Issue 2

The Rise of Democratic Ideas

Even though it was bitterly cold, the protesters kept their candlelight vigil throughout the nights.

Key Terms

direct democracy
meritocracy
republic
monarchy
due process of law
natural rights
social contract
Federalist
Antifederalist
conservatism
liberalism
radicalism
socialism
communism
proletariat
totalitarian
fascism
Cold War

Read and Understand

1. Democratic ideas began in the ancient world.
2. English common law protected rights.
3. Enlightenment led to democratic revolutions.
4. Totalitarian states challenged democracy.
5. The struggle for democracy continues.

On November 24, 1989, 350,000 protesters gathered in Wenceslas Square in Prague, Czechoslovakia. "Svoboda! Svoboda! [Freedom! Freedom!]," the demonstrators chanted. Their cry filled the ancient square and echoed across the city. After a week of demonstrations, Czechoslovakia's Communist government had bowed to popular pressure and resigned. Meanwhile, in Germany, the movement for freedom and unity had led to the tearing down of the wall that had kept that nation divided into two very different political systems—one freely elected, the other imposed by force. After years of repression, people in these nations and others in Eastern Europe had spoken out on an issue of universal concern—the kind of government under which they were willing to live. Now that it was possible to create a new government, what kind of system should it be? How could they be sure it would protect their freedom?

This problem was made doubly difficult by the need to reform not only the government, but also the economic system—the way people made a living. While creating democratic institutions, Eastern Europeans had to build a free economy from the ground up. It was hard even to know where to begin. Janusz Lewandowski, leader of the Liberal Democratic party in Poland, put it this way:

> *The privatization [restoration of state property to private ownership] of Eastern Europe means selling property that belongs to no one and has no known value to people who have no money.*

The people of Eastern Europe had been without real political or economic freedom for more than a generation. Fortunately, however, Lewandowski and the other newly elected leaders in Eastern Europe could turn to democratic ideas that first developed almost 2,500 years earlier.

Democratic ideas began in the ancient world. 1

The questions facing the people of Eastern Europe today are ones that people have thought about since history began. Even the earliest societies made choices about ways for providing order while enabling people to lead their lives. Each society had to answer questions such as these: Who makes the rules? What happens if we disagree? How do we control crime and settle disputes between people?

Judaism and Christianity stressed individual choice and responsibility.

A number of important ideas about society and government came from Judaism and later from Christianity. Judaism's Ten Commandments established a standard of moral conduct for society—again, a written law to which even rulers could be held accountable. For people to build a life together, they had to be protected from violence ("You shall not kill"), from loss of their property ("You shall not steal"), and from fraud and trickery ("You shall not bear false witness [lie]").

In addition, Old Testament prophets denounced tyranny and injustice, thus inspiring future generations to oppose unjust rulers. Judaism and Christianity believe each individual has a personal relationship with God, and thus each of these religions emphasizes the dignity and worth of every person.

Democracy was developed in Athens.

While the ancient Jews, later joined by Christians, spoke for the dignity and rights of the individual, it was the Greeks who first built an actual system of government based on these rights. It was in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens that the word *democracy* first appeared. In a speech given in 431 B.C., the statesman Pericles proudly told his fellow citizens:

> *Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states. Instead, others copy what we do. Our plan of government favors the many instead of the few; that is why it is called a democracy.*

Pericles was justly proud of the government of Athens, the world's first **direct democracy**. In a direct democracy, all citizens meet in one place to make the laws for their state. In Athens, all male citizens met in the Assembly, where they debated laws and decided important government policies.

Greek democracy had limitations.

Although the Athenian government drew in a new way on the strength of its people, it also had serious limitations. Only about one fifth of the people of Athens could be citizens. Athenian law denied citizenship to women, slaves, and foreign residents. A disastrous failure of the Assembly occurred during Athens's long war with Sparta. Several poorly planned military expeditions led to defeats and Athens's final surrender. As a result, public confidence in democratic government began to decline.

Socrates and Plato Defeat began to produce a climate of bitterness and suspicion in Athens. Stung by their failure, some Athenians turned against the philosopher Socrates. Knowing that

he had often questioned the customs and traditions of the city, they accused him of corrupting the youth and failing to honor the gods. He argued that his questions were good for Athens because they forced people to think about their values and actions. In the end, a jury sentenced Socrates to death. While the death of Socrates can be considered to be a failure of democracy, his willingness to accept his punishment rather than take the opportunity to flee showed his respect for democracy.

Socrates's teachings lived on in the writings of his favorite pupil, Plato. The execution of Socrates convinced Plato that most people lacked the wisdom needed for democratic government. In his book *The Republic*, Plato said that good government was impossible

> *unless philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings or princes become genuine and adequate philosophers, and political power and philosophy are brought together.*

This was not democracy, however, but rather rule by individuals of exceptional ability and moral character, a **meritocracy**.

Aristotle Plato's greatest student, Aristotle, also studied politics and government, but he came to somewhat different conclusions. In his book *Politics*, Aristotle surveyed the different kinds of government as seen in neighboring countries. Perhaps, he said, if all rulers were wise, the form of government wouldn't matter. In reality, however, each kind of government tended to create its own kind of injustice:

> *The perversion of royalty is tyranny; of aristocracy, oligarchy; of constitutional government, democracy. For tyranny is a kind of monarchy which has in view the interest of the monarch only. Oligarchy has in view the interest of the wealthy; democracy, that of the needy: none of them has the common good of all.*

To prevent the abuses that would occur if only one group of people ruled, Aristotle favored a mixed government, in which a strong executive, an aristocratic council, and a democratic assembly balanced one another. This idea of building "checks and balances" into the government would reappear later in the Constitution of the United States.

At 17, Aristotle became a pupil of Plato at the Academy in Athens. Later, as his own thoughts developed, Aristotle became critical of Plato's teachings.

The Greek experiment with democracy produced bold new ideas about self-government and the role of the free citizen. However, the criticisms of democracy made by Plato and Aristotle tended to identify it with disorderly rule by a mob. As a result, later peoples ceased to use the term *democracy* or that form of government for almost 2,000 years.

Rome developed new political ideas.

The people of Rome took an active interest in their government. Being a Roman citizen was a matter not only of pride but also of responsibility. Not all citizens were equal—for example, some citizens did not have the right to vote—yet Romans viewed matters of government as *res publica*, or matters of public interest. For about 500 years (509 B.C.—27 B.C.) Rome was a **republic**. Officials—including the heads of government—were elected.

Representative government Although this system appeared to be similar to the democracy of Greece, it differed in several important ways. First, it was not a direct democracy, with citizens taking a personal part in governing. Instead, like the United States government today, it was based on representation, with voters

In 529 B.C., Justinian ordered the Platonic Academy in Athens to be closed.

electing the officials who would represent them in the government. One advantage of this system was that it could serve a political unit larger than a city-state.

Like the Greeks, Roman thinkers wrestled with the question of how democracy could be preserved. Marcus Tullius Cicero, in his book *On the Commonwealth*, observed that:

> *The advocates of democracy affirm that, [when] one man or a few men become wealthier and more powerful than other citizens, their pride and arrogance give rise [to special privileges], because the inactive and the weak give way and submit to the pretensions of the rich. So long, however, as the people actually retain their power, these thinkers hold that no form of government is better, more liberal, or more prosperous, since the people have control over legislation, the administration of justice, the making of war and peace, the concluding of treaties, and over the civil status and property of each individual citizen.*

Cicero thus felt that democracy could be preserved as long as enough people were willing to exercise their rights. Eventually, however, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, as well as corruption of the ideals of citizenship, led to the collapse of the Roman republic and its replacement by the rule of an emperor.

Written law Another characteristic of Roman government was the regard for written law. In 451 B.C., officials made a collection of Roman laws, the Twelve Tables. These tables assured that all citizens had a right to the protection of the law. Centuries later the Roman emperor Justinian developed a more extensive code, based on the laws of the Roman empire. The Code of Justinian later became a guide on legal matters throughout western Europe. Written laws helped establish the idea of "a government of laws, not of men" where even rulers and the powerful could sometimes be held accountable for their actions.

Lesson Review 1

Define: (a) direct democracy, (b) meritocracy, (c) republic
Identify: (a) Ten Commandments, (b) prophet, (c) Athens, (d) Pericles, (e) Socrates, (f) Plato, (g) Aristotle, (h) Roman republic, (i) Cicero, (j) Twelve Tables, (k) Code of Justinian
Answer:

1. (a) What did the people of Czechoslovakia accomplish in 1989? (b) Describe the problems that they then faced.
2. How did Judaism and Christianity promote human rights and justice?
3. How does a direct democracy differ from a representative democracy?
4. In what ways was the democracy of Athens limited?
5. Compare Plato's and Aristotle's ideas about democracy and government.
6. What is the importance of having written law?

Critical Thinking

7. Do you prefer Plato's system of government or Aristotle's? Give reasons to support your answer.