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The East European revolutions of 1989

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Soviet acceptance of the collapse of East European Communist regimes in 1989 must be considered the single most significant event leading to the end of the Cold War. It provided the most compelling evidence of the magnitude of changes that were going on inside the USSR in 1989. Until then, the importance of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms was doubted in many places. Soviet behavior in 1989 in Eastern Europe was the definitive reality check of the "new thinking" in Soviet foreign policy.

Provocative as it may sound, it is not so much what happened in Eastern Europe itself in 1989 that was historically significant. The fragility of the Communist regimes there had been on the historical record for many years. It was Soviet tolerance for change that made the difference. Until Gorbachev's reforms, Soviet domination of Eastern Europe had been internalized both in the East and in the West as an inescapable fact until some indeterminate future time. That is why the complete emancipation of Eastern Europe in 1989, while Soviet power was still intact, came as a breathtaking surprise in the West, in Eastern Europe itself, and even in the Soviet Union. The central argument of this chapter is that, while each revolution had specific national characteristics, their pace and scale were largely shaped by the *gradual* discovery of the scope of Soviet tolerance.

Since the Soviet military suppression of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, Western Sovietologists and East European political actors alike had believed there were two clear thresholds that East European countries could not cross without triggering Soviet military action: ending the dictatorship of the Communist Party and its role as the only possible engine of socialist development, and/or withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. The pact was held to be the very core of the world socialist system. Alexander Dubček and the Czechoslovak leaders of 1968 had carefully tried to avoid these two pitfalls. But at that time Moscow was more intolerant than Dubček had expected about developments that merely approached these thresholds.

Amazing as it may appear in retrospect, as late as three years after Gorbachev's accession, these two limits of Soviet tolerance were still assumed to be in place. Given the reforms that Gorbachev had introduced in the USSR, it was clear that there was room for greater experimentation and tolerance than there had been earlier. But, of the two old thresholds, only the first – political reform – seemed open to even partial reconsideration.

A prelude to 1989: Solidarity in Poland

Poland made the first of the series of revolutionary breakthroughs in Eastern Europe in 1989. It had always been the most rebellious Warsaw Pact member, having experienced social upheavals in 1956, 1970, 1976, and 1980–81. The most far-reaching had been the last: for a year, the regime had teetered on the verge of complete collapse.

In July and August 1980, a wave of strikes involving 300,000 workers swept across Poland after the government announced food-price increases of close to 100 percent in some cases in order to slow the growth of Poland's imports and spiraling foreign debt. To end the unrest, the government was forced to make a major political concession. On August 31, in the Gdańsk shipyard, it officially accepted the first independent trade union in the Communist world: Solidarity. In exchange, its leader, Lech Wałęsa, formally acknowledged the leading role of the Communists, the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP), in state affairs.

For a short period of time, many political actors, including leading party figures, believed that a new model of reformed socialism could emerge from the Gdańsk agreements. Wałęsa repeatedly stated that Solidarity was not and did not want to become a political organization. His and his chief advisers' aim was not "to conquer the state, but to reform its interaction with society."[1]

But the social and economic situation in Poland was too revolutionary for reform to be workable, and Solidarity was too strong (and the party government too weak) for a real partnership to emerge. In a matter of months, Solidarity membership surged to 10 million in a total Polish population of 35 million. Spontaneous strikes broke out across the country and were temporarily settled with wage hikes. By December 1980, general wage increases had reached 13 percent while the total food supply had decreased by 2 percent. The

1 Jack Bielasiak, "Solidarity and the State: Strategies of Social Reconstruction," in Bronislaw Misztal (ed.), *Poland after Solidarity: Social Movements versus the State* (Oxford: Transaction Books, 1985), 28.

gap continued widening throughout most of 1981. In each major confrontation, the regime had to back down. Deliberately or not, Solidarity became a major political organization. While it never formally claimed state power, it portrayed itself as the representative of the whole Polish nation.

Needless to say, Soviet leaders were extremely hostile to Solidarity from the outset, and very openly so. Starting in late August 1980, they conducted a series of military maneuvers and troop movements on Poland's borders and inside the country, in an attempt to intimidate the union and pressure their Polish counterparts to restore order. On the eve of Solidarity's congress in September 1981, the largest military exercises in the history of the Warsaw Pact were held in the Baltic republics, Belorussia, and along the Polish coast. But when each of these moves failed to significantly affect events in Poland, it became clear that Soviet leaders were highly reluctant to resort to direct military action. Solidarity's leaders were emboldened. In the weeks before the crackdown in December 1981, the union's leading organs were calling for self-management not only in the workplace but also in local communities. There was talk of organizing a workers' militia, and the union called for a national referendum on confidence in the government to be held within months.

After some hesitation, the Soviet Politburo had by June 1981 made a secret decision not to intervene militarily in Poland under "any circumstances."[2] The Soviets expected serious armed resistance and even feared that segments of the Polish army might fight Soviet or Warsaw Pact troops. They also foresaw toughened international sanctions, in addition to those that had already been imposed on the USSR on account of its ongoing war in Afghanistan. According to evidence that became available after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow would have been prepared to live with the failure of the Polish regime rather than face the consequences of an intervention. This does not mean that the Soviet leaders were willing to abandon their strategic and military positions in Poland. On the contrary, in the event of a challenge from a new regime, they were ready to defend their bases and the Warsaw Pact's lines of communication, by force if necessary.[3] It must be emphasized, however, that none of these contingency plans for action, *or inaction*, was ever tested in reality.

The Soviet leaders abandoned their idea of the best-case scenario, which was the reestablishment of order by their Polish counterparts. But they were

2 See Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 171–204.

3 *Ibid.*, 235.

very dissatisfied with the Polish government's equivocation. Officials in Warsaw, including General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the prime minister, reneged on many promises made to Moscow to introduce martial law. It was only after Jaruzelski became party leader, on September 6, that serious plans to impose martial law were made.

Solidarity's leaders never took the threat seriously. They were convinced that the Communists would never dare declare and enforce martial law. They were certain that most of the armed forces would defy orders and the regime would collapse. The union's leaders, therefore, were stunned by Jaruzelski's military coup of December 13, 1981. The general imposed order over a period of three days, arrested Solidarity's leaders and activists, and avoided a bloodbath. The success of the coup also came as a dismaying surprise for most Western observers and governments.

Eastern Europe between the repression of Solidarity and the advent of Gorbachev

The repression of Solidarity was greeted with enormous relief in Moscow and by the leaders of the other Warsaw Pact countries. At the height of its strength, Solidarity had launched a solemn "Appeal to the Peoples of Eastern Europe" to follow its lead. Its repression was seen everywhere as a reminder of Soviet thresholds of tolerance. If the suppression of the Prague Spring had been a clear warning to East European leaders, the clampdown on Solidarity was a warning to the opposition forces. The net result favored "stagnation," to use the term later chosen by Gorbachev to characterize the Soviet predicament. While stagnation manifested itself differently in each East European country, what all the regimes had to fear was social unrest rather than an assault on power by opposition forces.

Economic growth rates slowed in all the countries of the area, from an average of 4.2% in 1975, to 1.4% in 1980, and 1.0% in 1985. In 1987, it was 0.2%. The problem afflicted both conservative and reformist regimes. The prudent economic reforms that had been successful in Hungary for quite a few years had exhausted their potential. In some countries, the standard of living even declined. At the same time, their hard-currency debts to the West kept increasing, reaching enormous proportions in some cases. Again, the trend was unaffected by the degree of political orthodoxy of the regimes. For instance, East Germany was one of the most indebted countries and at the same time one of the most ideologically hostile to the West. All of Eastern Europe was increasingly linked to the West as a result of economic factors

notwithstanding the deep geopolitical divide of the continent. The same could be said about the penetration and influence of Western ideas and values.

Awareness of the severity of the overall situation varied widely among the Communist leaderships of the region. In Poland and Hungary, where for many years there had been a significant degree of tolerance for debate within society and within the party, the conviction that bolder changes were needed had permeated both. Many leading Communist intellectuals and politicians believed that the full benefits of the extension of market mechanisms could be realized only with accompanying social, though not political, pluralism. But Soviet intolerance was a stumbling block. In East Germany and Czechoslovakia, earlier successes and an economic performance that was still better than that of all other socialist states convinced leaders that they could muddle through with only piecemeal adjustments. Ideological rigidity combined at times with a sense of weak legitimacy to prevent the introduction of reforms, as in the case of Czechoslovakia.

When Gorbachev took power in 1985 and began to deal with the USSR's own, much weaker "westward gravitation," Eastern Europe was already divided in two loose sub-blocs. In Poland and Hungary, the regimes were prepared to accept the challenges of new economic transformations and experiments in democratization. In East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, the regimes refused to embark on these uncharted waters. This divide deepened in 1988, with growing polarization in 1989. With the exception of developments in Bulgaria, the differences between these two sets of states remained in place throughout the revolutions of 1989, with events in the first group influencing what happened in the second. But the common thread in the revolutionary changes of 1989 was the gradual discovery of Soviet tolerance.

If that discovery was gradual, it was because Gorbachev's policies, consequential as they proved to be, were not devoid of ambiguity. The genuine democratization measures that he introduced in the USSR in 1987–88 were intended to legitimize the party's leading role. Together with economic reforms, they were meant to lead to a new model of democratic socialism, not a social democratic type of capitalism (even though they were pointing in that direction). Given past Soviet practices, Gorbachev's first deliberately ambiguous repudiations of the Brezhnev Doctrine were not taken at face value, within or outside the Warsaw Pact. His support of reforms in Poland and Hungary was clear. But his forbearance with the leaders of the second subbloc (with the noteworthy exception of Romania's leader, Nicolae Ceauşescu) was also a source of ambiguity.

Saving the party's leading role in Poland

In an apparent paradox, the crucial breakthrough that brought on the end of Communism in Poland in 1989 came in a much less revolutionary situation than 1980–81. As a matter of fact, it was a shared sense of their relative weakness that led the two antagonists of 1981 to reach a historic compromise in April 1989.

In order to achieve a degree of reconciliation with Polish citizens, Jaruzelski had decreed a general amnesty for all political prisoners in September 1986. The regime believed it had the upper hand in the deadlock with Solidarity, which continued to operate illegally. In 1988, even Wałęsa's main advisers estimated that public support for the union was around 20 percent, only slightly higher than support for the regime, and that the vast majority were indifferent. After its relegalization in the spring of 1989, Solidarity's membership reached 2 million, only one-fifth of the 1981 level. Therefore, Jaruzelski self-confidently entered into extensive roundtable negotiations with Solidarity in order to address the state of the economy and to limit negative public reaction to the expected consequences of economic reforms.

When roundtable negotiations began on February 6, 1989, all issues were on the table except foreign policy. Both sides tacitly admitted that relations

21. Demonstrators during the 1987 papal visit to Poland: no one could predict the limits of Soviet tolerance.

with the USSR were not negotiable, and Solidarity did not even raise them. While the party's leading role was not directly challenged, this point was in fact at the center of the talks. The real issue of the day was the reduction of the party's power. On April 7, 1989, the roundtable agreements were signed. Solidarity was recognized not only as a trade union, but also as a legitimate political opposition force. A crucial point for the government was Solidarity's agreement to participate in the elections, which were to be held under rules that essentially preserved the party's leading role.

Under the new system, it was agreed that the opposition would compete for 35% of the 460 seats in the Diet while the other 65% would be left unopposed to the PUWP and its satellite parties. A new body, a 100-seat Senate with far less power, was to be elected in free elections. However, to override a Senate veto, a two-thirds' majority would be required in the Diet. Consequently, the party might have to negotiate with the opposition on some of the government's major programs; this was one of the most politically significant elements of the accords. The two houses of parliament sitting in joint session would elect the president, who was to wield considerable powers. Given the far greater number of deputies in the Diet and the PUWP's official dominance of the body, the formula ensured General Jaruzelski's election to a six-year term.

The official Soviet reaction was enthusiastic. While Gorbachev was not prepared to accept a multiparty system for the USSR itself, the Polish agreements were a best-case scenario for Eastern Europe. They fit perfectly with the Soviet leader's domestic and foreign-policy goals. While the party's power had been constrained, it still remained hegemonic in the political arena. At the same time, the democratization process was genuine and credible enough that Western countries would feel obliged to encourage it with economic assistance. It was a significant step toward societal rapprochement between the two Europes, which Gorbachev saw as a necessary precondition for trust, further arms reductions, and cooperation. It was seen as a milestone in the construction of Gorbachev's ideal of a "common European home," which would gradually overcome the division of Europe.

However, barely two months after the roundtable agreements, the Polish scenario began to unravel. On June 4, in the first round of the elections, Solidarity's Civic Committee won 92 of the 100 seats in the Senate, far more than predicted. But the biggest surprise was the miserable performance of the PUWP and its allies in the competition for the Diet seats reserved for them. Solidarity won 160 of the 161 seats for which it could compete. By contrast, for the 299 seats reserved for the governing coalition, only five candidates

managed to garner the 50 percent of votes required to win. Voters had the right to choose between several candidates. Some people crossed out the names of all the Communists on their ballots; others crossed out the names of the most prominent ones. The PUWP's losses were a terrible blow for the government. In the second round of voting, the governing coalition won the remaining 294 seats it had been guaranteed. But voter turnout was a mere 25 percent. The government's delegitimization and Solidarity's victory were felt all the more keenly since they were unexpected on both sides.

The PUWP's satellite parties took advantage of the party's weakness to escape its domination. They refused to enter a new coalition government with the PUWP unless Solidarity was also included. Without its allies, the party did not have an absolute majority in the Diet. Solidarity refused to enter a PUWP-led coalition.

It was in this atmosphere of uncertainty that Gorbachev spoke to the Council of Europe on July 7 and made a most explicit repudiation of the Brezhnev Doctrine. He was addressing a West European audience and seeking to increase the credibility of his foreign policy, without apparently realizing the impact his remarks would have in Poland, where they altered Solidarity's perception of its room to maneuver. On August 7, Wałęsa raised the stakes and called for a Solidarity-led government under a new slogan: "Your president, our prime minister." A more wide-ranging power-sharing agreement than had ever been contemplated before was now demanded.

On July 19, Jaruzelski had been elected president by the parliament, thanks to abstentions by several Solidarity deputies, who did not want to push their new political clout too far. On August 18, after tough negotiations and ambiguous low-level Soviet warnings, Wałęsa agreed to accept Communist ministers in a Solidarity-led government. Jaruzelski designated Wałęsa's nominee, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, to form a new government. Before giving a final blessing to Mazowiecki's government's composition, Mieczysław Rakowski, who had replaced Jaruzelski as PUWP general secretary, had a forty-minute telephone conversation with Gorbachev. The Soviet leader expressed no objections to the formation of the new government and deflected Rakowski's request to visit Moscow, saying it would be interpreted as a form of Soviet opposition or pressure.

As early as 1985, meeting with the Communist leaders of the Warsaw Pact, Gorbachev had told them they had an entirely free hand in their internal affairs. This was not taken at face value, even after August 1989. Of course, Gorbachev did express preferences or concerns at various times. These were seen as warnings. At the time of the developments in Poland, Gorbachev was near the peak of his worldwide prestige and popularity. The Soviet Union's withdrawal

from Afghanistan, unilateral disarmament initiatives, and acceptance of important changes in Poland and Hungary were perceived in the West as tangible proof of Gorbachev's declared intention of ending the Cold War and building a new international order. He had good reason to be fully confident in what he could achieve with his mounting political capital. What he told Rakowski was typical of the way he was to approach adverse developments in Eastern Europe. By accepting them gracefully, he thought he could earn goodwill and respect for Soviet interests from "former" opponents. In the short run, this policy of appeasement did work to a significant extent in Poland. Both Wałęsa and Mazowiecki repeatedly vowed that Solidarity would fulfill Polish Warsaw Pact commitments. This respect for Soviet power and benevolence did also extend – to a much lesser degree – to domestic politics for some time.

The formation of the Mazowiecki government spelled the end of the PUWP's hegemony in Polish politics. But the Communists remained a major force to be reckoned with. Their four ministers headed the Ministries of Defense, the Interior (police forces), Transportation (closely linked to Warsaw Pact logistics), and Foreign Trade. The important Foreign Affairs Ministry was given to Krzysztof Skubiszewski, an independent who had previously been a member of Jaruzelski's Council. The extent of Communists' influence remained far greater than the number of ministries under their control would suggest. Above all, Jaruzelski continued to serve as commander-in-chief. He had the constitutional power to dismiss the government, dissolve the parliament, or declare a state of emergency. In the roundtable agreement, the office of president had been designed to be the chief instrument of the PUWP's power. All of the tools of repression remained in the hands of Communists.

Though a fundamental breakthrough had taken place in Poland in August 1989, Solidarity's leaders did not consider it in any way irreversible. It was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall, soon afterwards, that Poland's real emancipation from the USSR took place.

Saving the party's leading role in Hungary: more promising beginnings

The democratic transformations initiated in 1989 by the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party (HSWP, the Hungarian Communist party) were bolder than those in Poland. The Hungarian regime had been the most audacious in implementing reforms, even at times of considerable Soviet intolerance. It had gained more experience in testing the limits of Soviet tolerance than other countries' governments and was also more confident of its political strength.

Surprisingly, the HSWP's leader, János Kádár, had succeeded in redeeming himself after presiding over the brutal Soviet repression of the 1956 Hungarian insurrection. From the 1960s on, he had pursued a policy of inclusion and reconciliation, while introducing market mechanisms into the economy and allowing the development of a sizable private sector. For lengthy periods of time, in the 1970s and 1980s, there were no political prisoners in Hungary. Kádár became genuinely popular. He and his associates were convinced that they had gained a significant degree of legitimacy. In retrospect, it would be more accurate to say that they had earned wide acceptance, certainly more than any other Communist government in Eastern Europe.

Kádár's long tenure was destabilized by Gorbachev's rise to power in Moscow. Bolder reforms were needed and the Hungarian leader refused to heed mounting pressure within the HSWP. His associates rightly believed that Gorbachev's reforms had opened new horizons. In May 1988, they forced Kádár to resign the party leadership.

Prime Minister Karoly Grosz replaced Kádár as party leader. Grosz was known for his efficiency and was considered a committed reformer. But more radical reformers soon outmaneuvered him. At the beginning of 1989, the party leadership was very divided. Two of the main reformers, Imre Pozsgay, the most outspoken and most popular, and Rezso Nyers, who had been the architect of the "Hungarian model," openly courted support outside the party. Like Jaruzelski, all of the leading Hungarian reformers, including Grosz, agreed that the political system should be opened up to the opposition.

In January 1989, without the party's approval, Pozsgay released and endorsed the conclusions of a commission he chaired that had been charged with reexamining the 1956 insurrection. He declared that the uprising had not been a counterrevolution but a legitimate popular insurrection. Pozsgay thought this was a necessary step to reinforce the party's legitimacy, and thereby his own popularity and ability to face upcoming political challenges. His unilateral statement was not only a gamble with the party leadership (which he won), but also a somewhat risky test of Soviet tolerance. His declaration was an implicit denunciation of Soviet behavior on a major issue. When no official Soviet reaction was forthcoming, Pozsgay was highly relieved.[4] He knew that a Soviet rebuff would have spelled the end of his rise within the HSWP leadership; the fact that none ever came emboldened him.

4 It was later revealed that Gorbachev had prevented the publication of a rebuttal prepared by the head of the International Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Still, he could take nothing for granted. Hungarian reformers did not know the limits of Soviet tolerance. According to their own accounts, they knew that Gorbachev was pressing for reforms and that there was an ongoing struggle within the Soviet leadership. On the other hand, they had great difficulty in weighing not only the balance of power in Moscow at any given time but also in discerning Gorbachev's ultimate intentions.

In February, the party's Central Committee approved the outlines of a new constitution to be submitted to the National Assembly. The HSWP's leading role was not inscribed in the document. The omission did not mean that the party was prepared to relinquish power. It was confirming its commitment to keep its leading role through persuasion and the use of political instruments, not constitutional ones. At the same time, the draft constitution defined Hungary as a "socialist state," and of course the emerging new political parties were bound to act in accordance with the constitution. The rules of the game between the HSWP and other political parties were not yet defined.

When the results of the Polish roundtable were made public, the Hungarian opposition parties let it be known that, unlike Solidarity, they would accept nothing less than genuine competition and free elections. The HSWP's leader, Grosz, was opposed to free elections. But he was rapidly losing ground within the party leadership. On June 21, when Hungary formally opened its own national roundtable, it was already clear that the party leadership would agree that the 1990 elections would be free and fully competitive.

Party leaders' acceptance of free elections was based on the conviction that their commitment to fundamental reforms was paying off. Reliable polls were forecasting 35 to 40% support for the HSWP; its closest rival was under 20%. Under these conditions, the reforming HSWP could expect to remain the dominant political party and the arbiter of the political game for the next four years, even without an absolute majority. HSWP leaders wanted an electoral system that delivered a clear majority government, which was what Pozsgay was advocating. Moreover, Pozsgay was the party's designated candidate for the powerful presidency, to be created as a result of the roundtable negotiations. He was widely expected to win a free election. Building on these encouraging expectations, the HSWP decided to hold a party congress in the fall and formally transform itself into a Western-type socialist party.

In Moscow, in closed debates among reformers, Aleksandr Iakovlev, the most radical of Gorbachev's associates, saw these developments as a vindication of his claims that bold reforms could enable a Communist Party to gain new legitimacy and keep its leading role by political means. At that time, he was

advocating a formal split and competition between the reformist and conservative wings of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. While Gorbachev was definitely not prepared to accept such a change, he viewed the Hungarian developments with cautious sympathy, which explains why most official Soviet newspapers, such as *Pravda*, commented on them favorably.

Gorbachev's hands-off attitude did not mean that the HSWP and the Hungarian opposition parties felt entirely free of Soviet constraints and demands. While the leading role of the party was clearly open to reconsideration, the socialist system itself could not be criticized. In a meeting with Grosz in Moscow in March 1989, Gorbachev told him that "the safekeeping of socialism" was the aim of reform.[5] At that time, in the USSR itself, socialism was becoming an increasingly elastic concept. Gorbachev himself had no clear idea of the limits of "reformed socialism." However, it was a core belief and a powerful motivating force for his actions. Though his warning to Grosz was not formulated as a direct threat, it was taken very seriously in Hungary. The opposition accepted a compromise formula stipulating in the first lines of the constitution that in the Republic of Hungary "the values of bourgeois democracy and democratic socialism are equally realized." In deference to Soviet power, the opposition agreed to early presidential elections, which Pozsgay was expected to win.[6]

At the end of July, during the roundtable negotiations, Nyers, who was then president of the HSWP, declared that Gorbachev wanted "the HSWP to remain *one of the essential forces* in the renewal of society; and Hungary not to abandon its friendship with the Soviet Union in a *unilateral* movement toward the West."[7] The last words are highly significant. The European reconciliation that Gorbachev contemplated was to be made through bloc-to-bloc negotiations. The new European order was to be organized around two largely demilitarized blocs. They were to be gradually superseded by a reconfigured and strengthened CSCE that could manage the pan-European process. Therefore, in order to win better terms for the USSR in Europe, Gorbachev needed a modicum of foreign-policy cohesion within the Warsaw

5 "Memorandum of Conversation between M. S. Gorbachev and HSWP General Secretary Karoly Grosz," Moscow, March 23–24, 1989, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 12/13 (Fall/Winter 2001), 78.

6 See Renée De Nevers, *Comrades No More: The Seeds of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 151.

7 *Corriere della Sera*, September 9, 1989: emphasis added.

Pact, which, while in a different way from before, remained crucial.[8] Hungary's membership in the pact was not up for negotiation at the Budapest roundtable, any more than it had been in Poland.

When the roundtable talks ended on September 18, the HSWP embraced democratic rules more fully than its Polish counterpart, but it had a firmer hold on power and considerably brighter prospects. Its opportunities, however, would soon be swept away by the earth-shattering events that took place in Germany with the fall of the Berlin Wall. What was happening in Hungary had a decisive effect on developments in East Germany. The first breach in the Berlin Wall happened on September 10 when Hungarian authorities opened their western borders to East German citizens.

The Berlin Wall as catalyst

The processes of change in Poland and Hungary in 1989 have been described as "negotiated revolutions." Though the terms are somewhat antinomic, the characterization is appropriate. These revolutions were initiated from above. A third revolution of this type occurred in Bulgaria on November 9, simultaneously with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but without any link to it. Subsequently, real revolutions from below occurred in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, with a "negotiated capitulation" in the first two.

The dividing line between the two patterns of change was the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its consequences rapidly blurred the differences between the results of the two models. When the Soviet Union tacitly acquiesced to the fall of the Berlin Wall, people around the world saw it as a momentous event. It provided dramatic and incontrovertible confirmation of the demise of the Brezhnev Doctrine. In the two weeks that followed, as the East German regime began to crumble with not the slightest – even indirect – Soviet show of force, the magnitude of Gorbachev's incremental revolution became unmistakably clear. The German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, became convinced that the new Soviet course was irreversible and that German unification was possible. He therefore decided to seize the initiative and put German unification on the international agenda.

As it became evident that the USSR would not use force and was advising East European regimes against it, respect for Soviet power and its assumed thresholds of tolerance rapidly evaporated nearly everywhere, including

8 For a detailed examination of Gorbachev's approach to change in Eastern Europe as a way for the USSR to join Europe, see Jacques Lévesque, *The Enigma of 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

Washington. Ignoring Gorbachev's objections, US president George H. W. Bush and Kohl insisted that a united Germany must be a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), notwithstanding the fact that this would mean the end of the Warsaw Pact. Earlier, in July, during an official visit to Poland and Hungary, Bush had met with opposition leaders and advised prudence and restraint. In Hungary, according to his advisers, he had been somewhat disturbed by their impatience. But now he was willing to challenge the most basic ingredient of the European balance of power.

The first signs of the crumbling of East Germany radically accelerated events throughout the region. The fragile political equilibria achieved in Poland and Hungary collapsed. All of Eastern Europe, it seemed, was intent on hurling itself through the open Berlin Wall. In the weeks that followed the fall of Erich Honecker, the East German leader, and the opening of the Wall, the PUWP disintegrated. In some places in Poland, party cells declared their own dissolution. In the summer of 1990, given the totally new domestic and international situation, Jaruzelski decided to renounce the presidency. In Hungary, on November 26, a referendum was held to postpone the presidential elections until after the parliamentary elections. The proposition passed by a slight margin, ending Pozsgay's political ambitions. When the parliamentary elections took place in May 1990, the Socialist Party, the successor to the HSWP, received 8 percent of the popular vote, losing all power.

In June 1990, when it appeared increasingly probable that Gorbachev would have to accept a united Germany in NATO, the new Hungarian prime minister declared that his country wanted to leave the Warsaw Pact, or see the pact dissolved. After receiving new German guarantees of its border, the Polish government reneged on its earlier commitments and followed suit. Gorbachev did little to reverse the trend of events; Soviet tolerance astonished contemporaries.

Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution

The crumbling of the Berlin Wall triggered changes in Czechoslovakia. The leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CzCP) was still controlled by those who had called for the military suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968. Unlike Kádár, they had never sought reconciliation with the people. They had expelled hundreds of thousands of supporters from the party and kept them out. At the beginning of 1989, no reformist wing existed within the party.

The active opposition was limited to tiny elitist groups such as Charter 77, set up to monitor compliance with the Helsinki Accords; its most prominent

member was Václav Havel. He and other activists were constantly harassed and arrested by the police. While Czechoslovakia's economy had the same structural problems as its neighbors, the people enjoyed the highest standard of living in Eastern Europe and the regime had a significant degree of acceptance within the working class.

Nonetheless, a genuine reformist Communist alternative existed in Czechoslovakia, one that could have enjoyed immediate legitimacy. Dubček and many veterans of the Prague Spring were still alive. Leaders of the Italian Communist Party, who had strongly supported the Czechoslovak experiment in 1968, asked Gorbachev to facilitate their return to political life. Although the Soviet leader had excellent relations with the Italian Communists, he refused. He said that he could not intervene and that change had to come from within the CzCP.[9] His aloofness could be interpreted in different ways. But while mildly encouraging CzCP boss Milouš Jakeš to introduce reforms in April 1989, he also told him that he considered the Prague Spring "to have turned toward counterrevolution."[10] This statement was made after he had accepted the HSWP's revision of the far more radical Hungarian insurrection of 1956. Given such inconsistencies, it is small wonder that many East European reformers were uncertain *at that time* about the limits of his tolerance. This was certainly the case with Czechoslovak prime minister Ladislav Adamec, a would-be reformer. Adamec sought and received encouragement from members of Gorbachev's entourage, but was told that he could not and would not get direct support from Gorbachev. As a result, Adamec remained a very timid proponent of reforms.

But the changes that took place in Poland and Hungary in the summer of 1989 affected events in Prague. In July, Adamec announced the forthcoming introduction of economic reforms, some of them similar to those of the Prague Spring, but without any accompanying political overtures. By August, the number of opposition groups had grown to more than thirty. On August 21, the twenty-first anniversary of the Soviet-led invasion, nearly 10,000 people took part in demonstrations, chanting slogans such as "Long live Poland and Hungary" and "Long live Dubček."

A week after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the situation changed dramatically. With authorization from the government, the official student organization

9 See Antonio Rubbi, *Incontri con Gorbaciov: i colloqui di Natta e Ochetto con il leader sovietico* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1990), ch. 5.

10 See the transcript of the conversation in Georgii Shakhnazarov, *Tsena svobody: reformatsiia Gorbacheva glazami ego pomoshchnika* [The Price of Freedom: Gorbachev's Reforms through His Aide's Eyes], (Moscow: Rossika Zevs, 1993), 109.

called for a demonstration on the fiftieth anniversary of the death of a student killed during the Nazi occupation. The crowd swelled to 50,000 and turned into an unprecedented mass demonstration against the regime. Sections of the crowd were brutally assaulted by police forces and hundreds of people were injured. This sparked a series of events that brought the regime down in three weeks.

On November 19, on Havel's initiative, twelve opposition groups formed Civic Forum. Daily mass demonstrations and gatherings in Prague grew to gigantic proportions, from 200,000 people in the first days to 400,000, and then to as many as 750,000. Havel addressed the crowd in Wenceslas Square on November 21, as did student and opposition leaders, including Dubček. The party leadership was paralyzed. Contrary to what was feared and reported, the government never contemplated a crackdown, even though army leaders were prepared to act. Given events elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the expectation that they would face open disapproval from Moscow, the CzCP Politburo lost the will to resort to mass repression. While there were threats, there was no attempt to systematically arrest opposition leaders. The regime believed that it could remain in power if it were willing to accept reform.

On November 21, Prime Minister Adamec announced that he was prepared to open talks with Civic Forum, that he favored "a different concept of the leading role of the Party," and that he would open the government to non-Communists. In the following days, he met with members of Civic Forum, who demonstrated flexibility. Finally, on December 3, in what appears to have been a total misreading of the situation, he came out with a proposal for a new government in which non-Communists would receive five seats in a 21-member Cabinet. His concept of the leading role of the party still implied political hegemony, as in April in Poland. Obviously, at that point, the issue was not one of assumed Soviet limits of tolerance, but rather Adamec's own political convictions. His proposal was rejected. Immediately afterwards, he left for Moscow to attend the meeting of Warsaw Pact leaders that followed the Bush–Gorbachev Malta summit of December 2 and 3. The CzCP being dramatically weakened, Adamec sought Gorbachev's open, explicit support for his efforts to form a new government. But the Soviet leader felt it was too late to get involved. Upon his return from Moscow, Adamec resumed negotiations with Civic Forum. Rather than agreeing to a government in which he would have been in the minority, he resigned on December 7. A few days later, his deputy and successor as prime minister, Marián Čalfa, formed a government in which non-Communists were in the majority. Čalfa himself quit the party shortly afterwards. The dismantling of the regime

was completed on December 29, when Parliament elected Havel as president. Dubček had accepted the lower position of chairman of the parliament the previous day.

Havel and Civic Forum gained the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia. They initially accepted the country's international obligations under the Warsaw Pact, and even proposed a European security concept that was very close to Gorbachev's vision. They suggested the creation of a new pan-European security system based on the CSCE; NATO and the Warsaw Pact would continue until they were gradually replaced by the new structure. However, in July, when it became apparent that Gorbachev would feel compelled to accept a united Germany inside NATO, Czechoslovakia began to consider withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact.[11] Later, together with Hungary and Poland, it did press for the dismantling of the pact.

Romania: a revolution from below, intercepted from above

In almost every respect, the Romanian revolution of December 1989 departed from patterns observed elsewhere. The Romanian revolution was both a popular insurrection and a *coup d'état*: both were bloody and caused hundreds of deaths. These peculiarities were, of course, related to the nature of Ceauşescu's regime, which made East Germany and Czechoslovakia look like modern, benign dictatorships, and the Polish and Hungarian regimes positively enlightened and benevolent. A manifesto published abroad in March 1989 by former Romanian Communist leaders described their country's grotesque regime as fundamentally "non-European."

Still, it was the Romanian people's awareness of what was going on elsewhere in Eastern Europe that energized them and ignited the revolts that spelled the end of the regime. It was not an accident that the first of these revolts occurred close to Hungary, in the largely ethnic Hungarian city of Timişoara, on December 16 and 17. Romanians joined the growing protests in spite of the ethnic tensions that Ceauşescu had fomented for years. The unrest was brutally repressed, causing sixty deaths.

Until the riots reached Bucharest, Ceauşescu exhibited confidence in his ability to withstand the earthquake rocking Eastern Europe. On December 18, he left Romania for a scheduled visit to Iran. On December 21, after his return,

11 See Andrew Cottley, *East-Central Europe after the Cold War* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 62–63.

22. December 1989: the Romanian revolution against the Communist regime turned violent. The other East European revolutions of 1989 were mostly peaceful.

a mass demonstration that had been called in his support turned into a riot, and he and his wife fled Bucharest. Until their speedy execution on December 25 after a grotesque "trial," sporadic fighting continued in Bucharest. Meanwhile, astounding news poured in, much of which later proved to be disinformation. It was announced that terrorists from the notorious Securitate, supposedly assisted by Palestinian and Syrian fighters, had killed as many 63,000 people. Later, the number of deaths proved to be in the order of 600 and most of the "terrorists" arrested were released without trial.

There are many conflicting conspiracy theories about the events of that third week of December. Some go as far as to claim that the fighting and disinformation were orchestrated by the new leaders in order to keep the rebellious population off the streets while they divided power, and to demonize the Ceaușescus. After the Berlin Wall came down and the Czechoslovak regime collapsed, a large number of high-level officials in Romanian state organizations and the apparatus of repression were only waiting for the opportune moment to jump ship and turn against the despot they hated. The twisted web of intrigue reveals the confusion of maneuvers in a free-for-all fed by mutual distrust created by Ceaușescu's dictatorship.

There are clear signs that the governing body that emerged in those dramatic days was largely a makeshift affair. One of its masterminds, Silviu Brucan, a former ambassador to the United States, was under house arrest when the regime fell. In 1984, he had been involved, along with General Nicolae Militaru and other military leaders, in planning a coup against Ceauşescu, which was ultimately called off. Ion Iliescu, who was to become the new leader, had once been considered a potential successor to Ceauşescu, but had been marginalized since 1971. The poor coordination of the "*coup d'état*" that piggybacked on the insurrection was obvious. After Ceauşescu fled Bucharest on December 22, General Militaru appeared on television and asked viewers to find Iliescu and tell him to come to the television station. Iliescu arrived shortly thereafter and asked other individuals to come to the headquarters of the Central Committee to help found a National Salvation Committee.

Soviet behavior was consistent with the general pattern observed elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Brucan recalled in 1992 that during a visit to the USSR in November 1988 he had met with Gorbachev and told him of his intent to work for the overthrow of Ceauşescu. The Soviet leader told him that the USSR could not take part. He reportedly expressed sympathy, however, with the idea of ousting the dictator, "on condition that it was conceived and carried out in such a way as to leave the Communist Party as the leading political force in Romania."[12]

From his first public utterances, Iliescu declared himself in favor of renewed socialism, and the National Salvation Front (NSF) was later transformed into a new Socialist Party that managed to hold on to power. The outcome was in line with the USSR's preferences, but was definitely not orchestrated in the Kremlin. Interestingly, a more active Soviet role in Romania or even direct intervention would have been welcomed in Washington. On December 24, with Bucharest engulfed in fighting and chaos, James A. Baker III, the US secretary of state, declared on American television that the United States would not object "if the Warsaw Pact judges it necessary to intervene" in Romania.[13] While this was eloquent proof that the Cold War was over, it was met in Moscow with some degree of suspicion and irony. The United States had just sent troops into Panama to oust General Manuel Noriega.[14] Soviet leaders saw Baker's implicit invitation as a way of legitimizing the United

12 Silviu Brucan, *Generatia Irosită* [Wasted Generation], quoted by Dennis Deletant, *Ceauşescu and the Securitate* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), 366.
13 James Baker interview, "Meet the Press," December 24, 1989.
14 See John H. Coatsworth's chapter in this volume.

States' behavior. Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze's deputy ministers remarked to the American ambassador in Moscow that it was somewhat paradoxical that, at a time when the USSR had abandoned the Brezhnev Doctrine, the United States was embracing it.

After December 1989, the fortunes of Iliescu and the NSF can be seen as a successful variant of Gorbachev's best-case scenario for Eastern Europe. Iliescu won the presidential election of May 1990 with 85 percent of the popular vote, while the NSF won 236 of the 396 seats in the lower house of the new Romanian parliament. Romania remained a reliable member of the Warsaw Pact up to its end in 1991.

Bulgaria's quiet, successful transition

The other success story of Gorbachevism took place in Bulgaria. There is an element of continuity here: Bulgaria was the country that had always caused the fewest problems for its Soviet mentor, and it remained the most faithful ally of the USSR up to the Soviet collapse.

At the beginning of 1989, Bulgaria was still led by Todor Zhivkov, who had led the Bulgarian Communist Party for thirty-five years. An astute political survivor who was always attentive to Moscow, he was alert to the generational change in the Soviet leadership and the start of perestroika. In 1987, in a bid to emulate and even overtake perestroika, he launched a vast program of radical administrative and organizational changes that touched everything except the mechanisms of his personal power. As many as 30,000 officials were removed from their positions, engendering strong dissatisfaction among technocrats. At the same time, he was playing on Bulgarian nationalism. He had launched a campaign of "Bulgarianization" which, as of June 1989, had led to the forced emigration of over 200,000 Bulgarians of Turkish origin amid widespread international condemnation.

In this context, and with the changes going on in Poland and Hungary, many Bulgarian party and government leaders dreamed of overthrowing the dictator. But here, too, second-tier Communist officials were hesitant to act without cues from the Soviet Union. For them, as for Zhivkov, the key to the future lay in Moscow. They knew that Zhivkov was despised in Gorbachev's entourage, much more so than Honecker or Jakeš. But in all formal and informal meetings, the dictator seemed to have good, even warm, relations with Gorbachev. Foreign Minister Petar Mladenov had the opportunity to sound out Gorbachev personally during an informal gathering at the Warsaw Pact summit of July 1989. He whispered to Gorbachev: "We are determined to

carry out a change of direction in Bulgaria." He got a very short answer: "eto vashoe delo [it's your business]."[15] This could be understood as a green light, but it was far from the explicit support that was sought. Mladenov took three months to act, delaying until he had mustered the support of Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Lukanov, the minister of defense, and the Central Committee secretary for international affairs, among others. They apparently received guarded support from the Soviet Embassy in Sofia, which was controlled by committed "Gorbachevites" (not the case everywhere in Eastern Europe). At a Politburo meeting held on November 9 (hours before the Berlin Wall's opening), Zhivkov was forced to agree to hand in his resignation at the Central Committee meeting scheduled for the next day.

In the following weeks, Mladenov and his reformist team put forward a program of "reformed socialism," and promised free elections and the removal of the reference to "the leading role" of the party from the constitution. Following the Hungarian model, the Bulgarian Communist Party transformed itself into a socialist party. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, it opened roundtable negotiations with opposition forces, which had appeared before Zhivkov's fall. It won the free elections of June 1990 with an absolute majority of 52.75 percent.

The new Bulgarian party, like the Romanian successor party, the NSF, survived the debacle that swept away Communist reformers across Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was largely because civil society was not yet so developed in the two countries, nor were opposition forces so powerful. Historians have seen this as a manifestation of the faultline that divides the Balkan region from the rest of Europe, one rooted in long Ottoman domination. Whatever the merits of this view, these two faithful allies were of little help to Gorbachev in securing the new European international order that he contemplated. The events in the northern tier of the Warsaw Pact sealed the failure of his European goals.

The fall of the East European regimes

With the exception of Bulgaria, the actual collapse of all the East European regimes took place in less than two months, from mid-November to the end of 1989. Before that, the changes in Poland and Hungary can be seen as a testing of the limits of Soviet tolerance. After the Soviet acceptance of the fall of the Berlin Wall, which had been the linchpin of the USSR's hegemony in Eastern Europe, everything changed everywhere in a matter of weeks. It had become

15 Interview with Petar Mladenov, Sofia, November 12, 1994.

unmistakably clear that Gorbachev not only would not use force, but also would not condone its use by the Communist Parties to hold on to power. The East German party crumbled, the Czechoslovak and Romanian regimes were swept away, and the Polish and Hungarian political compromises were destroyed.

Gorbachev's highly idealistic expectation that Soviet acceptance would bring new forms of democratic socialism and salvage Soviet influence within a transformed alliance proved to be ill-founded. His long leniency with Honecker's and Jakeš's regimes did not help. Soviet domination had lasted too long, and its consequences were too deeply resented. A cathartic moment was needed.

The opposition forces of Eastern Europe showed restraint and respect for Soviet power until the extent of Soviet tolerance was put to a final test with the fall of the Berlin Wall. So did the United States. Until November 1989, Bush had urged greater prudence on the Polish and Hungarian opposition leaders and, with his NATO allies, he had favoured the integrity of the Warsaw Pact. Afterwards, Bush pressed for German unification inside NATO. As Gorbachev had feared, this proved fatal to the pact and to his all-European goals.

The East European revolutions occurred when Gorbachev's tolerance for reform surpassed anything that his contemporaries had imagined. As his tolerance became clear, the reformers were emboldened, as were Bush and Kohl. East European peoples had long yearned for change; Gorbachev made it possible.