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**Mark Kramer. "The Demise of the Soviet Bloc." *The Journal of Modern History* 83:4 (December 2011): 788-854.**

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Review by **Charles Gati**, The Johns Hopkins University

The events of 1989 were a surprising and heady time, even for those who followed Soviet politics closely. It is hard to remember that in the early eighties there was increased tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, indicating that Moscow was unlikely to loosen the reins on the Warsaw Pact countries. Moreover, the policies of the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, initially showed considerable continuity with those of his predecessors. Few could have predicted the events of 1989 -- the coming transformation of the Soviet bloc in Central and Eastern Europe, or the rate at which the bloc dissolved, or how peacefully it occurred. As late as January of 1989, East German leader Erich Honecker said that "the [Berlin] Wall will be standing in 50 and even in 100 years, if the reasons for it are not yet removed" (846). But "[e]vents that would have been unthinkable even a year or two earlier suddenly happened in rapid succession: a peaceful revolution from below in East Germany, the opening and gradual dismantling of the Berlin wall, popular unrest and the downfall of Todor Zhivkov in Bulgaria, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and violent upheaval and the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu in Romania" (839).

Mark Kramer details how this astounding transformation was possible in such a short time. His important conclusion is this: "What changed in 1989, compared to earlier crises in Eastern Europe, was not the depth of popular opposition to the Soviet-backed regimes. Instead, what changed was the whole thrust of Soviet policy in the region... Admirable as the protesters were, none of what they achieved would have been possible without the drastic changes in Moscow that allowed the events to occur" (788).

After a brief examination of the ways in which Gorbachev's early policies represented a continuation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, Kramer offers an in-depth look at the shifts in policy-making within the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1988 and 1989, and how these shifts created greater political space for protestors in Eastern and Central

Europe. He deals with several critical junctures—the CPSU’s response to Tiananmen, the relationship with the various Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, the Hungarian decision to allow East Germany refugees to travel through to Austria, and the fall of the Berlin wall—that demonstrate how Gorbachev’s responses to these new developments enabled the rapid transformation which had seemed so improbable only years before. Paradoxically, Gorbachev believed that political accommodation was necessary in order to prevent violent upheaval and hold together the Soviet bloc, but in point of fact his policies contributed to the disintegration of the bloc.

The article traces how, from the time he came to power in 1985 through 1987, Gorbachev gave no indication that the Soviet Union would hesitate in countering threats to Communist rule in Europe. He extended the Warsaw Treaty by thirty years, and he affirmed the Brezhnev Doctrine, the post-1968 statements that justified the invasion of Czechoslovakia by “linking the fate of every Communist country with the fate of all other Communist countries” (790). Kramer refutes Gorbachev’s *ex post facto* claim that he had warned the Eastern European governments early on that the Soviet Union would no longer aid them in combating civil unrest. Kramer points to a series of Gorbachev-led personnel changes within the CPSU that occurred years later -- enabling the policy shift in 1988/1989 (most notably the replacement of Konstantin Rusakov by Georgii Shakhnazarov). In 1988, Gorbachev was able to consolidate political power by replacing CPSU Politburo and Central Committee members who had become increasingly anxious about the way he was approaching significant issues, including relations with the bloc.

A primary driver of reform by then was Gorbachev’s growing awareness that his early policy of *uskorenie* or acceleration, improving the economy by efficiency gains, did not go far enough toward revitalizing the flagging Soviet economy. “Gorbachev increasingly emphasized political reforms to help mobilize popular support for his programs, to expose corrupt and incompetent officials, to undercut bureaucratic resistance to economic decentralization, and to yield more accurate economic and social data” (802). This heavy slate of domestic reforms necessitated spending cuts in other areas, and in December, 1988, while speaking at the United Nations, Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union would dramatically reduce its troops and tanks in Eastern Europe. His declaration came as a surprise; East Germany’s Honecker, among others, was “stunned and dismayed” (807).

Kramer explains that the announcement signaled the abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine, and the new question was whether Gorbachev could avoid the “Khrushchev Dilemma” -- how to proceed with the processes of change without sparking large scale uprisings such as the revolts in Hungary in 1956 or East Germany in 1953. Here, Gorbachev found himself caught in the proverbial hard place between Scylla and Charybdis. In the face of violent uprisings, a crackdown would have had detrimental consequences for his program of reform as well as East-West relations. However, a failure to act would prompt hard-line critics within the CPSU leadership to accuse him “of

recklessness and betrayal, and [these leaders] would have done their best to remove him from power” (810).

In the next section, Kramer offers three examples which illustrate Gorbachev’s abhorrence at the idea of resorting to violent military action either in Eastern Europe or in the Soviet Union itself. Gorbachev immediately condemned the April 1989 crackdown in Tbilisi, which was implemented without his approval or foreknowledge. The Soviet Union declined to respond to the June re-internment of the leader of the 1956 revolt, former Hungarian Prime Minister Imre Nagy, an event accompanied by “emotional and often fiery speeches (including some with a distinctly anti-Soviet edge)” (818), and even referred to the reburial as a “‘humane act’ undertaken ‘in the spirit of national reconciliation.’” (819). Kramer’s examination of Gorbachev’s reaction to the Tiananmen Square massacre is particularly telling. Gorbachev was reportedly “‘shocked,’ ‘nearly speechless,’ and ‘shaken’” (824) when he learned about “the harshness of the crackdown in China and the high death toll coming so soon after his visit.” (824) He subsequently sought to differentiate between his approach and that of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): “We deplore that it turned out that way. We are in favor of having the most acute problems solved solely through political dialogue between the authorities and the people” (825).

One thorn in Gorbachev’s side was the opposition of hard-line East German, Czechoslovak, and Romanian leaders to his support for reform and his de facto policy of military nonintervention. These leaders feared that Gorbachev’s policies undermined their hold to power, and even believed that violent protest would be desirable because it offered a pretext for crackdown. They felt particularly threatened by the rise of the Solidarity labor union movement in Poland and by the Hungarian decision to allow East German refugees to pass through Hungary to Austria. By contrast, Gorbachev asserted that Poland had “the ‘absolute right to choose its own social system,’ including the option of a non-Communist government” and that “any solution adopted by our Polish friends will be acceptable to us.” (828) In what Kramer describes as “an ironic reversal of Romania’s position in 1968,” (829), Romanian leaders encouraged other Warsaw Pact member countries to send troops to Poland to defend the Communist regime there.

The September 1989 decision by Hungary to allow East German refugees into Austria, which was contiguous with West Germany was a move that would come to signify the end of the Iron Curtain. Although pressure for this decision had been building for a long time as conditions within refugee camps in Hungary deteriorated that summer, Honecker saw it as a slap in the face because it enabled the largest outflow of East Germans into West Germany since the erection of the Berlin Wall. Tensions mounted, and Honecker attempted to convene an emergency session of the Warsaw Pact to force the return of these refugees to East Germany. The Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesperson’s sole comment was that the Hungarian decision did not “affect us [in the USSR] directly,” (836) hammering a nail in the Brezhnev Doctrine’s coffin. While Honecker sought a meeting with Gorbachev, the Soviet leader was greeted in East Germany by protestors who “held

up in signs in Russian exclaiming ‘Gorby, you are our only hope!’” (840). Gorbachev found Honecker oblivious to the signs of change and unrest in East Germany, and pressed for a change in leadership.

Kramer also deals with the opening of the Berlin Wall, which highlights “the role of chance and contingency” in history (843). The East German leaders were ready to approve some loosening of travel restrictions between East and West Germany for permanent travelers, but the Politburo member announcing this change had not had time to be properly briefed and ignored this distinction, saying instead that the loosening applied to all travelers and that the measure was immediately effective. This television announcement led people to stream to and over the Wall. The subsequent reunification of East and West Germany was one of Gorbachev’s great successes -- and failures. Gorbachev had hoped that by reducing the scope of Soviet domination over the region, he could ultimately strengthen the Soviet bloc. Instead, the bloc collapsed.

This article offers a unique and indeed brilliant examination of the changes in Gorbachev’s policies toward the Soviet bloc during the late 1980s. Kramer makes use of archival research in almost a dozen languages. Until he expands on this study and publishes his findings in a book-length manuscript, this article will remain the single most thorough analysis of the demise of the Soviet bloc – a geopolitical earthquake from which neither Russia nor its neighbors in the Soviet Union and in Central and Eastern Europe have yet recovered.

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