the 200th anniversary of which was celebrated in 1989. Yet it did not change conditions in places where major changes were to be expected — that is to say, anywhere in the overpopulated explosive Third World, in the seething cauldron of the Middle East, or in Latin America.

What happened instead was that the old Europe, which had been dictated to by outsiders for over a generation, rose up and thereby succeeded in establishing old European values over almost the whole of the European Continent for the first time ever.

And for the first time in its history, the whole of Europe — with the exception of the remote corner that is Albania — is now under democratic rule, or at least will be so in the foreseeable future. For the first time, Europeans can move about in free societies from the North Sea to the Bosphorus and from Brest to Brest-Litovsk without fear of tyranny. This year, the like of which we shall never see again, the people achieved what Europe’s revolutionaries had striven for in vain as long ago as 1848.

These miracles were achieved by the European peoples, to whom *Newsweek* therefore devoted the cover of its December double issue with the caption ‘People of the Year’. It was all made possible by a politician whom *Der Spiegel* had already chosen as its Man of the Year, Man of the Hour in 1988 and on whom *Time* now conferred the honorary title ‘Man of the Decade’. The man was Mikhail Gorbachev. Although, initially, he himself could never have guessed all the repercussions of the revolution to which *glasnost* and *perestroika* would give rise, he did not slow the development that had started. He exposed the ideology that he says he still supports to rapid decay, as the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt described it. He allowed one regime after the other to collapse, even when the rot started to set in on the borders of his own empire.

Already 6 out of 15 Soviet republics want to leave the Union. Gorbachev’s Russia has long been overwhelmed by the revolutionary pace of its former satellites. The prophet of change is bringing up the rear of a development that is without precedent in the whole of history: the greatest act of self-emancipation ever, as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* puts it.

‘Life punishes those who come too late,’ Gorbachev had told the reactionary Socialist Unity Party of Germany in October in an attempt to goad them into action. Now life seems to be punishing the very one who started things moving.

The world appeared to have been turned upside down, and that applied not just to the Marxists. They should have known from their teacher that revolution was the only way forward at a time when change was historically necessary.

Confusion also reigned amongst those who wrongly felt they were the victors, yet they were in no way equal to the historic importance of the hour. London-based journalist Melvin Lasky boasted that the Cold War had been worth waging. In Washington, Burton Yale Pines took the same view, colourfully expressing his

pleasure that the West had won the Cold War.

No one had yet thought how they would fill their lives now that they no longer occupied the moral high ground. What is more, they are not the ones that defeated Communism — it did it all by itself.

What has happened to Communism undoubtedly also poses problems for the conservative world view. After all, what would happen if the mob wanted to determine the course of politics as extra-parliamentary opposition used to do; what if it called institutions and privileges into question and kept a closer eye on those in power than non-Socialist Members of Parliament tend to do?

What would ensue if those in power no longer had a say in what happened to ordinary citizens? If the major armaments factories were taken unawares by the peoples' desire for peace? If previously familiar pictures of the enemy faded, and if peace were to break out uncontrollably?

The year 1989 — a year of rebellion and reawakening — became a time for emotion. On 10 November, at the newly re-opened Glienecker Bridge in Berlin, Vernon Walters, US Ambassador in Bonn, confessed that he had never seen so many men cry.

Hans-Dietrich Genscher cried in Prague after he had smoothed the way to freedom for the thousands waiting in the West German Embassy there. Willy Brandt cried in Rostock when East German citizens called to him to stay there. And Richard von Weizsäcker cried when he was smothered in kisses by complete strangers at an opening in the Wall where someone had been shot dead at the beginning of the year.

*Newsweek* marvelled that it had been 'one of those years, coming perhaps twice a century, that change the world forever'. It was a year that saw the fulfilment of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's words, 'Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.'

At the end of the year, one thing was clear and must have been at least partly apparent even to the most committed ideologist. The idea which had cast its spell over generations of intellectuals and proletarians, which was a synonym for a new, more just world for generations of the dispossessed, and for which millions of people willingly gave their lives — the idea of Socialism — had been unceremoniously abandoned in 1989. At least that was true of the 'real Socialism' that controlled over a dozen peoples in many different forms.

Human encounter with this utopia that was supposed to bring happiness to the people but had been corrupted by its imitators cost well over 50 million lives in all. Socialism came to mean, above all, civil war and labour camps, massacres, show trials, hunger, economic shortages, an intellectual wasteland, bootlicking, corruption and terror. It also meant the stone-age Communism of a Pol Pot, of a cruel Shining Path guerrilla in Peru and, finally, of the Dracula of our time, Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Decades earlier, Arthur Koestler and George Orwell, Manès Sperber, Jean-Paul Sartre and countless others had already seen Socialism for the monster it was, but to many they were renegades, traitors or in the pay of others.

Throughout the former Eastern bloc, Socialism is now ridiculed as 'the longest and most difficult route from capitalism to capitalism', its only lasting feat being the destruction of Hitler's Germany — but at what price?

Even the promise of a 'humanistic Socialism', of a Communism with a 'human face', for which the Prague reformers had fought in vain two decades before, does not really bear scrutiny in today's world.

Sweden's Finance Minister, Kjell-Olof Feldt, commented on this with Nordic sobriety. In his view, Socialism with a human face was in reality capitalism with a human face — and that was embodied by Social Democracy.

Feldt knows what he is talking about. After all, no State that calls itself Socialist has ever been as Socialist

as Sweden with its entirely capitalist economy. Sweden is classless, offers equal opportunities to all and has a tax system that produces largely the same income for everyone. But all this is in a free and open society without a police state, without labour camps, and without that barbarian accessory that came to be the most hated symbol of Socialism: barbed wire.

The 'real Socialists' in power first used barbed wire to confine all those who did not wish to accept the new order. Later, however, it was whole nations, and ultimately that quarter of the human race that was under their control. So it was no coincidence that the end of this Socialism was also marked by the tearing down of the barbed-wire barriers. Loops of barbed wire and pieces of the Wall were taken as souvenirs of this historical turning point, like marking a departure from Satan's paradise, as the Cuban Guillermo Cabrera Infante called the Socialism which he and other fellow sufferers had to live through.

A young Russian woman moving to the West conveyed almost naively but very convincingly what people who lived under 'Socialism', and in some cases knew nothing else, thought of it. According to her, the Communism that they had always been promised was there in the reality of West German life: the majority almost always had the basic necessities of life, while the social security system worked reasonably well, and all this largely without violence, force, or the arbitrary use of power.

These are, no doubt, precisely the things longed for by those who have now taken their future into their own hands, however much the West German consumer society may still scoff at the sight of their East German counterparts thronging to the department stores. In their view, Socialism had its chance for 40 to 70 years and did not use it. 'What is the difference between the Prague Spring and *perestroika*?' goes a Czech joke. Answer: '20 years.'

Almost all the other peoples that gained their freedom in 1989 had already previously tried to rid themselves of the burden of 'real Socialism': the East Germans in 1953, the Hungarians in 1956, the Czechoslovaks in 1968, and the Poles in 1970 and again in 1980. They were shot down, locked up, occupied or silenced by martial law and lost 10, 20 or 30 years of their life. The world was unable or unwilling to help them.

Strange how history repeats itself. With their irresponsible Suez adventure in 1956, the British and French diverted attention away from the suppression of the Hungarian uprising. In 1989, just when thousands were dying in Romania, the Americans were invading Panama to detain General Noriega for insubordination in their own back yard. The richest country in the world was able to spare just half a million dollars for the ill-treated Romanians.

The *nomenclatura* elite, who were swept away by the people's revolution and who, according to Stefan Heym, had long since deteriorated into a Red aristocracy of looters that misused the name of the people for their instruments of coercion — from 'people's' police through 'people's' court to the pleonasm 'people's' democracy — showed in these fateful weeks how little idea they had of the people.

Like the Roman Emperor Caligula, Romania's megalomaniac leader 'Conducator' Ceaușescu ruled by the maxim 'Let them hate so long as they fear.' China's elderly tyrant Deng Xiaoping, looking at the three million soldiers in his 'people's' army, scoffed at his more flexible opponent, Communist Party Secretary Zhao, who insisted that he had the people on his side. Deng reputedly taunted him with the words 'You have nothing.' A few days later, the lone figure of 19-year-old worker's son Wang Weilin was enough to bring a line of tanks to a halt.

Erich Honecker was still sounding off two months before he was shamefully forced to stand down from office, claiming that the unity between the masses and the party had never been as great as it was then. Honecker, the owner of 14 luxury cars, was so far removed from his people that he possibly believed his empty pathos himself.

Only shortly before his death, the Hungarian János Kádár wondered why the country still had so much foreign debt, all of which had been incurred under his regime. With barefaced innocence, he asked a close friend where all the money had gone ...

The peoples repaid their rulers for this abuse of power and cynicism, for this incompetence and contempt, when they resigned themselves to having nothing more to lose. One Romanian rebel said it was all the same to them whether they died of starvation, froze to death, or were shot dead.

All this happened only a few years after Gorbachev, a reformer in the motherland of Socialism, had diagnosed a 'sick society' and had started his world-changing revolution from the top.

This was also the paradox of 1989, the year of revolutions: the change was initiated by reformers who had amazingly produced the ailing system themselves. In Moscow, it was first initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev and him alone.

Gorbachev had the courage for the necessary and impossible adventure involving perhaps the most radical reform in modern history — such was the acclaim from Polish democrat Adam Michnik. He knew that what the dissident Andrei Amalrik had predicted would come true and that, one day, goats would browse in Moscow's Red Square if the country did not engage in reforms.

Like Peter the Great, he had to battle hard against the cumbersome administrative apparatus of the empire to get things moving at all. He was followed only hesitantly by intellectuals, artists, writers and, lastly, politicians. Even the people, at least the Russian people, still see danger and chaos lurking behind *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

It is hard to accept what is being said: that Gorbachev has done what Hitler and the capitalists did not succeed in doing, namely destroy the Russian Empire. The situation will become even more dramatic, because, after decades of slavery, disloyal peoples do not want to wait for decolonisation. Yet their actions are jeopardising the reformer's experiment.

The revolution also began from the top in the country which, until the autumn, was the undisputed pioneer of change in the former Eastern bloc and whose example spurred on others. That country was Hungary.

In Hungary, the Communist Imre Pozsgay, who had reformed into a practising Social Democrat, drove his initially suspicious compatriots from one stage of reform to another, even including the first voluntary disbandment of a ruling Communist Party.

The people, seemingly temporarily dazed by the speed of their enforced liberation, remained unconvinced for a long time and were not really willing to participate fully in what were their first free elections. They demonstrated their desire for freedom at a funeral where Imre Nagy, hanged for heroically leading the 1956 uprising, was reburied with full honours.

The opening of the Hungarian borders to the flood of GDR refugees, which brought the country into conflict with the other Warsaw Pact countries in September, then triggered the first great national uprising of the year — that of the Germans in the GDR.

Their actions proved Karl Marx, the father of Communism, to be a liar, since he had once reviled his compatriots for never having completed a revolution of their own but for having participated in every counter-revolution. At least since the pro-democracy demonstrations in Leipzig, Dresden and Berlin, the 1989 European revolution had been finding its own way forward, fulfilling Friedrich Engels' prophecy that revolutions take an unpredictable course.

If East Berlin renegades initially believed that they could keep events under control, they panicked when the citizens simply no longer wanted what they wanted and when the Communists' tried and tested step-by-step policy turned against those who had invented it and who now found their power being eroded step by step.

Egon Krenz then opened the Wall overnight and was soon swept away himself by this breach in the dam. Everything was happening too quickly and was too radical, even for those who were still trying to get

reforms through long after the revolution was under way.

Dissident Bärbel Bohley watched in bewilderment as millions of Germans locked in an emotional embrace on both sides. She complained that the government had gone mad and that the people had taken leave of their senses.

The Vopo and Stasi — the East German People's Police and State Security Service — those mainstays of the regime that had laid into the people with impunity just weeks before, resorted to embarrassed appeals. One Vopo officer tried to dissuade a citizen from placing candles in front of the Council of State building in East Berlin by asking him who was going to clean up afterwards.

The party leaders were incorrigible, repeating the same mistakes everywhere. Unimpressed by the cyclone battering their neighbours, hardliners in Prague Castle still thought they could stop the march of history. They had the rebels bludgeoned as if nothing had been going on around them. They were then all the quicker to dissociate themselves from their 1968 cry for help to Moscow — although the last ones in the bloc to do so — and subsequently resigned. But they probably did not understand a thing.

After all, before Christmas, the Prague Communists persisted in electing Ladislav Adamec party leader, the third in the space of four weeks. Yet Adamec was the eleventh-hour Premier and renegade who, only in October, had dismissed as a nonentity the dramatist Václav Havel, who was in line to be the new President of Czechoslovakia. Adamec will presumably soon be viewed like the other great figures of yesteryear — the Hagers and Honeckers, the Giereks and Jakes', the Kádárs and Zhivkovs, and perhaps also like some of those who are still in office —the Gysis and Rakowskis, for example.

The man who will remain in the memory as the worst slave-driver under the banner of European Socialism will, however, be the only tyrant who had to pay with his life in this otherwise so peaceful revolution. And that man was Nicolae Ceauşescu.

His face was frozen in disbelief and incomprehension before a crowd ordered to cheer, but suddenly rebellious, in the seconds before State television switched off picture and sound. And this said even more about the potentate and his system than the horrific pictures of the next few days, during which so many more people fell victim to his despotism.

The fact that Ceauşescu was the only Eastern European leader to resist amidst terrible bloodshed, that elsewhere the Communists stepped down without resistance and even, at times, almost with relief, was everywhere due in part to forces and institutions that had previously been fearful of freedom and progress. In Poland, at least, Communism was also vanquished with the help of the Catholic clergy and their spiritual leader in Rome, Mikhail Gorbachev being the first CPSU General Secretary to make a pilgrimage there. In the GDR, the Protestant churches, which had formerly often given in to the State, were the bastions of the civil uprising. In Romania, the uprising was sparked by the dreaded Secret Police's attempted removal of Lutheran pastor Láslo Tökés.

Whether such coalitions will last is as unknown as the fate of the Eastern Europe that gained its freedom in 1989. Following the initial exhilaration of liberation after the 1789, 1848 and 1917 revolutions, a mood of depression descended, and 1990 will probably be no different. Socialism, whether carrying the hopes of the past or the curse of the present reality, will probably not just vanish from the face of the earth or disappear from the history books without trace. Undiminished, albeit certainly not undisputed, it lives on to control a thousand million Chinese.

Jurek Becker, who was long subject to the realities of life in the GDR, has already expressed his fear that, if Socialism ceases to be one possible way of life, then this could be a sign that the end of the world really is approaching.

*Die Zeit* writer Andrzej Szczypiorski was filled with cultural pessimism at the uneventful passing of a major option for the human race. He said that the end of Communism was not only a victory for the commonplace

in life but also the burial of the old illusions to combat ignorance.

These sheep without a shepherd, no longer being told what to do, could now seek refuge in superstition, myths or drugs or even fall prey to gurus of all kinds. According to Dostoevsky, man spends his whole life trying to attain to perfect freedom but, once he has it, he has 'no more tormenting care' than to find someone to whom he can hand it over as quickly as possible.

The new freedoms give rise to new fears: the physical fear of responsibility; political fears of a 'Fourth German Reich' that could again wreak havoc in Europe; and fear of a terrible 'General Winter', that could finish off destitute Russia or give it its own Napoleon.

Even Margaret Thatcher, often acclaimed as the fearless Iron Lady, had words of caution for a time when nations were not only living through history but suddenly making it themselves. 'When the ice breaks up,' she said, 'it can be very dangerous.'