

The End of the Cold War: The Night the Masks Fell

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The End of the Cold War: The Night the Masks Fell

In November 1947 Secretary of State George Marshall sent a memorandum to President Harry Truman entitled “Resume of World Situation.” Its premise was that Moscow was likely to consolidate its control over Eastern Europe, and though it would rule the area by naked force, its domination would not be permanent: “One of the most dangerous moments to world stability will come when some day Russian rule begins to crumble in the eastern European area.” That moment arrived in 1989, some forty-two years after Secretary Marshall’s memorandum had reached the Oval Office. What caused the implosion of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989? And how did the West react to it?

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One view has it that the rapid collapse of the Soviet Empire was determined primarily by pressure from western governments who worked to undermine Communist rule. According to this theory, Russian control over Eastern Europe and Communist rule in the region faltered at the end of 1989 primarily because of the leadership of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and George H. W. Bush. Several institutions, especially NATO, also receive credit from this school of thought. The chronic economic troubles of the Soviet Union were—according to many commentators—made terminal by Reagan’s Star Wars scheme and such weapons systems as the Pershing II. The arms race is supposed to have hollowed out the Soviet system, producing shining steel on the surface while the inside was left shriveled, obsolete, and bankrupt. Every mainstream interpretation of 1989 also reserved considerable credit for internal East European actors, such as the Solidarity movement under Lech Walesa or the dissident group Charter ’77 led by Vaclav Havel.

I think this kind of account gives too much weight to external and internal opponents of Communist regimes and does not recognize the role played, perhaps unwittingly, by the East European rulers themselves. In my view:

1. The collapse of Communist regimes in 1989 was not brought about by external forces. In fact, the most significant western leaders—President Bush, Prime Minister Thatcher, President Mitterrand, and Chancellor Kohl—watched the evolving events with evident disapproval.

2. Except in Poland, where the Solidarity movement evolved into a legitimate alternative to the illegitimate military junta, East European dissidents were not organized enough to become a parallel government and a threat to the regime. The East European Communist bosses were shamed but not defeated by their domestic opponents.

3. Two outside actors proved very influential in the drama of 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev and John Paul II. Gorbachev launched fundamental reforms in the Soviet Union, pushed East European bureaucracies to do the same, and renounced the use of force within the Communist Bloc. For his part, the Pope inspired and empowered millions of previously dejected subjects. His personality caused passive and atomized groups in the region to coalesce. But neither Gorbachev nor John Paul II was responsible for dissolving Communist rule in Eastern Europe.

4. The regimes in East Berlin, Prague, and Budapest imploded because the demoralized and cynical ruling elites had run out of the energy needed for them to pretend that they still believed in their own dogma. Inspired by the nonviolent, even friendly atmosphere of the roundtable talks in Poland in 1989, they threw away the uncomfortable masks they had been wearing since the early fifties and, undefeated, walked away from power. They could have saved their careers if they had used force; they wisely chose not to do so.

To sum up: the leaders in the West were not pressing for regime change in Eastern Europe in 1989, nor did Gorbachev. The only people who favored regime change—the dissidents—were not in a position to effect it. The Communist governments in Eastern Europe were not aiming at regime change, but they—more than any other players—brought it about.

At the outset, the special role of three outside players should be acknowledged here. First, NATO, having set the outer limits for Soviet international conduct, defended them with unquestionable fortitude. The second significant outside player was John Paul II. He had an electrifying impact on Poland. It should not be forgotten, however, that the country was placed under martial law in December 1981, two years after the Pope's first visit. The enormous authority of John Paul II notwithstanding, the Communist generals and their tanks imposed their will upon the country and remained in power for eight more years. From 1978 to 1989, John Paul II motivated millions of Poles to live morally and truthfully—in “fundamental solidarity between human beings,” as he liked to put it, with emphasis on the key word. But he did not overthrow Polish Communism nor did he or the Church attempt to do so.

The third crucial outside actor was Mikhail Gorbachev. He courageously pushed his policy of perestroika even when it started to dissolve the power base of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It was also Gorbachev who renounced the Brezhnev Doctrine. Once it became apparent that the Kremlin would not uphold the East European regimes by sending in tanks to deal with political crises, those in power realized—in some cases for the first time ever—that they were accountable directly to their subjects, not to the Kremlin. This fundamentally changed their outlook. Nevertheless, it was not Gorbachev who opened the Berlin Wall; he did not urge the Polish junta to negotiate with Solidarity; he did not dissolve the Warsaw Pact. Those

decisions were made within Eastern Europe, and without his approval.

Several points can be raised in support of the view that western governments did not play a decisive role in the collapse of Communism in 1989 and that they were not even looking for opportunities to do so. Consider the case of Polish Army Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski. He was brought to the United States by the Central Intelligence Agency in late November 1981, after nine years as one of its highest-placed agents in the hierarchy of a Communist state. When he was still in Warsaw, Kuklinski was in a unique position to learn the complete plan prepared by the clique around General Wojciech Jaruzelski for the imposition of a military dictatorship. Kuklinski knew it from the inside out and was eager to discuss it with the CIA. To his amazement, he was instead debriefed by defense specialists on the engineering details of various Warsaw Pact weapons systems. His attempts to talk about the imminent imposition of martial law in Poland were energetically rebuffed. The Agency subsequently acknowledged that this had happened but insisted that it was just an honest administrative error.

A more plausible explanation is that the U.S. Government was determined to shield itself from Kuklinski's report on the imminent coup d'état, since such knowledge would have led to the necessity of a painful decision concerning what to do in response. The spokesman for the Jaruzelski military régime, Jerzy Urban, later stated that the planners took the absence of an American reaction to the intelligence brought by Kuklinski as an encouragement for Jaruzelski to proceed. They were probably right. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt spoke for others among world leaders when he reacted to the news regarding the coup d'état by saying that he hoped the Poles would now finally go back to work.

This attitude persisted in Washington throughout the eighties. In December 1988, when it was no longer possible to ignore signs that fundamental shifts were about to take place in Eastern Europe, Henry Kissinger and President-elect George Bush sent a letter to Gorbachev offering a deal: hold the tanks and the United States would not seek to exploit Moscow's present weakness to gain advantage for itself in Eastern Europe. Bush committed himself to respecting the allegedly legitimate national security concerns of Moscow in Eastern Europe in return for Gorbachev's promise to rule the area without naked military force. This poorly thought out initiative took place behind the back of U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock, who was incensed by it. He understood that if the letter had been made public, it would have been perceived in Eastern Europe as an abandonment by America.

The United States was certainly not alone in its distinct lack of enthusiasm for changes in Eastern Europe. As Laszlo Borhi has documented, Chancellor Franz Vranitzky of Austria and Chancellor Helmut Kohl in early 1989 pleaded with delegations from Poland and Hungary not to move too fast. Although neither of them put it exactly that way, it was possible to conclude that Austria and Germany were comfortable with the status quo.

As for France, it had no interest in opening up the closed regimes in Eastern Europe, bringing democracy, and restoring its traditional standing as a major power in the region. President François Mitterrand wished to accelerate European integration. He hoped that this would strengthen the economic component of the Economic

Community. Reforms in Eastern Europe were an unwelcome distraction from that task. Although he enjoyed a close friendship with Chancellor Kohl, the prospect of a united Germany pushed him closer toward the British prime minister, who was skeptical and concerned.

Great Britain traditionally preferred to accept no commitments regarding Eastern Europe. Its main objective in the area was stability. Restoring sovereignty in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary led in the opposite direction and was therefore undesirable. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher assured Gorbachev that she wished for East and West to coexist on the basis of mutual respect. The prime minister was committed to making Gorbachev feel as safe as possible. Indeed, she privately assured him that he should disregard a NATO resolution in support of German unification. It was mere persiflage for public consumption, she said. In reality, she opposed it. Her Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd described the situation with disarming frankness. The Cold War, he said, was “a system . . . under which we’ve lived happily for forty years.” Thatcher saw Mitterrand in Paris and showed him various maps of Germany depicting its growth. The two agreed that the message was “not entirely reassuring about the future.”

President Bush went to Warsaw in 1989. He found that he liked General Jaruzelski. The Soviet-trained dictator who drove Solidarity underground and held society hostage struck him as a Polish patriot and a man who could carry out the task of stabilizing Poland. When the general said he was eager to leave politics, Bush pleaded with him to stay in office. He instructed his ambassador to pressure the newly elected Polish senators to keep Jaruzelski in the presidential palace.

Finally, let us recall a crucial development that is by now well known: the Berlin Wall crumbled because of a misunderstanding. Speaking at a press conference, Genosse Günther Schabowski misinterpreted a badly written resolution, and that error was further amplified by the Associated Press and other media that misrepresented Schabowski’s erroneous interpretation still further. West German television and even an East German station contributed to the confusion when they asserted that the Wall was “wide open” when it really was not. At that point, the East German border guards had given no indication that they would consider disobeying their orders to stop any border violations. In February they had killed Chris Gueffroy, the last of some twelve hundred victims of the Wall, in cold blood. On 9 November 1989, as on any other day, the guards were entirely businesslike as they faced a large crowd. They calmly awaited orders. Their captain was on the phone trying to reach a competent person to help him reconcile his standing shoot-to-kill order with a barrage of official media reports that the Wall would be opened *sofort*. Having failed to reach anyone and having assessed the size of the growing crowd, he slammed the phone and told his men: “*Alles auf!*” The soldiers stepped aside. Michael Meyer noted that the first person to walk through the Wall was an old lady in a blue bathrobe, blue curlers, and fluffy blue slippers who had been waiting at the Wall for four hours. T. S. Eliot was right to predict that the end would come with a whimper, not a bang.

But a bang was not an impossibility. In an interview with the BBC on 20 September 2009, Gorbachev revealed that when the Berlin Wall was breached, Prime Minister

Thatcher and President Mitterrand “insisted that the unification [of Germany] should not go on, that the process should be stopped.” “I asked them if they had any suggestions. They had only one—that somebody else should pull their chestnuts out of the fire.” Gorbachev went on to say that Great Britain and France had urged him to use military force to close the Wall again. He refused on the grounds that it would have been irresponsible. If true, this testimony would radically revise the image that Thatcher and Mitterrand created for themselves as active opponents of Communism who helped overturn the immoral status quo.

Starting in 1987, Gorbachev had attempted to pursue his perestroika. At the same time, he was determined to uphold the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. In Eastern Europe he wished to eliminate such egregious obstacles to reform as Erich Honecker in East Germany and Gustav Husak in Czechoslovakia. But he hoped for the status quo to prevail. In this regard, the West supported him completely.

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Let us now consider the second of my assertions, namely, that—except in Poland—the ruling Communist elites were not defeated by their domestic opponents. Many have attempted to answer the question of why Communist rule collapsed so suddenly in 1989. This is an important question, of course, but equally important is why the collapse had taken so long. The East European Communist parties that took power in the late forties had committed outrages against their own people. They murdered or persecuted many innocents, illegally confiscated private property, mismanaged the economies, censored ideas and art, openly lied and demanded that others lie as well. They had no legitimacy. Yet they remained in power for some forty-four years. Except for a few days in Budapest in 1956, their physical safety and comfortable existence were never in doubt.

Consider, in this connection, the case of the Stalin monument in Prague. The Communists seized power in February 1948 and they expected to be praised by Moscow. The opposite happened—within weeks Stalin found their performance to be deeply flawed and he threatened them with drastic consequences. In January 1949, the Soviet Embassy summoned the party bosses and charged them with serious transgressions against the official policy of the Communist bloc. They were also accused of being ungrateful: a Soviet official noted as if *en passant* that Prague was the only East European capital that did not plan to unveil a monument to Stalin. The party leaders understood that their lives were on the line and ordered all the sculptors in the land to submit proposals for a Stalin monument. No one wanted to win this absurd competition, but one, Otakar Svec, was so determined not to win it that he deliberately submitted an outrageously impossible proposal. It could instantly be perceived to be hideous and was so gigantic that the entire hill on which it would be situated would have to be extensively rebuilt and stabilized with ferroconcrete injections.

Such is the logic of history in Central Europe that it was just this model that was chosen. Svec sank into depression but from then on had to work in his studio under the direct supervision of a secret police agent who kept a detailed record of every

day and guarded against any attempt to sabotage the project. The final version of the design was approved some two years later, in December 1951. Quite a few of the party leaders who had launched the project never got to enjoy it. They had been arrested and charged with high treason and executed just eight days before the final model was approved.

By the time the monstrosity was to be unveiled in 1955, Stalin had died and his legacy was in the process of being revised by his successors. Nikita Khrushchev, who led the anti-Stalinist platform in Moscow, was about to withdraw the Red Army from Austria. He had no intention of coming to Prague to unveil a monument to a man he was soon to unmask as a monster. (Eventually, a second-rate apparatchik on the verge of retirement would be dispatched to represent the Kremlin.) But the largest Stalin monument in the world, an obscene heap of granite, stood on top of the reinforced hill, visible from miles away. There was no way that it could be ignored. Just before it was unveiled, the sculptor's wife could no longer bear the shame and she took her own life. The sculptor followed her, killing himself shortly before his work was presented to the public.

A year later, the twentieth Soviet party congress unmasked the crimes of Stalin in a language hitherto dismissed as western propaganda. The Communist Party in Prague was desperate for the monument to disappear. But how does one remove the ultimate symbol of one's ideology without destroying one's legitimacy? Could the Church give up the Cross and stay alive? Finally, in 1961 the party decided the political carbuncle it had created had to be removed. The process took more than a year.

It is remarkable that with the demolition of the central symbol of its mythology, the party did not lose its power. No crowds gathered to protest the absurdity of building and then removing the monstrosity. The power base of the Communist bosses suffered no perceptible cracks; their control of the secret police, the military, and the media remained unchanged. What did change was their own ability to believe in the system over which they presided. They held all the instruments of power firmly in their hands but they no longer believed in the goal for the sake of which they had once acquired them.

The Stalin monument debacle in Prague was one of many such events that unmasked the founding myth of East European Communism as fraudulent. Consider Adam Wazyk's brilliant "A Poem for Adults," published in 1955, the very year the Stalin Monument was unveiled. It unforgettably revealed the hypocrisy of the official ideology:

Fourier, the dreamer, charmingly foretold
that lemonade would flow in the seas.
Does it flow?
They drink sea water,
crying:
"lemonade!"
returning home secretly
to vomit.
...

They came and cried:
“Under socialism
a hurt finger does not hurt.”
They hurt their fingers.
They felt the pain.
They began to doubt.

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Given the episode involving the Stalin Monument and the sentiments captured by Wazyk, it is astonishing that the East European regimes continued for another three and a half decades. If there had been a viable opposition, it would have swept out the fraudulent rulers. But that never happened. Even the most guilty ones, such as Husak, Honecker, Gierek, and Zhivkov—all except the Ceausescus—simply retired, and their successors negotiated a peaceful transfer of power. Neither external nor internal opponents forced them out.

The East European bosses knew that their system was based on a foundation of lies and that their subjects lived in prison. When Miklos Nemeth became prime minister of Communist Hungary in November 1988 he noticed and promptly eliminated a line in the state budget that was set aside for barbed wire on the border with Austria. He expected to be attacked from the Kremlin, but this never happened. Less than a year later, in September 1989, he opened the border crossings completely. Some East European hard-liners criticized him, but most said nothing. They had been watching carefully the Polish “roundtable” talks and the semi-free elections that took place in the spring and summer of 1989. Their collegial atmosphere was reassuring. It was a relief for those in power to discover that there was another way of existing, one without secret vomiting. November 9 was the night they threw away their masks and gave up their executive authority. At that time all their instruments of power (the armed forces, police, media, etc.) were intact; they continued to be treated as legitimate partners by the West; and the majority of their subjects remained obedient. The East European bosses—especially those in East Germany—could have attempted the Tiananmen Square option, but most of them were too rational to cause a massacre before the eyes of the whole world, with potentially dire consequences for themselves. It was surely much easier, and safer, to negotiate a path to comfortable retirement.