1989!

Timothy Garton Ash

1989: The Struggle to Create Post–Cold War Europe  
by Mary Elise Sarotte  
Princeton University Press, 321 pp., $29.95

Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment  
by Stephen Kotkin, with a contribution by Jan T. Gross  
Modern Library, 197 pp., $24.00

Der Vorhang Geht Auf: Das Ende der Diktaturen in Osteuropa  
by György Dalos  
Munich: C.H. Beck, 272 pp., €19.90

The Year That Changed the World: The Untold Story Behind the Fall of the Berlin Wall  
by Michael Meyer  
Scribner, 255 pp., $26.00

Histoire secrète de la chute du mur de Berlin  
by Michel Meyer  
Paris: Odile Jacob, 348 pp., €21.00 (paper)

Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire  
by Victor Sebestyen  
Pantheon, 451 pp., $30.00

The Fall of the Berlin Wall: The Revolutionary Legacy of 1989  
edited by Jeffrey A. Engel  
Oxford University Press, 186 pp., $27.95

There Is No Freedom Without Bread! 1989 and the Civil War That Brought Down Communism  
by Constantine Pleshakov  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 289 pp., $26.00

Tear Down This Wall: A City, a President, and the Speech That Ended the Cold War  
by Romesh Ratnesar  
Simon and Schuster, 240 pp., $27.00
Anti-government demonstrators in Wenceslas Square, Prague, November 20, 1989
Unsurprisingly, the twentieth anniversary of 1989 has added to an already groaning shelf of books on the year that ended the short twentieth century. If we extend “1989” to include the unification of Germany and disunification of the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, we should more accurately say the three years that ended the century. The anniversary books include retrospective journalistic chronicles, with some vivid personal glimpses and striking details (Victor Sebestyen, György Dalos, Michael Meyer, and Michel Meyer), spirited essays in historical interpretation (Stephen Kotkin and Constantine Pleshakov), and original scholarly work drawing on archival sources as well as oral history (Mary Elise Sarotte and the volume edited by Jeffrey Engel). I cannot review them individually. Most add something to our knowledge; some add quite a lot. It is no criticism of any of these authors to say that I come away dreaming of another book: the global, synthetic history of 1989 that remains to be written.

1.

Over these twenty years, the most interesting new findings have come from Soviet, American, and German archives, and, to a lesser extent, from East European, British, and French ones. They throw light mainly on the high politics of 1989–1991. Thus, for example, we find that the Soviet Politburo did not even discuss Germany on November 9, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall would come down, but instead heard a panicky report from Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov about preparations for secession in the Baltic states and their possible effects in Ukraine and Russia. “I smell an overall collapse,” said Ryzhkov.

It is remarkable to read the fulsome welcome Mikhail Gorbachev’s adviser Anatoly Chernyaev gives in his diary on November 10 to the fall of the Berlin Wall: “This is what Gorbachev has done…. He has sensed the pace of history and helped history to find a natural channel.” And it is shaming, for an Englishman, to learn how shamelessly Margaret Thatcher seems to have betrayed her public promises to Germany. “The words written in the NATO communique may sound different, but disregard them,” she apparently told Gorbachev in September 1989, according to a note of their conversation prepared by Chernyaev. “We do not want the unification of Germany.” (Sarotte also obtained the British record of this conversation, using Britain’s Freedom of Information Act. She notes that “it did not contain these comments, but it was redacted.”)

So, in a classic Rankean advance of historical scholarship, we know more than we did at the time about these traditionally documented areas of high politics. By contrast, we have learned little new about the causes and social dynamics of the mass, popular actions that actually gave 1989 a claim to be a revolution, or chain of revolutions.

I spent many hours of my life standing in those crowds, in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague; their behavior was both inspiring and mysterious. What had moved these individual men and women to come out on the streets, especially in the early days, when it was not self-evidently safe to do so? What swayed them as a crowd? Who, in Prague, was the first to take a key ring out of his or her pocket, hold the keys aloft, and shake them—an action that, copied by 300,000 people, produced the
most amazing sound, like massed Chinese bells?

Historians such as George Rudé, with his pioneering study of the crowd in the French Revolution, E.P. Thompson, and Eric Hobsbawm have attempted to understand the underlying dynamics of popular protest in earlier periods. It is surely time for contemporary historians, with better sources at their disposal (hours of television, video, and radio footage, for example), to take up the challenge of trying to analyze 1989 from below, and not merely from above.

Every writer on 1989 wrestles with an almost unavoidable human proclivity that psychologists have christened “hindsight bias”—the tendency, that is, to regard actual historical outcomes as more probable than alternatives that seemed real at the time (for example, a Tiananmen-style crackdown in Central Europe). What actually happened looks as if it somehow had to happen. Henri Bergson talked of “the illusions of retrospective determinism.” Explanations are then offered for what happened. As one scholar commented a few years after 1989: no one foresaw this, but everyone could explain it afterward. Reading these books, I was again reminded of the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski’s “law of the infinite cornucopia,” which states that an infinite number of explanations can be found for any given event.

A great virtue of Mary Elise Sarotte’s 1989 is that she makes the problem of hindsight bias explicit, and systematically explores the roads not taken. She reminds us, for example, how close East Germany may have come to bloodshed in Leipzig on October 9, 1989: the authorities mobilized a force of eight thousand men, including police, soldiers, and Stasi; hospitals were told to prepare beds for possible victims. And she looks at the diplomatic models that were mooted but not executed in the shaping of a new European order in 1990, including that of a pan-European security system built around the continued existence of two separate German states.

Every writer has a professional, geographical, or disciplinary bent. Journalists, politicians, diplomats, historians, political scientists, transitologists, scholars of social movements, economists, experts in security studies, civil resistance, and international relations—all come to 1989 with their own particular experiences, methods, comparative frames of reference, and jargon. Often, they end up saying much the same thing in different ways.

Success has many fathers, and everyone has a favorite. Poles and Catholics like to highlight the role of the Polish pope, particularly in his inspiring visits to Poland in 1979, 1983, and 1987. Germans and Hungarians single out the contribution of Hungarian reform communists who opened the Iron Curtain and let East Germans escape through it. (Michael Meyer, in a book full of vivid personal recollections of events he witnessed as a Newsweek correspondent, calls this the “untold story” of 1989; well, in English perhaps, but in German it has been often told.) Russianists usually give the largest credit to Gorbachev. Germans on the left make the pitch for their version of détente, known as Ostpolitik; Americans on the right make it for Ronald Reagan. (Romesh Ratnesar subtitles his dispensable book on Reagan’s 1987 “tear down this wall” speech in Berlin “A City, a President, and the Speech That Ended the Cold War.”)

There is nothing wrong with such a plurality of perspectives. Each illumines a different part of
the elephant, or views the whole beast from a different angle. But whenever an author seizes on a single element and says this is the explanation, the key, you know he is wrong.

Regrettably, Stephen Kotkin, a celebrated historian of the Soviet Union, falls into this trap when he turns his attention to countries he knows less well. Uncivil Society contains a lot of meaty, interesting historical explanation of communism’s failure, but it is spoiled by a stridently revisionist argument that 1989 was, as the book’s subtitle suggests, little more than an “implosion of the communist establishment.” This establishment of the party-state, or “uncivil society” (by contrast with what he identifies as the imagined or idealized “civil society” celebrated by dissident and Western intellectuals at the time), “brought down its own system.” Except in Poland, “the focus on the opposition falls into the realm of fiction.”

His polemic peaks in this line: “The GDR [East Germany] was a Ponzi scheme that fell in a bank run.” Now this statement might do as a provocation in the classroom; as a serious assertion in a book it is little short of ludicrous. True, thanks to exhaustive research by historians such as Andre Steiner and Jeffrey Kopstein, we now have a clear understanding of the scale of the GDR’s hard currency debt, and the impact this had on the communist leadership in the autumn of 1989. On becoming party leader in succession to Erich Honecker, who had concealed the depth of the problem from most of his colleagues—and in some sense perhaps even from himself—Egon Krenz asked for an honest report on the country’s economic position. At the end of October, he was told that the GDR was “dependent to the greatest possible extent on capitalistic credit.” But a state is not a bank, let alone a Ponzi scheme. States can live for long periods with large debt burdens. States do not simply “go bankrupt.”

And the GDR was a particular kind of state: it was the Soviet Zone of Occupation turned into a satellite of the Soviet Union. So long as that nuclear-armed superpower was prepared to bear the burden of its satellite states, that state could have continued to exist. But Mikhail Gorbachev and his advisers reckoned that their best chance of modernizing the Soviet Union lay in large-scale economic cooperation with the other Germany—the Federal Republic—and other Western partners. Gorbachev felt it was not worth risking that prospect by supporting repression in the GDR. If he, or a different Soviet leader, had made a different call, the GDR could have survived for many years—as a miserable, debt-ridden, crisis-torn country on the front line of a miserable, crisis-torn empire, to be sure, but that would not be the first such case in history.

The metaphor of the bank run, to which Kotkin often returns, shows what else is defective in his thesis. In a bank run, a mass of individuals, acting in panic, in a wholly uncoordinated fashion, run to a bank to get their personal deposits back. They have no other purpose. They have no organization. They articulate no vision of a better bank, let alone of a different banking system in an alternative polity. This is apparently what Kotkin wants to argue. Always excepting the Polish case, he sees in the crowds in the streets in 1989 only “social mobilization absent corresponding societal organization.”

And so, referring to the rapid development of Czechoslovakia’s “Velvet Revolution” through mass
demonstrations to a nationwide general strike, he writes, “None of this was inspired or led by dissidents or Civic Forum, which was abolished not long after 1989.” So the general strike somehow called itself. When 300,000 people on Wenceslas Square chanted ” Havel na hrad! “—“Havel to the Castle!”—this did not mean that Havel’s biography, personality, or highly visible leadership had anything whatever to do with it. For this was just another “implosion” of a communist establishment. To anyone who was there, or who simply reads the careful accounts by Czech and Western historians who have studied the Velvet Revolution in detail, this claim is as untenable as the one about the Ponzi scheme. This is revisionism on stilts.

The point about such moments of popular mobilization and civil resistance is that, given certain preexisting conditions (including what may be tiny opposition groups and isolated political prisoners like Havel or Aung San Suu Kyi), forms of societal organization such as Civic Forum—improvised, often chaotic, but nonetheless definitely organization—can emerge with extraordinary speed. This is a phenomenon that historians of 1989 should study more deeply, not deny. To claim that popular and opposition agency in East-Central Europe had nothing to do with the outcome is as absurd as it would be to claim that “the people” alone toppled communism and a nuclear-armed empire. As with all historical processes, agency and structure must be understood in a complex interplay.
In truth, the essence of 1989 lies in the multiple interactions not merely of a single society and party-state, but of many societies and states, in a series of interconnected three-dimensional chess games. While the French Revolution of 1789 always had foreign dimensions and repercussions, and became an international event with the revolutionary wars, it originated as a domestic development in one large country. The European revolution of 1989 was, from the outset, an international event—and by international I mean not just the diplomatic relations between states but also the interactions of both states and societies across borders. So the lines of causation include the influence of individual states on their own societies, societies on their own states, states on other states, societies on other societies, states on other societies (for example, Gorbachev’s direct impact on East-Central Europeans), and societies on other states (for example, the knock-on effect on the Soviet Union of popular protest in East-Central Europe). These portmanteau notions of state and society have themselves to be disaggregated into groups, factions, and individuals, including unique actors such as Pope John Paul II.

The end of communism in Europe brought the most paradoxical realization of a communist dream. Poland in 1980–1981 saw a workers’ revolution—but it was against a so-called workers’ state. Communists dreamed of proletarian internationalism spreading revolution from country to country; in 1989–1991, revolution did finally spread from country to country, with the effect of dismantling communism. Yet the story is as much one of unintended consequences as it is of deliberate actions—let alone of historical necessity.

So what happened in 1989 can only be understood on the basis of a scrupulous, detailed chronological reconstruction of intended and unintended effects, in multiple directions on multiple stages, day by day, and sometimes—as on the evening of November 9 in Berlin—minute by minute. The reporting or misreporting of events, especially by television, is itself a vital part of the causal chain. When a trusted, avuncular presenter on the 10:30 PM West German television news declared that “the gates in the Wall are wide open” they were not yet wide open; but this report helped to make them so, since it increased the flood of East Berliners (who watched and were more inclined to believe West German television) hoping to get through the frontier crossings to the West, and the crowds of West Berliners coming to greet them on the other side. An erroneous report on Radio Free Europe that a student called Martin had been killed, in the suppression of the November 17, 1989, student demonstration in Prague, helped to swell the protesting crowds in the first days of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. (In what seems to me the best, and certainly the most amusing, of the retrospective chronicles, György Dalos tells how the student came home the next evening to be told by a somewhat agitated father that he was reportedly dead.)

A model of the kind of fine-grained, multinational analysis that we need is the work of the Harvard scholar Mark Kramer on Soviet–East European relations, so far published only in a series of scholarly articles, research papers, and book chapters. Basing his work on extensive digging in Soviet and East European archives, plus a wide range of published sources, Kramer demonstrates the
full intricacy of the interaction between imperial center and periphery. He concludes that what he calls the “spillover” was mainly from the Soviet Union to Eastern Europe between 1986 and 1988, in both directions in 1989, and then mainly back from Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, as the Baltic states, Ukraine, and eventually Russia itself were emboldened to follow the East-Central European example of self-liberation. If leading academic publishers are not already pursuing Kramer to turn this work into a book, they should start doing so now.

Important though it is, the Soviet–East European interaction is only part of a wider international setting. During the first half of 1989, the new US administration of George H.W. Bush was extremely reticent in its response both to Gorbachev and to the changes being pushed forward by a combination of reform communists and dissidents in Poland and Hungary. What we have learned from the Soviet and East European archives confirms that Washington’s assessment was, in fact, far too skeptical. (In one of several excellent scholarly essays in the volume edited by Jeffrey Engel, Melvyn P. Leffler notes how then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney suggested that Gorbachev’s policies “may be a temporary aberration in the behavior of our foremost adversary.”) Nor did Bush set much store by bearded dissidents who looked like something out of Berkeley in the 1960s. Victor Sebestyen, in a book full of sharp snapshots and crisp narrative, has a well-sourced account of the President meeting with the leading Hungarian dissident János Kis in Budapest in July 1989, and subsequently telling aides, “These really aren’t the right guys to be running the place.” Much better to stick with a preppy reform communist.

Yet even though Washington’s cautious attitude partly resulted from a misassessment, this was actually the best possible position it could have taken. This time around, unlike in 1956, no one in Moscow could suggest with even a jot of plausibility that the United States was stirring the cauldron in Eastern Europe. On the contrary, Bush personally urged General Wojciech Jaruzelski to run for Polish president, as a guarantor of stability, and he was obsessed with doing nothing that could derail Gorbachev. Sarotte suggests that American restraint made it easier for the Soviet Union, too, to step back and let events unfold on the ground in East-Central Europe. With some exaggeration, one might say that Washington got it right because it got it wrong.

To give credit where it is due: in the last months of 1989, especially after the fall of the Wall, and throughout 1990, this initial superabundance of caution turned into a combination of entirely deliberate restraint (“don’t dance on the Wall!” was the injunction heard in the corridors of the White House and the State Department) and some quite impressive statecraft in support of Helmut Kohl’s drive for German unification on Western terms. But for the decisive nine months, from the beginning of Poland’s roundtable talks in February to the fall of the Wall in November, the United States’ contribution lay mainly in what it did not do.

That is even more true of the other superpower. Kramer argues that at several moments Gorbachev did quietly nudge East European communist leaders in the direction of bolder change. But for the most part, his crucial contribution was to accept changes happening at the periphery of the Soviet Union’s outer empire, rather than attempting to slow down or reverse them.
When Helmut Kohl asked him what he thought of the Hungarians’ decision to open the Iron Curtain to Austria, he replied, “The Hungarians are a good people.” Another telling example comes from Poland in August 1989, at a moment when the Solidarity adviser Tadeusz Mazowiecki was trying to form a government led and shaped by non-communists. The last leader of Poland’s communist party, Mieczysław Rakowski, records in his diary a telephone conversation with Gorbachev: “When I [Rakowski] said that one could not alter the situation with the help of a state of emergency, G. said that a new variant of martial law [stan wojenny, the Polish term for the martial law imposed by General Jaruzelski in December 1981] is impossible and, however wearisome it would be, we would have to get out of this situation without resorting to such means.” And the day after the unplanned, spontaneous popular breaching of the Berlin Wall, the last leader of East Germany’s communist party, Egon Krenz, received a message from Gorbachev, via the Soviet ambassador to East Berlin. As Krenz recalls it, the Soviet leader congratulated him on a “courageous step.” He was, as the German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger observed, an example of a new kind of hero: the hero of retreat.

Yet Gorbachev’s laid-back attitude was based on a much deeper misapprehension than Bush’s. He mistakenly believed such changes would stop at the frontier of the Soviet Union, which he saw as a country, not an internal empire. Instead, as Kramer shows, the revolutionary changes in East-Central Europe contributed directly to the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself. Robert Conquest, the historian of the Soviet Great Terror and Ukrainian famine, asked Gorbachev many years later whether, if he had known where it would all lead, he would have done the same again. He replied: “Probably not.”

It is perhaps a characteristic of superpowers that they think they make history. Big events must surely be made by big powers. Yet in the nine months that gave birth to a new world, from February to November 1989, the United States and the Soviet Union were largely passive midwives. They made history by what they did not do. And both giants stood back partly because they underestimated the significance of things being done by little people in little countries.

China also plays an important part. The Tiananmen Square massacre occurred on the very day of Poland’s breakthrough in a semifree election, June 4, 1989. I will never forget seeing on a television screen in the makeshift offices of the Polish opposition daily Gazeta Wyborcza, amid the excitement of Poland’s election day, the first footage of dead or wounded Chinese protesters being carried off Tiananmen Square. “Tiananmen” happened in Europe, too, in the sense that both opposition and reform communist leaders saw what could happen if it came to a violent confrontation, and redoubled their efforts to avoid it.

To put it another way, the fact that Tiananmen happened in China is one of the reasons it did not happen in Europe. However, an influence then flowed back in the other direction: from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to China. As David Shambaugh and others have documented, the Chinese Communist Party systematically studied the lessons of the collapse of communism in Europe, to make sure it did not happen to them. Today’s China is a result of that learning process.

The year 1989 was one of the best in European history. Indeed, I am hard pushed to think of a better
one. It was also a year in which the world looked to Europe—specifically to Central Europe, and, at the pivotal moment, to Berlin. World history—using the term in a quasi-Hegelian sense—was made in the heart of the old continent, just down the road from Hegel’s old university, now called the Humboldt University. Twenty years later, I am tempted to speculate (while continuing to work with other Europeans in an endeavor to prove this hunch wrong) that this may also have been the last occasion—at least for a very long time—when world history was made in Europe. Today, world history is being made elsewhere. There is now a Café Weltgeist at the Humboldt University, but the Weltgeist itself has moved on. Of Europe’s long, starring role on the world stage, future generations may yet say: nothing became her like the leaving of it.

In any case, the longer-term consequences of 1 989 are only now beginning to emerge. They, too, belong in the synthetic global history of 1989 that, partly for this reason, could not have been written sooner. But after two decades, the time has come for a brilliant young historian—at home in many languages; capable of empathizing both with powerholders and with so-called ordinary people; a writer of distinction; tenured, but with few teaching obligations; well-funded for extensive research on several continents; Stakhanovite in work habits; monastic in private life—to start writing this necessary, almost impossible masterpiece: a kind of Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk of modern history. With luck, he or she should have it ready for the thirtieth anniversary, in 2019.

—This is the first of two articles. A sequel will look at the post-1989 history and prospects of “velvet revolution.”


2 The title page says "Stephen Kotkin, with a contribution by Jan T. Gross," and the preface says the book originated in a Princeton seminar co-taught by the authors, but nowhere specifies the exact nature of Gross's "contribution." Since Gross is an outstanding historian of modern Poland, I am assuming that this contribution came particularly in the chapter on Poland, which suffers least from the weakness I identify below.

3 Difficult, of course, if most of East Germany’s people had escaped to the West via Hungary; but this counter-factual obviously involves Moscow instructing other satellite states, including Hungary, to keep the Iron Curtain closed for citizens of the GDR, as they had for decades before.

4 In an endnote, Kotkin says that "the priceless 'bank run' metaphor was elaborated for the Soviet case by Steven L. Solnick, Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Communist Institutions (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)." But Solnick uses it to describe the behavior of officials stealing from the state. "Unlike a bank run," Solnick writes, "the defecting officials were not depositors claiming their rightful assets, but employees of the state appropriating state assets." While there were elements of this "privatisation of the nomenklatura" during the transition in East-Central Europe, such behavior does not begin to explain what happened in East Germany or Czechoslovakia in the autumn of 1989. Illuminating in Solnick's analysis of the Soviet Union, the metaphor is simply misapplied to East-Central Europe.

5 An appropriately detailed account is Hans-Hermann Hertle, Der Fall der Mauer: die unbeabsichtigte Selbstauflösung des SED-Staates (Second edition, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1999). The same author's documentary television program When the Wall Came Tumbling Down: 50 Hours That Changed the World (English edition: Icestorm International, 1999) is well worth watching.

6 The most important set of articles is his "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union," published in three parts in the Journal of Cold War History, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 2003); Vol. 6, No. 4 (Fall 2004); Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 2007). But see also his research reports published by the Cold War International History Project, and his chapter in Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present; edited by Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash. (Oxford University Press, 2009).