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The Fall of the Soviet Empire

VICTOR SEBESTYEN



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In memory of my mother Éva
and Patricia Diggory

It is impossible to predict the time and progress of revolution. It is governed by its own more or less mysterious laws. But when it comes, it moves irresistibly.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

Ideas that have outlived their day may hobble about the world for years, but it is hard for them ever to lead and dominate life. Such ideas never gain complete possession of a man, or they gain possession only of incomplete people.

Alexander Herzen

God preserve me from those who want what's best for me.
From the nice guys
always willing to inform on me
from the priest with a tape recorder under his vestments
from the blankets you get under without saying good evening
from those angry with their own people. . . .
now when winter's coming.

Mircea Dinescu

INTRODUCTION

This is a story with a happy ending. Nobody who witnessed the joy on the streets of Berlin, Prague or Budapest at the end of 1989 will ever forget those extraordinary scenes of celebration. The people's will had triumphed over tyranny in a dizzying few months of almost entirely peaceful revolutions which changed the world. That is where this narrative finishes, at a point of bright hopes, intelligent optimism, sincere thanksgiving – and great parties. One of history's most brutal empires was on its knees. Poets and philosophers who had been languishing in jails became presidents and government ministers. When the Berlin Wall fell on a chilly November night it seemed as though the open wounds of the cruel twentieth century would at last begin to heal. These were not entirely foolish dreams. Some pundits – most notably, but not uniquely, Francis Fukayama – became carried away and predicted the end of history and of future ideological conflicts.

The pundits were right about the scale and importance of the changes in 1989 – if not about the end of history. An entire way of life and of looking at reality – communism as inspired by Marx, Lenin and Stalin – had been exposed as a gruesomely failed experiment. Freedom and independence for a large part of Europe that had been imprisoned for four decades became feasible within weeks. At the start of 1989 neither seemed possible for years ahead. The Cold War was declared over. There remained two powers which possessed enough nuclear weapons to destroy civilisation several times over, but neither now looked like using them. The Year of Revolutions appeared as a beacon of hope for oppressed people elsewhere who dared to dream that they too could free themselves.

The sudden collapse of the Soviet empire was entirely unexpected. After the event, many sages in academia, the military, the media, politics and diplomacy boasted that they had seen it coming. But it is hard to find any evidence, least of all from inside the intelligence agencies. Espionage played a vital role in the Cold War – in reality as

well as in the imagination of a public in East and West fed on a diet of thrillers and spy movies. Despite the huge resources lavished on the intelligence services in both camps, spies were not telling their masters in Washington or Moscow or London how weak the Soviet system was. Before it happened, nobody of significant influence proposed that the entire monolithic structure feared by so many for so long would disintegrate – and within a matter of months. I discount the late British journalist Bernard Levin who at the end of 1988 wrote an unusually prescient piece that foreshadowed events with bizarre accuracy, but at the time even he said that he was indulging in fantasy, not prophecy. Received wisdom was that the USSR faced a long, slow and painful decline and it would be many years, maybe decades, before the satellite states of Central and Eastern Europe escaped the Soviet orbit. As James Baker, the US Secretary of State during part of this story, said: 'Anyone who tells you they knew it was going to happen – well, they're blowing smoke at you.'

For nearly half a century, the Soviets had held on firmly to their spoils of war. The Red Tsars in the Kremlin saw possession of their satellite states as proof of their power and a vindication of their Communist faith, though by the 1980s nationalism had become a stronger impulse than ideology. They had crushed any potential rebellions with ruthless savagery – in Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968. It looked as though the Iron Curtain, 300 kilometres of concrete walls and wire fences dividing a continent, was permanent. Many revisionists since have argued that it was inevitable the Soviet empire would fall the way it did. They claim it was a classic case of imperial 'overstretch'; the USSR could not afford to hang on to its burdensome outposts. To the brave Czechs, East Germans and Bulgarians who demonstrated in their hundreds of thousands demanding freedom, the fall of their oppressive regimes did not seem inevitable at the time. If the police answering to their own dictators did not shoot at them, the Soviets might. The Russians had done so before, many times and at a high cost in blood. It was not beyond the realms of possibility that the Red Army, with an occupation force of more than half a million soldiers, would revert to traditional methods. An entire way of life was swept away along with a half-dozen incompetent, corrupt and at times vicious tyrannies. It happened with little violence, apart from a few days in Romania. But it was not a given that these revolutions would be peaceful. There were many occasions when one spark could have lit a fuse that set half a continent ablaze.

No other empire in history had ever abandoned its dominions so quickly or so peacefully. Why did the Soviet Union surrender without a fight? And why at the end of the 1980s? Archives in the USSR and Eastern Europe show how exhausted, bankrupt and painfully aware the Soviets were that communism had failed. The USSR lost its will to run an empire. The imperialists in the Kremlin could have expired slowly, over many decades, like the Ottomans. The Soviet Union could have limped along for a long time as 'Upper Volta with Nukes'. The Soviets chose not to do so.

I have written extensively here about Afghanistan. Some readers might ask why I have set so much of a book that is principally concerned with Central Europe in the hills around Kabul? Losing the war in Afghanistan during the 1980s caused Soviet leaders to abandon their 'outer empire', though at the time they did not see the consequences so logically or clearly. The Soviets' disastrous military campaign in Afghanistan made them reluctant to send troops into battle anywhere else. Without the implied threat of force, they were in no position to hold on to their empire in Europe. The crippling foreign debts incurred by the satellite states, some of which by the late 1980s could barely meet their interest payments, was one of the main factors. The Soviets were no longer prepared to guarantee them, particularly as the collapse in oil prices during the mid-1980s triggered a crisis in the USSR from which the state never recovered. Communism in Europe survived only as long as capitalist bankers from the West were willing to bankroll it.

The human factor is the principal answer, as so often. The last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, was a contradictory figure. A new kind of Kremlin chieftain, he could walk, talk and think on his own, unlike the geriatrics who preceded him, whose physical decay seemed to symbolise the condition of their country. He and a few of his advisers thought that the Soviet Union's satellite states were not worth keeping if they could only be held with tanks. He did the right things, but for the wrong reason. His overriding aim was to save communism in the Soviet Union. He believed the people of Eastern Europe would choose to stay allied to the Soviets in a socialist commonwealth. His miscalculations were staggering. Given the chance, the East Europeans joyfully abandoned communism. Nor was Gorbachev able to save it in the USSR. By his own lights he was a failure, but millions of people have cause to be thankful to him. He was consoled for his errors when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990.

A few of the other big personalities who emerge from these pages

had a much clearer and more realistic grasp of events than the Soviet leader. The Polish Pope John Paul II, Lech Wałęsa, the workers' leader who defeated the workers' state, Václav Havel, the playwright/philosopher who turned himself into a man of action, and the hard-nosed East German despot Erich Honecker all knew communism was doomed if it was pushed in the right way. As this was the first fully televised revolution in history they became familiar faces. Television had a powerful effect in this drama. When people in Prague saw the Berlin Wall come down, they began to believe they too could overthrow their rulers. Ten days later they did. Nicolae Ceaușescu lost power the moment his face was seen on Romanian television looking confused, then petrified and finally weak as crowds booed him at a Bucharest rally. Four days later he was dead.

East Europeans liberated themselves, but the West played a vital part. The United States 'won' the Cold War and victors tend to write history. The classic narrative is that the toughness of Ronald Reagan brought down the evil empire of the Soviet Union. But Reagan was misunderstood. It was forty years of Western 'containment' that weakened the Soviet Union, and Reagan made no progress whatsoever in his first four years. It was only after Gorbachev emerged and Reagan tried a new, more conciliatory approach that a process began which ended the Cold War. Reagan was admirable in many ways, as this story will I hope show. But his cheerleaders praise him for the wrong things. That is less of an irony than the fate of his successor, George H.W. Bush, a cautious, moderate and sensible man. He valued 'global stability' as one of his primary aims. During periods of 1989, when revolutions were happening so fast, he feared the globe might become seriously unstable. He had been a Cold Warrior in his time and a former head of the CIA. He was leader of the Free World. As documents now show, as well as interviews with his aides, there were times in the middle of the year during which he tried desperately to keep Communist governments in power when he felt that Eastern Europe might be careering out of control.

A word on geography and terminology. This story is about the fall of what the Soviet Union called its 'outer empire' – the six countries that comprised, under the USSR's tutelage, the Warsaw Pact. They are very different places with vastly contrasting histories, cultures, religions and experiences. In the past they had as many antagonisms as alliances. I have not attempted to lump them together to invent a monolithic

whole. But one thing they shared historically is that for forty-five years they were joined together, effectively under one ruler. It made sense to stick with the Warsaw Pact countries because they, in the 1989 story, formed a discrete whole. Nor have I covered Yugoslavia, which had begun its agonising death throes in 1989 but was not part of the Soviet sphere. That tragedy requires a book of its own.

Throughout this narrative I have used the terms Central Europe or Eastern Europe interchangeably, and I realise that is a liberty. I do not wish to tread on toes. Entire books have been written about the 'meaning' of Central Europe as an idea and as a place, where it ends and Eastern Europe begins. I intend them to mean the same thing, purely to avoid repetition of the same phrase too often. Similarly with Soviet Union, the USSR and Russia. Obviously I know 'Russian' is not the same as 'Soviet'. I use them loosely solely in the interest of style.

As a journalist in the 1980s I covered many of the events described in this book. It was more than just a story for me. My family had fled Hungary and, a tiny child, I was a refugee from 'behind the Iron Curtain'. From my earliest memories people around me were speaking as though the all-powerful Soviet empire which had transformed our lives would be there for ever. It turned out to be far weaker than everybody supposed. I am lucky that I was there at some of the crucial points as it fell, amid the excitement and drama that I describe here.

London, December 2008.