

1989-1991

# Fall of communism in Poland

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In the second half of the 1980s, the communists realised that a new formula was needed. They were preparing for a change allowing the opposition to share power, while trying to take control over national property. It was proposed in 1988 to hold a 'round table' creating conditions for negotiations between the communists and the opposition. The talks lasted from February to April 1989 yet moving towards democracy took another two years. The first free election was held on 27 October 1991.

In the latter half of the 1980s, an economic crisis hit the USSR, and consequently the Eastern Bloc countries. The authorities realised that the system would need to be reformed. In Polish society, uncertainty and lethargy dominated. Martial law may have been lifted but acts of violence perpetrated by the authorities were a daily staple. In 1984, security servicemen murdered the chaplain of the Warsaw branch of Solidarity, Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. Strikes and protests would break out but were swiftly pacified. The underground Solidarity movement, outlawed during martial law period and infiltrated by the Security Service (SB), was being weakened by successive arrests or provoked internal conflict. In that mood, even another papal visit of 1987 failed to restore the spontaneous civic engagement of the pre-martial law times. Mainly opposition activists from large cities were engaged as well as strong support of the Catholic Church.

It was only in 1988 that another wave of protests came, extinguished given the threat of being pacified by ZOMO riot troops. It became clear, however, that in the Eastern Bloc countries change was taking place, both in the economic systems and political life. The power camp began to prepare for inserting the opposition into the government system, with as little damage to the elite in power as possible. It was mainly about their personal safety, security of their property and establishment of rules under which they would be able to remain in the highest circles of power. In August 1988 a meeting was held between Lech Wałęsa and Czesław Kiszczak. In return for extinguishing yet another strike wave, Kiszczak promised to orchestrate a 'Round table,' a negotiating space for both those in power and the opposition. The fact that Wałęsa agreed prompted

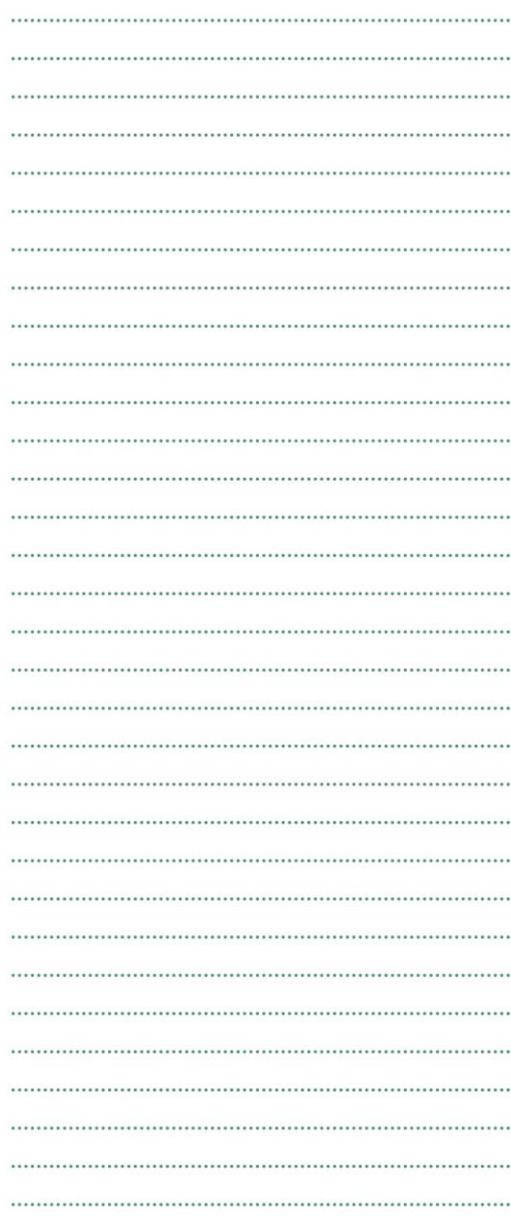


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astonishment and resistance among workers on strike, yet the strike leaders were eventually convinced that the talks had to start.

During the following several months, the authorities were probing for different solutions. Censorship was still in place, as was repression of the opposition and the intimidation of the public. In that climate, many politicians in the opposition were very reluctant to sit at the same table with the communist authorities. Still, key opposition activists decided to accept the invitation for the talks. On 6 February 1989, the 'Round Table' talks began. Televised proceedings and press releases reflected the official side of the negotiations, with the unofficial part playing out in a villa in Magdalenka near Warsaw, where key decisions were taken.

Under the 'Round Table' agreement, a general election was to be held on 4 June 1989, known as 'contractual' today, where the opposition was to man not more than 35 percent of the seats in the sejm and up to 100 percent in the senate. The president was to be chosen by the National Assembly (combining the sejm and senate). Additionally, the ruling coalition was to be able to propose a 'national list,' guaranteeing thirty-five mandates for prominent politicians of the power camp. Everyone was surprised to see Solidarity winning all the assigned seats in the sejm and 99 percent of senators as well as a total failure of the national list of the power camp. After the general election, an open vote for president was announced and the winner was Wojciech Jaruzelski. It could be observed on the occasion that not all opposition MPS voted against him, just as not all members of the assembly from the power camp voted for him. That was a clear sign that neither of the sides was a monolith and differences of opinion and divisions would be a natural consequence of the fact. In August, after another change in the power camp, Jaruzelski appointed the opposition politician Tadeusz Mazowiecki to become Prime Minister. He was able to form a government yet the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence still remained under the strict control of communists.



In the Autumn of 1989, the breakup of the Soviet Bloc became a fact. The Berlin Wall fell and the USSR, busy saving its own economy, was not interested in intervening in any of the countries of the Bloc. The democratic transformation in the countries freeing themselves from Soviet domination became a fact. In December, the pre-war name of the country was restored in Poland: the Republic of Poland, along with a crown on the head of the eagle in its national emblem. The so-called 'Balcerowicz's Plan' became the basis for an economic reform of the state. Free forming of political parties and groupings was allowed and the opposition press functioned. On the wave of change, the PUWP transformed itself into a number of smaller political parties. At the same time, functionaries of the communist security service and militia were busy destroying archives of the Ministry of the Interior with documents which could ascribe guilt to those formerly in power, communist security agents and secret collaborators as well as unveil economic scandals in the Polish People's Republic.

In 1990, Lech Wałęsa became Polish president and in the Autumn of 1991 the first free general election after the Second World War was held. Some historians see exactly that date as a symbolic moment, the end of the process of the fall of communism in Poland. Some evoke a later event: 17 September 1993, when the last of the Red Army left Polish territory. At long last, Poland was not controlled by foreign troops for the first time since 1939.

**Translated:** Mikołaj Sekrecki

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