
Introduction

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The question today is the same as that of twenty years ago: what do we call the events that transformed eastern Europe in 1989? Our improved perspective has not necessarily generated better answers. The most popular term is ‘revolution’, but many observers still hesitate to apply it to largely non-violent change. Can there be a ‘liberal revolution’? Timothy Garton-Ash’s evocative neologism ‘refolution’ (meaning ‘revolution’ and ‘reform’) captures well the ambivalence many feel about describing a gradual transition to democracy as ‘revolutionary’. The processes of civil society formation he observed in the 1980s by no means concluded with 1989; in south-eastern Europe in particular the transition to democracy has not been revolutionary but slow and painful. Perhaps ‘democracy’ is not even the right word.

Yet even in places where democracy seems to have taken firm root we witness concerns about keeping a noxious past from filtering into the present. Take for example the lustration of the state apparatus, or the opening of archives for a full investigation of communism. Everywhere we see efforts that frustrate reckoning. Only in the last several years has Poland inaugurated lustration: fifteen years after Czechoslovakia. Yet Czech archival access has been anything but straightforward, especially for non-Czechs. Until last year, Romanian archives for the communist period were accessible only in exceptional cases. Access to the relevant former Soviet archives on the end of the communist era is uneven at best. And so on.

There is also the question of what region we are talking about. If by eastern Europe we mean everything east of Germany and Austria – as is connoted in the German *Osteuropa* – then we must wonder about Russia. The changes there have been fantastic, though leading in directions diverging from those taken by the newest members of NATO. Yet why, as Mark Beissinger asks, do we speak of east European and not Russian revolutions?

The original meaning of the word revolution as cycle suggests deeper temporal dimensions; if one looks far enough into the past, one sees what Charles Maier, in his contribution to this issue, calls a major chapter in a two-century struggle unleashed by economic modernisation and the ideas of the Enlightenment. If this is the case, then the struggle is between two visions of the world. One suggests that fulfilment arises

from individual or even familial gain, from the restless effort to win more, understand more and escape from the gravitational weight of tradition and community. Liberty and individual fulfilment are prized, equality and collective achievement seem less important, except perhaps in the realm of games, which always acts as a psychological counterweight to the discipline required by real life.

But, Maier asks, is this tension ever resolved, was 1989 an end?

At all times a dimension of moral commitment attaches to events we call 'revolutions,' and here perhaps the term is useful in showing how the 'revolutions' have failed to live up to revolutionary hopes. Much like the French Revolution two hundred years earlier, whose limited scope fed the desire for a more complete one next time around, and ironically these came about in eastern Europe in 1917 and 1947, the revolutions of 1989 were envisioned as both a total reversal of the existing order and a new beginning. Indeed, when used in 1989 the word suggested open-ended change, unlocking potentials of human freedom that people had only dreamed of. In the meantime dreams have encountered reality, and as James Krapfl of McGill University noted in the meeting at Stanford University where these papers were first presented, practically no one in the Czech or Slovak republics currently talks unreservedly about revolution. In fact the word can only evoke cynicism or disappointment, not analytical description. There were of course revolutionaries, but they lost control over events. In his article Jeffrey Kopstein tells us that 1989 'was a magic moment, but part of what made it so magic is that sovereignty was regained and then, almost instantaneously, handed over to the West'. Those who had aspired for half a century to regain sovereignty often gave it up almost overnight to faceless bureaucrats in Brussels (see the Baltic Referendums).

Vladimir Tismaneanu urges caution to scholars tempted to embrace uniformly gloomy assessments. It is true that the region was not simply engulfed by an irrepressible wave of democratisation, as some observers had forecast, and authoritarian strains have not been banished entirely from political life. Still, 'The importance of these revolutions cannot therefore be overestimated: they represent the triumph of civic dignity and political morality over ideological monism, bureaucratic cynicism and police dictatorship.'

The authors in this special issue do not resolve or even spend much time on terminology, but, each in their own way, approach the miracle year of 1989 from a different angle. The essays seek to unlock fresh perspectives on the processes of change in general, and focus on special subjects that have failed to attract much scholarly attention, some of them on less tangible levels. If 1989 did not always involve sudden spectacular rupture, it was a culmination (and continuation) of more subtle changes, especially in the area of mentality and perception. Much more took place than simply the replacement of one set of regimes by another; one way of interpreting the world replaced another, even in the West.

For scholars of communist eastern Europe, it became not only possible but necessary to use the world 'totalitarian' again, even though, as Charles Maier shows, there was no agreement on precisely how it might be employed. What is clear is that with few exceptions, historians and social scientists not only failed to 'predict' 1989,

they also found that they had discarded vocabulary to make sense of it twenty years previously.

Perhaps the last twenty years have been about making sense not of 1989 but of the preceding period. Vaclav Havel called it 'late totalitarian', and social historians in Germany have applied the words 'welfare dictatorship', but Charles Maier prefers the term 'late socialism'. New descriptive devices raise new questions. How does one get from a dictatorship of terror to one of social secularity? In short, the collapse of these regimes, whatever words one used to describe them, made it possible to gaze on them through lenses not obscured by concerns of the present, at least not totally. But even with a new lens what one sees depends on what one studies. As Charles Maier writes, 'Describe the communist state, and the historian conjures up an image of illiberal surveillance and the manipulation of fear and privilege. Describe the communist society, and one can end up with a trivialisation of coercive mechanisms.'

Much also depends on which precise states one studies. Why did the denouements of major actors differ so markedly in 1989? Radically improved archival access permits historians to look for answers in layers of social history that seemed buried, with the topmost layer of state socialism becoming a settled geological stratum rather than a place of active accretion. Maier suggests reasons for varying patterns: Czechs and Germans, heirs of 'ancient-régime *Polizey* . . . developed patterns of risk-avoidance and ample denunciation – in contrast to the Polish pattern of defiance and suppression, or even the Hungarian experience of connivance with the state and party in evasive behaviour'. Vladimir Tismaneanu lists more intermediate conditions: 'the strength or the weakness of the pre-1989 intra-party reformist trends as well as oppositional traditions . . . explain the striking distinctions between these events in different countries'. And Jeffrey Kopstein urges us to consider a divide between places with developed bureaucracies and literacy (East Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic) vs. historically less literate and more patrimonial (Bulgaria).

Tensions in argument are unavoidable when making fresh sense of the recent past, and are evident in Vladimir Tismaneanu's contribution: 'The Leninist systems were terminally sick, and the disease affected first and foremost their capacity for self-regeneration' and 'what is now generally taken for granted, the end of Sovietism, was only a possibility, and not even a very likely one, at the beginning of 1989'. Both statements are true, and remind us of the need to make historical judgements while not overdetermining the past. The view from the West appears more definite: 'reform communism' was always an oxymoron, betraying the uncomfortable truism that any idea that requires a human face has an ugly face to cover. Does anyone speak of 'liberalism with a human face?' By 1989 this epitome of 1968 had already become a relic of an irrelevant and disappointing past, and whether they favoured Gorbachev (Italy) or his enemies in the Soviet leadership (France), Western communist parties went the same way in 1989 as did state socialism: into oblivion.

Marci Shore suggests a new direction for the study of the 1989 revolutions: as a matter of a specific generation. Looking back over the twentieth century in Poland and the Czech lands, she identifies each historical moment as the moment of a different group of people. Questions of 'causation' fade into the background, and it

becomes more important to understand each of the styles adopted by the groups who inhabited each of socialism's successive stages. The issue is not so much to explain who killed Marxism as a viable programme for opposition in 1968, but to comprehend how dissidents developed their intellectual personalities when Marxism no longer existed as a framework supporting thought and identity. This focus on context helps us see how intellectuals responded to changes in the atmosphere. For example, the fascination with Habsburg central Europe of the 1980s was conceivable only in this post-Marxist environment. And after 1989 the issue was not so much socialisation into ideology or anti-ideology; rather the 'young and unencumbered' learned or did not learn to profit from new circumstances, above all through education.

Seen in this way the year 1989 appears as something that happened and not something that was made. Shore cites the Czech dissident Jan Urban: 'It's not that we won – it's that they collapsed. And we just had to step in, because there was no one else around.' It was all improvisation, 'just total chaos, but great fun'. Thus throughout the twentieth century new worlds have descended on eastern Europe at regular intervals, with the cast of the previous world swept away by their children.

Shore offers an interesting twist on the historicism of Brezhnev and his infamous doctrine: it was not so much that no socialist society could 'revert' to capitalism, but rather, as Pons suggests, it could not go back to the moment of 'socialism with a human face'. If there is an issue for historians to wonder about, it is not so much who 'caused' the revolution, but how the debates about 'who caused the revolution' have been framed: who promotes one version (the dissidents) or another (the second tier)? Shore interjects her own finding: what really matters is who was old enough to 'be held responsible for choices they made under the communist regime'.

Debates over the causes and course of the 1989 revolutions often evolve around the triad of structures–agency–spark. While many agree on the structural developments that brought about the rupture (globalized economies, increasing exposure to political, social and economic alternatives) and the sparks (the Hungarian decision to open its borders, the Leipzig demonstrations, Solidarity's increasing assertiveness, the Soviet refusal to use force despite having the means and willing organisations), the agencies of revolution are still debated: how much weight should be assigned to the human agency of civil society (if one can actually identify such an entity elsewhere than Poland), whether of dissidents (practically immaterial during and after the Soviet dissolution) or quasi-liberal communist apparatchiks, in pushing forward the revolutionary cycle.

Mark Beissinger pursues the analysis of the causes of the 1989 revolutions in both the Soviet Union and its satellites by looking at the way in which nationalisms played out in the above-mentioned triad. In the rapid succession of events, the roles of structure and agency were ultimately blurred. Herein lay also one of the greatest ironies of the 1989 cataclysm: building on the structures of Soviet ethno-federalism and the Warsaw Pact, nationalism, which was often dismissed as the johnny-come-lately of the socialist states, has turned almost overnight against its creators and into the most potent mobilizational politics and a core socio-political arena throughout the entire Soviet and socialist spheres. To add insult to injury, the

new nationalist movements informed and interacted with each other while chipping away at the authority of the communist regimes. The failure to develop nationalism as a legitimising tool for communist regimes in east-central Europe and the deep divisions within the Russian national camp – in sharp contrast to communist regimes in Latin America and Asia – signalled the end of the era of forced internationalism in the Soviet European hemisphere. Not least, nationalism continues to define the geopolitics of the region at present.

For the Soviet Union, 1989 would come in 1991. Needless to say, and without dismissing the role and weight of the local actors on the ground, Moscow was central to the entire episode by what it did and did not do at the time. Ever so insistent on its supremacy in guiding the ideological and political courses within the communist camp – as it repeatedly demonstrated in 1956 and 1968 and in the ensuing Brezhnev doctrine – the Kremlin's new advocacy of peaceful evolution and dissolution was accompanied by public, voluntary surrender of its infallibility, as Silvio Pons shows. Professing his continued advocacy of socialism, Gorbachev admitted that the Soviet model of socialism bred totalitarianism, repression and aggression. And one could hardly imagine any of Gorbachev's predecessors telling foreign communist leaders that 'we, and you, are travelling down similar roads, albeit with the complete autonomy and responsibility of each', as he conveyed to the leader of the Italian Communist Party in November 1990. And so, when the Pope of the Communist Church renounced his formative doctrine, annulled his own infallibility and consented to the diverging paths of the disciples, one could hardly be surprised to hear his closest advisors stating that the communist international movement was no more.

Ironically, at least for NATO, the success of the 1989 peaceful revolutions also spelled an identity crisis at best and existential threat at worst. Following cautious first steps, argues Andrew Michta, the Alliance opted for eastward enlargement and fixation on inside norm-setting and systemic transformation at the expense of outward strategic vision and military capability. Twenty years after scoring one of the most impressive victories in history – watching its nemesis collapsing with hardly a bullet fired and taking over its prized territorial possessions – the crisis of the Alliance reflects the ambiguity of the 1989 legacy: political and economic freedoms came along with the loss of clarity as their price tag. Notably, however, the liberal democratic foggy has not bred a viable challenge in the course of the past two decades. One can safely assume that for most post-1989 polities, occasional *Ostalgie* is an affordable price for what they gained during and after that momentous year.

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