



Mark Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union”, Parts I-III, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vols. 5(4), 6(4), and 7(1).

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“Who Gave You the Right to Mock a Great Power Like the Soviet Union?”

How Does Freedom Spread?

For those who still believe that the study of politics means the study of the thoughts and actions of living, breathing human beings and their effects on how societies and governments organize—and sometimes, disorganize—themselves, Mark Kramer’s three-part study of the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe is an example of the very best of its kind, and is one of the best works on the subject written since the end of the Cold War.

Kramer was not content simply to accept broad generalities that liberalization in Eastern Europe somehow led to the acceleration of the Soviet collapse, nor did he rely on arid theoretical constructs that drained the subject of human agency and drama. (My favorite of these latter type of studies was the rational choice exercise that appeared in a major journal some years ago that found that people were more likely to rebel if they felt they were less likely to be punished for it—which apparently was a bold refutation of the conventional wisdom that people normally prefer to rebel when it means certain death. Yet another landmark political science exercise in the elegant rediscovery of the obvious.)

Instead, Kramer asked the hard question: how *exactly* does liberalization occur, and how does liberalization in one place lead to liberalization in another? What are the mechanisms—and here, one may choose among metaphors—that lead to the spread, spillover, metastasis, of liberty? Relying on an array of sources, including open materials, formerly classified Soviet and Warsaw Pact documents, and first-person interviews, Kramer shows the threads that link events in one place to outcomes in another, and his three-part series makes for fascinating and important reading not only for specialists in Cold War history and Eastern European politics, but for students of political science in general and of democratization in particular. Indeed, many of the scholars of the 1990s who attempted to import ill-fitting models of democratization from other regions, particularly Latin America, would be well-advised to read Kramer’s work and to reconsider their own models and hypotheses.

In Part I, Kramer details how the sweeping reforms that took place in the USSR led to a “spillover” effect in Eastern Europe. (However, at the outset, he looks ahead and points out that this effect will become “bidirectional,” and will spill over *back* into the USSR.) In Parts II and III, he examines this reverse spillover, a kind of ideological “blowback” of liberalization into the USSR, and the debates and recriminations that followed. In the process, Kramer not only sheds light on an important theoretical issue, but he also tells a great story, one that begins with a

massive empire considering the question of reform, and ends with a senior officer of that empire shouting in exasperation at one of its former subjects as he is being unceremoniously booted from its territory: “Who gave you the right to mock a great power like the Soviet Union?”

PART I: The First Wave of Change

Kramer’s story begins in 1988, as he notes that Gorbachev’s thinking on Eastern European affairs showed little in the way of innovation in his first few years after ascending to power in 1985. One criticism that might be made of this section is that the period between 1985 and 1988 is something of a black box in Kramer’s study, which is unfortunate. The struggle for power within the Kremlin is largely missing from this account, although in fairness to Kramer, that was not the subject of his study.

However, 1987 was a pivotal year in Soviet politics, particularly the January 1987 Plenum of the Central Committee, where it was clear that perestroika had been stymied by the kind of conservative elements who would also later oppose the liberalization of policy toward Eastern Europe. Gorbachev’s hand was strengthened as well later in the year when he was able to shake up the Soviet military in the wake of the scandal that followed the embarrassing incident of a young German landing a plane in Red Square, an event that took place as Gorbachev was meeting with the Warsaw Pact allies in Berlin in an attempt to move toward a “defensive” military doctrine in Europe. While Kramer is right to place the start of the liberalization moment in 1988, it would have been helpful had he started his story just a year earlier.

Still, by 1988 Kramer is able to identify five conditions in the USSR that set the stage for Gorbachev’s willingness to loosen control over Eastern Europe. First, Kramer argues that Gorbachev had more effectively consolidated his own power by 1988, which is true, although I would argue that this consolidation was mostly within Party structures, and had not yet extended to the military (with whom Gorbachev, as Kramer will point out in Part III, had to tussle right into 1991). Second, by 1988, Gorbachev had come to believe that economic reform without political reform was fundamentally impossible, both at home and in the socialist bloc. Third, by 1988, Gorbachev was actively in the process of trying to transfer power from ossified and recalcitrant Party structures to State structures, which in theory would be more amenable to reform. Fourth, there was justifiable concern in Moscow that episodes of unrest already visible in the Soviet empire could grow out of control without genuine attempts at reform. And finally, a more relaxed East-West relationship provided latitude for Soviet reformers to argue for loosening control over the socialist countries without opening themselves to charges that the West would take undue advantage of such liberalization.

The problem for Gorbachev was that by taking the path of liberalization at home and abroad, he opened the door to processes he was unlikely to be able to control. (I would argue that this pretty much sums up Gorbachev’s entire career as General Secretary after 1986.) Kramer notes that Gorbachev, in trying to balance reform at home with improved relations abroad, was running the danger of what Kramer calls the “Khrushchev Dilemma;” that is, trying to accept “peaceful domestic change, as in Czechoslovakia in 1968,” while still preventing “widespread anti-Soviet violence from breaking out, as in Hungary in 1956.” (I, 186). But the increasing likelihood of facing this dilemma was of Gorbachev’s own making, as Kramer explains:

Gorbachev's overriding objective was to avoid the Khrushchev Dilemma altogether. He could not afford to be confronted by a violent uprising in one of the key East European countries. Only by forestalling such a disastrous turn of events would he have any hope of moving ahead with his reform program. The problem, however, was that his very policies, by unleashing centrifugal forces within the Eastern bloc, had already made it *more* likely that a violent rebellion would occur. [emphasis original] (I, 187)

But why was there no fear (or not *enough* fear) in Eastern Europe of a Soviet military intervention to put a stop to such rebellions? The answer to this question is key to understanding the events of the period.

Kramer does an excellent job of showing how Gorbachev, from the very start, had boxed himself in regarding the use of force on both ideological and practical grounds. By declaring an intention to revitalize socialism, and thus in effect to re-legitimize it as a choice made by the peoples of the USSR and Eastern Europe, he could not then backtrack and simply impose it on the points of Soviet bayonets. But in any case, he realized from a pragmatic point of view that a military solution to ideological and political unruliness in Eastern Europe would undermine his attempts at reform at home, and play right into the hands of opponents who claimed that such reforms were nothing but an invitation to chaos (to say nothing of intimidating the very social forces that Gorbachev was hoping to energize and embolden).

Gorbachev's solution, then, was not to *stall* events in Eastern Europe, but actually to *hasten* them. He and his advisors hoped, Kramer writes, that "by drastically modifying the region's political complexion, they could defuse the pressures that had given rise to violent internal crises in the past." (I, 188) The problem, of course, is that some of the most bullheaded opponents of reform in the Warsaw Pact were the Party structures and leadership in those nations, particularly the GDR, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, and this necessitated a more active Soviet role in promoting reform. True reform would not only require tacit Soviet toleration of changes in Eastern Europe, but actual Soviet initiation and support of such changes. In a sense, Gorbachev and his team were hoping to make change a *fait accompli* in the region, and thus be able to turn to domestic reform with a stronger hand, having snuffed out the danger of violent revolution on the one hand while having created examples of reformed regimes (who would also be allies of his efforts) on the other.

An interesting question that arises in this early period is whether Gorbachev, to put it bluntly, really understood what he was doing. Kramer writes that Gorbachev "had not intended to undermine the socialist bloc and did not foresee that the changes he initiated would lead to the rapid demise of Communism in Eastern Europe..." (I, 191). This is almost certainly true (although as others have pointed out, Gorbachev himself has shown a certain amount of slipperiness and mendacity on this and many other issues related to his tenure as Soviet leader). Nonetheless, as Kramer points out, "his basic approach to Soviet-East European relations proved remarkably successful in averting the Khrushchev Dilemma," and in this early period that may have been the best that could be hoped for. (I, 191).

Poland was an important test case in this period, and the Gorbachev regime not only did not stand in the way of the decline of the Polish communists, but actively encouraged them to take a conciliatory line. In one of the many wonderful vignettes in Kramer's chapters, this led to "an ironic reversal" in the position of the Romanians, who had opposed sending troops to Czechoslovakia in 1968 but now, two decades later, "secretly urged the other Warsaw Pact states to join it in sending troops to Poland to prevent Solidarity from coming to power," which in turn led to the Soviets "lodg[ing] a stern protest with the Romanian authorities." (I, 198)

Kramer claims that the Polish example was "typical" of Gorbachev's policies at the time, in which the USSR would help to "bring about sweeping political change while depriving hardline Communist leaders of the option of violent repression." (I, 200) He suggests as a counterfactual that if Moscow had had as much influence in Romania, and been able to convince the leadership there to take the same approach it was encouraging elsewhere in the socialist bloc, the bloody battles there in 1989 might have been averted. I find this an interesting but unconvincing possibility; Romania was much more of a personalized, almost dynastic regime than those found among the gray bureaucrats of the GDR or Czechoslovakia, and it is hard to imagine Ceausescu knuckling under to Soviet demands for moderation and compromise.

Overall, Kramer believes that Gorbachev's toleration of, and even support for, rapid change in the socialist bloc redounded to his benefit, allowing him and his aides to "point to developments in Eastern Europe as evidence of the [traditional Marxist-Leninist] model's bankruptcy." (I, 202). However, Kramer's follow-on discussion of "direct spillover" inside Soviet borders raises the question of whether this political benefit was worth the eventual cost. "Despite the benefits Gorbachev gained from the disintegration of the bloc," Kramer writes, with no small understatement, "his political fortunes suffered once the lingering remnants of the socialist bloc were formally dissolved." (I, 204)

The Baltic Spillover

The Baltic States were especially vulnerable to the events in Eastern Europe. They had spent the least time as constituent parts of the USSR, they were independent countries within recent memory, and they were in many ways more similar to the nations of Eastern Europe than they were, or ever could be, to the core republics of the USSR. Geographic proximity meant that it was nearly impossible to shut out the news from outside the region. Radio and television waves do not observe borders (as I learned by being able to watch a Finnish broadcast of *Hill Street Blues* from my hotel in Estonia one evening in 1987) and there was no way to insulate these areas of the USSR from the events in neighboring nations.

Here, Gorbachev tried to draw the line, emphasizing that reform in Eastern Europe did not translate into a right of secession for Soviet republics. But why should leaving the socialist commonwealth be so very different from leaving the USSR? Without the threat of Soviet force, it would not take long for the secessionist genie to escape the bottle, and in any case reformers in Eastern Europe were already reaching out (and vice versa) to their counterparts in the Baltic region. In due time activists in the Soviet Baltic republics began to exert influence in governmental structures which were outpacing their sluggish Party counterparts—something Gorbachev had hoped would happen, but certainly not in this way. In a foreshadowing of what

would happen a year later in the USSR, the Lithuanian parliament in 1989 dumped the provision of their own constitution guaranteeing the supremacy of the Communist Party.

At this point, Gorbachev's policies began to descend into vacillation and incompetence, not only because of his Hamlet-like personality (a word used by both Kramer and others close to Gorbachev like Anatolii Chernaev), but also because he unwisely had surrounded himself with a coterie of retrograde ministers, including some who would eventually try to depose him.

In 1990, he allowed Soviet forces to move into Azerbaijan, ostensibly to stop pogroms against ethnic Armenians, but in reality (as Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov later admitted) the object was to crush Azerbaijani separatists as a warning to the other Union republics. While this cowed the Balts for a short time, it did nothing to stop Eastern European support to the Baltic independence movements, and the crackdown was short-lived. Indeed, when Soviet troops finally tried to suppress demonstrators in Lithuania and Latvia in early 1991, protests from other Eastern European nations were key influences on Soviet policies and helped moved Gorbachev back to a more conciliatory stance by spring of that year.

Solidarity and Soviet Workers

Kramer details the various contacts made between Solidarity in particular and other movements in the USSR, particularly in Ukraine. (For some reason, however, the influence of Pope John Paul II is conspicuously absent from any of the sections on Poland.) Particularly interesting is the section on Solidarity and Soviet miners, who Kramer argues would not have had the organizational skills or even the cognitive framework to challenge the Soviet regime without the moral and practical examples of Solidarity and its veterans. "At every stage," Kramer writes, "the Soviet coal strikes in 1989 were influenced by the recent changes in Poland." (I, 230) This is a key link in the causal chain of democratizing "spillover," since the coal strikes of 1989 were a signal moment in the unraveling of Soviet power. Without Gorbachev's attempts to use Eastern Europe for his own political agenda, there would have been no flowering of Solidarity, and Solidarity activists could not have been examples (and even advisors) to their Soviet counterparts, particularly the miners.

To his credit, Kramer is judicious in not claiming too much here. While Soviet leaders soon suspected evidence of nefarious Western involvement and laid much of their trouble with the miners at Solidarity's door, Kramer avers that such complaints "overstated the magnitude of Solidarity's influence on Soviet miners," even though there is "no doubt that the sweeping changes in Poland provided an important backdrop for the rise of a worker's movement in the Soviet Union." (I, 236)

What would be interesting to know, and what is not discussed here, is the degree to which Soviet fears of foreign involvement were true, since there have long been charges that the United States and the Vatican were in fact involved in facilitating Solidarity activity in Poland. Kramer himself in later pages notes that "growing tension between the East European countries and the Soviet intelligence organs was reinforced by the eagerness of the new East European intelligence service to cooperate with the West," but in general, the Western role in this whole process is left largely unexplored. (I, 250) Again, there are only so many pages to work with and Kramer

cannot be faulted too severely for sticking to the subject at hand, but the lack of context in the late Cold War period is noticeable.

The Files Opened: Some Ugly Truths

One section that is sure to discomfit Cold War revisionists is Kramer's description of the chagrin of Soviet and East European intelligence organizations at having their dirty laundry aired after democratic forces opened their secret files:

Suspicious had long existed in the West about the bizarre nature and scale of East German and Soviet activities, but the revelations went even beyond what had been expected, including elaborate support of extreme leftist and neo-Nazi terrorists in West Germany, the provision of paramilitary training and weapons to Arab and Irish terrorist groups, international arms dealing, the subversion of foreign governments, the formation and maintenance of special "murder squads," and the complicity of Stasi officials in Syrian- and Libyan-sponsored terrorist attacks against American soldiers....Czechoslovakia's shipment of a thousand tons of Semtex explosives to Libya (which then transferred the material to terrorists), Hungary's provision of support and shelter to the Middle Eastern terrorist known as Carlos (who was also sheltered by East Germany), Bulgaria's prominent role in drug smuggling and international terrorism, Romania's instigation of the bombing of Radio Free Europe's headquarters in Munich, Czechoslovakia's provision of guerilla training and "special weapons" to Arab terrorists, and Bulgaria's reliance on Soviet "technical support" for the assassination of [dissident] Georgii Markov...(I, 253)

The KGB did what it could to mitigate the damage, including destroying files, reclaiming equipment, and even attempting (with little success) to recruit agents from the intelligence services in the new Eastern European regimes, but these were "hardly sufficient to compensate for the damage that the Soviet agency suffered from the events of 1989 and 1990." (I, 255)

In a particularly perceptive passage, Kramer notes that the changes of 1989 incited a certain degree of Soviet paranoia, particularly in the defense and intelligence communities, that the changes in Eastern Europe were now being used by the West as a weapon against the USSR itself. The presumption of an imminent "threat" from the former Warsaw Pact nations, Kramer writes, "became an excuse for misreading or understating the fissiparous trends *within* the Soviet Union—trends that had no direct (or even indirect) support from the West." (I, 256) This directly contributed to a series of wrong-footed Soviet moves which led, as he argues in Parts II and III, to the collapse of the Soviet regime.

PART II: Spillover to the East

In the first part of his study, Kramer showed how liberalization and reform in the USSR began the process of the disintegration of socialism in Eastern Europe. In the second section, Kramer shows us the next link in the chain of events leading to the overall Soviet collapse, when the changes in Eastern Europe ricocheted back into the Soviet Union itself.

Kramer identifies four major consequences of the events in the Warsaw Pact after 1989: the “discrediting of Marxist-Leninist ideology,” a heightened sense of “vulnerability” on the part of the Soviet regime, the fading potential for the use of force to restore order, and the “demonstration effect” and “contagiousness” of regime change in Eastern Europe. (II, 3)

Although it is common now to refer to the USSR for what it was—an empire—it is crucial to remember that in theory it was supposed to be a commonwealth founded on an idea, an international system bound by common acceptance of ostensibly noble beliefs. Maintaining the illusion that the members of the socialist community in Eastern Europe were joined to the Soviet Union by a shared commitment to an ideology of revolution and liberation after 1945 was crucial to the Soviet identity, a fiction almost as important to Soviet legitimacy as the idea that the various sovietized republics of the former Russian Empire really had voluntarily joined to form a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922.

The myth of the growing “legitimacy” of the Eastern European regimes and the ideology they supposedly defended was so pervasive that it was even believed in the West, where there was no shortage of specialists on Eastern European politics who felt that the regimes of the region had found, in their own way, a kind of workable social contract with their respective peoples. Subjugation to the Soviet center was, apparently, something that could be gotten used to, with the ideology planted by Stalin after the war taking root despite the rather unpleasant manner in which it was imported.

This was all a lie, and as Kramer writes, the revelation of the lie would shock and dishearten Soviet communists (certainly more than their Western apologists) who themselves had come to believe one of the greatest falsehoods of the postwar era:

The massive protests against the East European regimes in 1989, resulting in the abrupt demise of the Soviet bloc, laid bare the fundamental illegitimacy of the Communist systems that had been in place since the 1940s....In the 1970s and 1980s some Western observers argued that the East European regimes had developed enough support and popular legitimacy to sustain themselves in power without Soviet military backing. The events of 1989 thoroughly discredited this argument and exposed the bankruptcy of the Marxist Leninist ideology that underlay the Soviet bloc. (II, 4-5)

This had a “powerful effect on Soviet elites,” who as Kramer points out may have been cynical about aspects of their social system, but still believed in the fundamental tenets of Marxism-Leninism and who sought to reform rather than abandon it, and as a result a certain amount of denial competed with a growing restive confusion among Soviet elites.

I recall, for example, a discussion with a senior political officer in the Strategic Rocket Forces in 1990, who said that he was glad that perestroika had happened, despite all the chaos in the USSR and Eastern Europe, because he believed that it would open the door for Soviet communists to go back and “rediscover the true Lenin and true Leninism,” and to overcome what he considered the deformed Stalinist-Brezhnevist aberration that had landed the Soviet Union in so much trouble in

the first place. The idea that Marxism-Leninism was breathing its last was not only an idea he and his comrades rejected, but one that had not really occurred to them in the first place.

This particular officer admired Gorbachev, and well he should have, since Gorbachev was, as Kramer rightly notes, first among the true believers in hoping against all reality that what was happening was the transformation of a new and enlightened socialism, rather than the death throes of a hopelessly rigid and outmoded ideology whose primary function had been to enforce Soviet rule. “Far from disavowing Communism,” Kramer tells us, “Gorbachev repeatedly averred that he remained faithful to Lenin’s teachings and was seeking only to improve the Communist system.” (II, 6)

How much of this Gorbachev truly believed is unknowable, but what is clear is that those around him in the highest reaches of the Soviet elite were experiencing a level of cognitive dissonance that can only be described as something like a meltdown. (Paul Hollander has written an excellent account of this phenomenon and its role in the Soviet collapse as well.)¹ The testimony of senior leaders, particularly military men like General Dmitrii Volkogonov, provides a detailed map of the road to intellectual collapse, and illuminates the discrete moments that take place in the minds of human beings that are the prerequisite for the fall of a regime. Volkogonov, who ironically was for years in charge of ideological training in the Soviet armed forces, described himself as a “loyal, convinced Communist.”

But when I saw what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989, how could I not realize that so much of what we had been told, so much of what we had believed in, was just a lie? My work on the Stalin biography [published in 1989] moved me away from [ideological] orthodoxy, but the fundamental changes in Eastern Europe made me rethink everything. (II, 8)

Likewise Marshal Sergei Akhromeev, who resigned in protest over Gorbachev’s 1988 UN speech offering unilateral troop reductions, and who would later commit suicide in the wake of the failed 1991 coup—which he supported, although the degree of his involvement remains unclear—told Brent Scowcroft in 1990 that the changes in Eastern Europe had left him “deeply confused.” (II, 9)

Kramer’s depiction of the military (about which more below) reveals the depth of ideological belief in the Soviet officer corps, but the military were not alone in their despondency. Predictably enough, the other group most distraught and beleaguered over the changes in the socialist bloc were the bureaucrats of the Party infrastructure, the functionaries who had devoted their lives to administering and furthering the affairs of the CPSU. Along with the military, the professional Party cadres were among Gorbachev’s most dedicated opponents, and it should have been no surprise in retrospect that the men who attempted to depose the last Soviet leader were perfect representatives of the gray institutions of the military, the security forces, and the bureaucracy. (There could be no better representative of the immobility and ignorance of the entrenched ranks of the Party than the feckless and mediocre Gennady Yanaev who would try to drunkenly step into the role of “Acting President” during the 1991 coup.)

¹ Paul Hollander, *Personal Will and Political Belief* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999).

The Collapse of the Party and the Loss of National Will

Kramer's story takes a slight but important detour, as he explains how Gorbachev sought to outflank the ossified Party structures by transferring more power to state structures that were supposedly more malleable and less allergic to reform (presumably because they were not organically bound to ideology in the way the Party was). With the Party literally crumbling beneath him, Gorbachev made the leap in early 1990 to a newly-created USSR presidency, a desperate attempt to put forward an institution that could take the place of the now-discredited CPSU. I would argue that Kramer, later in the article, overstates the influence of the creation of the Czechoslovak presidency for Vaclav Havel on this process, but it is true nonetheless that Gorbachev rather foolishly used Havel as a positive example during the debate over the creation of the Soviet office, as though Havel was someone that Soviet conservatives admired.

Gorbachev, Kramer notes, increasingly emphasized his position as President rather than as General Secretary, but as was the case with so many of Gorbachev's schemes, the idea backfired. The USSR Presidency never captured the national legitimacy its proponents had hoped would help keep the Union together; worse, the idea of a presidency was quickly emulated in the Russian Republic, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, a development that Gorbachev later admitted he had not foreseen (although he should have). Not only was the USSR Presidency not strong enough to govern the quickly fissioning Soviet Union, but worse, it had spawned institutions like itself out in the republics that were ready repositories of a popular mandate when the time for dissolution came.

Throughout 1990, the demoralizing influence of the Eastern European rejection of Soviet socialism accelerated the demise both of the Party and its ideology. Communist Party membership plummeted, with millions resigning or allowing their memberships to lapse. Even the security and military forces, even the most orthodox institutions in the USSR, fell into confusion and doubt; as one KGB officer wrote in 1990, some of his comrades had "begun to look at life more realistically and had come to realize that Communism is just a utopian illusion and that the CPSU in its current form has no future." (II, 15)

Kramer's discussion of this period makes it possible to see, in microanalytical detail, practically the very moment in late 1990 when a great empire lost the will to defend itself. The energy and optimism that had attended the arrival of perestroika and glasnost, and the subsequent elections to Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, had all dissipated in disappointment. (I actually visited—unannounced—a polling station late one night in Ukraine during the 1989 elections, and was allowed to stay behind as the station closed. The optimism and sense of seriousness as the votes were being counted was palpable at the time.) But the economy failed to improve, and the Congress—a huge and unwieldy body of over 2000 members—soon fell into useless squabbling.

On top of these disappointments, by late 1990 the Soviet Union's own "allies" had decisively rejected not only the Soviet secular religion but had not-so-politely unburdened themselves of being "defended" by a superpower, choosing instead to defect to the camp of capitalism and democracy and even talking of joining the hated NATO.

Could A Crackdown Have Mattered?

To be sure, there were desultory attempts by the regime to try to stop what had by now become an out of control chain reaction, including the use of violence in Azerbaijan and later in the Baltic states. But as Kramer points out, Gorbachev's inconsistency in the use of force at home—to say nothing of his initial unwillingness to military power in Eastern Europe in 1989—increasingly narrowed his coercive options.

Kramer believes (and here I must again disagree with him) that if Gorbachev had been willing to send troops into Eastern Europe in 1989 “he would have drawn a line—indirectly but forcefully—for the burgeoning separatist organizations and protest movements in the USSR.” (II, 21)

While it's possible that Kramer is correct that crushing the democratization movements in 1989 might well have cowed Soviet separatists, it is also possible that the resulting military fiasco throughout Eastern Europe might well have led to the outbreak of civil conflict within the USSR two years earlier than it did—assuming, of course, that such a heavy-handed tactic in 1989 didn't start World War III in the process.

In fact, Kramer himself makes the point that the disasters in Afghanistan and the casualties they produced were among the many pressures mitigating against the use of force at home, and it is hard to imagine that casualties inflicted by angry Poles would have been any better received than those of the mujahadeen. It is revealing to note that the Congress of People's Deputies adopted a resolution condemning the Afghan invasion on its 10th anniversary, just months after the collapse of the East European regimes. While Kramer is to be commended for thinking about the counterfactual case, it is difficult to see where it would ever have been possible for Gorbachev to use force after 1988, and to my mind it is an open question about whether the large-scale use of force in Eastern Europe would have delayed or accelerated the Soviet collapse.

Kramer sees the violent 1989 crackdown against protesters in Georgia—which apparently was ordered without Gorbachev's knowledge—as another opportunity where violence might have intimidated the other Soviet republics, but Kramer also notes that Gorbachev's dithering condemnation of the action instead further undermined any sense that violence could be a legitimate means of keeping order. While it is questionable whether support for the Tbilisi operation could have served as a warning to separatist groups, Kramer is certainly correct that the confusion at the highest levels of the Soviet government instead emboldened demonstrators elsewhere in what Kramer calls a “Tbilisi syndrome.”

The more baleful effect was on the actual instruments of repression: the scapegoating of the armed forces in the whole mess induced a great deal of reticence in Soviet commanders in the future, “lest they too be abandoned by Gorbachev and subjected to relentless vilification afterward if things went awry.”(II, 31-32) Here again, Kramer's study is to be commended for showing us the direct links between the actions of leading figures and the erosion of the state's coercive ability to defend its own existence.

Some Soviet figures, Kramer reports, were heartened by the events in Tiananmen Square in China in 1989, which for at least some in the Kremlin showed “the potential efficacy of all-out

force.” Others, however (including Gorbachev) were apparently shocked at the level and scale of the violence. (II, 34) This is an important observation, one that is as damning of the Chinese as it is exculpatory of the Soviets: that when push came to shove, the Soviet leadership could not match Beijing’s dictators in their stoic willingness to shed copious amounts of the blood of their own people. Even the “Committee of Eight” could not suppress their humanity enough to order the Soviet Army to kill its own people in 1991, an order that in any case would likely have been disobeyed (although the odious thug Boris Pugo, who quickly turned to suicide after the coup, reportedly pushed for just such a solution).

The key counterfactual question here is whether the wholesale use of force could have saved the USSR. Kramer believes that a “general crackdown” was not “wholly infeasible” as late as 1991, and he rightly responds to those who believe that the USSR was beyond saving in 1991 by noting that similar claims were made about China in 1989. “The violent crackdown [in China],” Kramer dryly notes, “put an immediate end to that line of argument.” (II 40-41) Still, Kramer understands that the Chinese actions occurred at an early stage of liberalization, and the Soviet crackdown, had it taken place, would have been in an atmosphere of far more matured liberalization.

To this, however, I would add one other major difference: Soviet federalism. Reading the reports that came in from across the USSR during the 1991 coup, it was clear that large-scale violence would have been impossible in an environment where regional leaders simply would have asserted control over their own territory. The worst case might have been a series of mini-Romania scenarios (or the dreaded “nuclear Yugoslavia” so many Soviets feared), but more likely would have been the situation that in fact began to emerge during those tense three days, in which regional figures simply ignored or countermanded the orders of the center.

In any event, the Party was losing control of the mechanisms of power (a time during which one top Soviet advisor recalls being able to see power being moved in “attaché cases” from the central authorities to the regions and state institutions).² Most importantly, this included control over the military, who increasingly saw themselves as ideologically and institutionally isolated. Increasing numbers of military men, as Kramer notes, went public with vows that they would not act against their own people, even as they decried the ideological collapse at the very top of the USSR.

Regional leaders, too, seized on the “demonstration effect” of events in Eastern Europe (which Gorbachev made more easily observable in the Soviet Union by lifting many press restrictions in the name of *glasnost*). Opportunism and liberalization met in a powerful synergy in the regions, where leaders like Boris Yeltsin cited events in Eastern Europe as a means of pushing Gorbachev ever harder. Kramer might have explored a bit further how much of this was cynical Kremlin politicking: Yeltsin, after all, had come back from being sent into political exile by Gorbachev only two years earlier and was now seeking to lead the Russian Republic. Still, whatever Yeltsin’s real intentions, the revolutionary changes in Eastern Europe were a convenient way to argue that Gorbachev wasn’t moving fast enough (or conversely, a way for his critics to charge that he had moved too fast).

² The advisor was Georgii Shakhnazarov. Quoted in Donald Murray, *A Democracy of Despots* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), p. 41

Gorbachev at first firmly resisted the demands for “roundtables” and power-sharing arrangements like those that emerged in Poland in 1989. “His aversion to proposals for roundtable negotiations,” Kramer writes, “was partly attributable to his concern that he might lose control of the process,”—as though he hadn’t already—“and it also stemmed from his desire to forestall any further recriminations from hardliners in the CPSU and security apparatus.” (II, 52)

Admiration for Gorbachev in the West should be diminished by the realization that in 1990, Gorbachev and the Politburo approved a “broad political counteroffensive” against pro-democracy groups in the USSR, including the spread of *kompromat*, or compromising materials, about its leaders. Military and security measures were also readied, including the creation of the special KGB “Alpha Group,” an elite rapid-reaction force designed primarily to deal with terrorism but also charged with taking down any “extreme dangers to the survival of the regime.” (II, 55)

Fortunately, this was all too little, too late. The other republics by late 1990 had already chosen their own leaders (including the elevation of Yeltsin to the head of the Russian parliament) and this forced Gorbachev into negotiating a Union Treaty that would have, in effect, turned the Soviet Union into a kind of loose confederation, shorn of its dissident republics. This was the immediate spur to the 1991 coup, and when the leaders of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine went to the Belovezha Forest to negotiate the demise of the USSR, they did so with the non-violent examples of 1989 in Eastern Europe clearly in mind.

PART III: “That Such a Fortress Would Fall....

In his final installment, Kramer discusses the recriminations and debates that broke out at the top ranks of the Soviet elite over the collapse of the Soviet alliance system in Europe. This is not merely to catalog the anguish of Soviet communists; rather he links this debate to an increasing loss of ideological faith among Soviet leaders and the consequent loss of the regime’s will to defend itself. He then considers the implications of his findings for the theoretical literature on democratization and change.

The Agony of the Armed Forces

Perhaps nowhere in Soviet society was the collapse of East European socialism felt more keenly than among the men of the Soviet armed forces. Not only were Soviet officers more ideologically orthodox than most of their fellow citizens, their view of Soviet history was also more sharply focused through the lens of the Second World War. For many of them, Eastern Europe was territory (as Leonid Brezhnev once told the deposed Czech leaders of 1968) that had been bought and paid for with the blood of the Soviet soldier. As Kramer notes, the loss of Eastern Europe generated deep tension in civil-military relations, and “was one of the factors that prompted the coup attempt” in 1991. (III, 5)

Actually, military officers were uncomfortable with Gorbachev’s defense policies well before 1991, as Kramer notes. Gorbachev’s “new thinking” came under attack as early as 1986, with

Soviet officers objecting to it on both ideological and practical grounds. Everything from his nuclear disarmament policies to his decidedly un-Marxist belief that international relations should be conducted between states, rather than classes, came in for pointed military criticism. “Little did they imagine,” Kramer writes, “that Gorbachev would also soon preside over the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact.” (III, 5)

With regard to Eastern Europe, the warning signs from the military were clear as the events of 1989 unfolded... There was increased public mention of the previously taboo subject of the invasion of Hungary in 1956, as well as open and laudatory discussion of the Polish military’s imposition of martial law in 1981. For the Soviet military, 1989 was nothing less than counterrevolution, and as such had to be dealt with as with all counterrevolutionary attempts: forcefully.

A sense of personal tragedy and profound humiliation ran high among senior officers in this period. Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov later said that he felt as if “his whole life was being betrayed” as the regimes of the Warsaw Pact imploded. (III, 8) Other officers expressed similar sentiments, and Kramer could well have filled an entire chapter with them. For example, Gen. Valentin Varennikov, head of Soviet Ground Forces and the only man tried (and acquitted) in the 1991 coup, told the extremist daily *Zavtra* in 1994:

In 1990 Gorbachev, as you know, accepted capitulation on the West's terms....If I and my compatriots in '45 had ever thought that such a fate awaited us, that such a monolith, such a fortress, as our state [*derzhava*] would be overthrown without a battle... [ellipses in original]³

These officers were predictably joined by CPSU cadres, and together the position this hardline bloc took was one infused by nostalgia and an inability to see the beyond the world of 1945. There were alarmed comments about the loss of “buffers” and the betrayal of the victory over Fascism—as if Germany were ready to roll her tanks eastward across the fields of Europe once more at any moment.

Gorbachev’s intellectual defenders, such as Viacheslav Dashichev, were deployed to counter these retrograde ideas, but they might just as well have saved the breath in their lungs and the ink in their pens. The Soviet military were still thinking in terms of the “combat readiness” of the Warsaw Pact even into 1990, a concern so detached from the reality of the situation as to be almost a source of comedy were it not held by men who at the time still commanded the second-most powerful military force in the world.

New Thinking and Old Thinking

What is particularly frightening about this period is the inability of Soviet officers to think in any terms but those of the coldest days of the Cold War. When asked in early 1990 about the developments in Eastern Europe, the chief of the Strategic Rocket Forces, Igor Sergeev, answered this way:

³ Valentin Varennikov: “My srazhalis’ za Rodinu”, *Zavtra*, 17(22), May 1994, pp. 1-2.

Parity was meant for the status quo. Our defensive doctrine takes account of the existing grouping and deployment of forces. If we lose our expanse [in Eastern Europe], we will be closer to danger. If, under conditions of parity, someone loses, that means someone else gains. (III, 13)

But by 1990, one would have to ask: someone else gains *what*? What, exactly, was the concern of Soviet officers about a buffer in Eastern Europe? Did anyone in the USSR really fear a NATO invasion? (In fairness, I have asked this same question of advocates of NATO expansion eastward, which seems to me to be a solution in search of a problem. Does anyone really fear the Third Shock Army returning to roll over newly-independent Ukraine on its way into Poland or Germany? Why, exactly, is Romania or Bulgaria being invited to NATO? Are they in danger?)

Kramer notes that Sergeev seemed to speak for the large majority of senior officers. And so he did, but Col. Gen. Albert Makashov, the commander of the Volga-Urals military district, would turn up the heat in March 1990 by publicly referring to Gorbachev as a “pacifist” and “dilettante” who should be “required to undergo a three-month remedial course at the General Staff Academy.” This attack by so senior an officer, Kramer notes, “loosened the floodgates” and soon Gorbachev’s policies were openly condemned in the major Soviet media, including *Pravda* and *Krasnaia Zvezda*. (III, 14) Makashov, it should be noted, would later go on to be one of the most retrograde Soviet nostalgists in the new Russia, the man who stood with Ruslan Khasbulatov and the “red-brown” bloc of authoritarians who took over the Russian White House in 1993, shouting that the supporters of Boris Yeltsin were traitors to the motherland and vowing that they would “wash in their own blood.”⁴

At the highest levels of the political leadership, Gorbachev’s chief critic was Egor Ligachev, a conservative who had begun his tenure on the Politburo in the 1980s more or less as a Gorbachev ally and who now emerged as a dedicated opponent, particularly of the new Soviet foreign policy line. Kramer details the fencing that took place between Ligachev and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, a man hated to this day by many former Soviet officers for what they see as his betrayal of the Union. Like the military, Ligachev saw the world primarily through the prism of Marxism-Leninism, and in fact blamed the loss of Eastern Europe on “certain [Soviet] officials” who tried to “gloss over the class nature of international relations.” He also exhibited an utterly irrational fear of Germany, arguing that German reunification would “completely erase the results of the Second World War.” (III, 15)

Even in 1990, it had to be clear to even the dimmest observer that Germany was so knee-deep in helpless pacifism that it was hard to imagine the Germans defending *themselves*, much less attacking a powerful neighbor to the east (especially without American backing), but Soviet conservatives were lost in a haze of reflexive fear that had little to do with actual threats and everything to do with a lifetime lived in a closed propaganda system.

Against this, Shevardnadze and others tried to turn the tables and point out that the situation in Eastern Europe had become volatile by the 1980s precisely due to the kind of rigid and ideological thinking of conservatives like Ligachev. He also decried the history of Soviet heavy-handedness in the region, including “forcibly imposing leaders suitable to us.” (III, 16) But as

⁴ Quoted in Thomas Nichols, *The Russian Presidency*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 77.

Kramer points out, this just added fuel to the fire in Moscow, and the attacks on Gorbachev and his team escalated, with the predictions of imminent military disaster in Europe becoming at times nearly apocalyptic.

A mystery that Kramer does not attempt to explain is why Gorbachev didn't take stronger action against some of these critics. In 1989, he finally did remove several high-ranking leaders from the Central Committee (the so-called "dead souls" who had already lost their state positions), and he had already fired some of the most obstinate military figures like Warsaw Pact chief Viktor Kulikov. But he continued to surround himself with people like Yazov, whom he promoted to Marshal of the Soviet Union in 1990, an act that was terribly misread by some Western Sovietologists as showing Gorbachev's strength over the military rather than his weakness.⁵

Still, Kramer insightfully notes that even men like Yazov and the new commander of the Warsaw Pact, Piotr Lushev (who was a definite improvement over Kulikov) "increasingly sensed that their main task was simply to keep the Pact from disappearing." (III, 17) Gorbachev's advisors pressed this point, arguing that German membership in NATO was a done deal and that any further argument over it would emphasize Soviet weakness and push the Pact closer to oblivion. The nations of Eastern Europe were already inclined to dissolve their last bonds to the USSR, and Soviet thundering about threats from the West would only encourage them along a direction that would be impossible to stop short of outright war.

The military answer to this was to slow the withdrawal of Soviet forces, and this ideologically charged issue quickly became bound up in the much more practical matter of where tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers and their families were going to sleep once they returned to the Motherland. But now the conservatives were on the defensive; the host countries wanted Soviet forces out, and even at home, more liberal voices were questioning whether the Warsaw Pact itself was ever necessary in the first place.

Kramer describes how the debate came to a head at the founding congress of the Russian Communist Party in 1990, where conservatives like Makashov and Ligachev vented their rage at the loss of Eastern Europe and laid the blame squarely on Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and others. This prompted Shevardnadze to warn that what such people wanted were nothing less than "witch hunts" like those that had occurred in the U.S. during the McCarthy era, and he pointedly referred to people like Makashov as seeing Eastern Europe not as nations liberated from Nazism but virtually seized as "trophies of war." (III 26)

The End Approaches

The story Kramer tells in this part of his narrative is interesting not only because of the window it provides into internal Soviet debates as the system collapsed, but also because it shows that this depth of political disagreement among the elite essentially guaranteed that the regime would be unable to defend itself either by force or argument in the face of increasing centrifugal tendencies. As the peoples of the USSR now began to emulate their former comrades in Eastern

⁵ Professor Stephen Meyer of MIT even went so far as to tell the Senate Foreign Relations committee that "hints of military coups are pure flights of fancy" in testimony he gave on June 6, 1991--just nine weeks before Gorbachev's temporary ouster.

Europe, the regime was paralyzed by internal argument so severe that no compromise was possible. There was no way to find a common language with people like Makashov, who was still happily living in the Stalinist past.

Kramer spends a significant amount of time on the 28th Party Congress, held in July 1990 and destined to be the last such congress of the soon to be deceased CPSU. In fact, this section of his study is the only that I found too long; I don't see the 28th Congress as a particularly important meeting. The debate broke down into predictable groupings, with Gorbachev's allies opposing the military and party cadres, with the charges and countercharges much the same as had been heard throughout 1989 and 1990.

In any event, the Congress was already being overtaken by events in the republics, and so even at the time it seemed like a pointless (and powerless) gathering, especially now that Gorbachev had made the jump to the new post of President of the USSR. Kramer notes that Gorbachev's policies prevailed at the end of the Congress, but this was not a surprising outcome, as the conservatives by late 1990 were intellectually and ideologically a spent force, with only one option left to them—the one they would exercise a year later to no avail.

Kramer sees the Congress as underscoring Gorbachev's strength (especially since it spelled the end of Ligachev's career when he crushingly lost his bid to be voted Deputy General Secretary), but Kramer's observation sidesteps the point that the Congress showed only Gorbachev's formal power over the Party itself. Gorbachev's taming of the Party stood in stark contrast to his increasing weakness as the leader of the USSR itself.

Kramer makes much of the fact that Gorbachev moved quickly to end the argument over German unification, accepting a united Germany in NATO. In doing so, Kramer argues that "Gorbachev demonstrated his own strength and denied the anti-reformist group any opportunity to obstruct the process of German unification." (III, 39)

This seems like an overly charitable interpretation in retrospect. At the time, it seemed more like Gorbachev had two choices with regard to German reunification: oppose it despite its inevitability, and thus be revealed to be utterly powerless, or accept it and appear more statesmanlike, while preempting any possible move by the Soviet opposition. In the end, Gorbachev met with Helmut Kohl, struck the best deal he could get from the German chancellor, and went on to gamely smile and accept something he had no chance of stopping anyway. (Or at least no chance short of nuclear war.) Why Kramer translates this as a demonstration of domestic strength is unclear, and he presents little evidence for this interpretation.

With the reunification deal finished in July, Kramer notes that this debate understandably went on the back burner, as it "seemed to become less urgent for many Soviet officials, who were preoccupied with the task of holding the Soviet Union together in the face of mounting economic and ethnic turmoil." (III, 40)

But with German reunification now a reality, the issue for Soviet military leaders was to try to slow the increasing demands from the other Eastern European nations to simply liquidate the Warsaw Pact itself. Whatever their fears, real or otherwise, about the imperialist threat from the

West, Soviet commanders simply had no place to put their people or equipment, and so they attempted, in effect, to blackmail countries like Hungary to gain material concessions for an orderly withdrawal.

In final, deliberate acts of spite (or more likely, paranoia), the Soviet military completely trashed the bases they left behind, making sure they contained nothing of worth and rendering them useless to “the enemy,” i.e., NATO. (III, 46)

The Conservative Retrenchment

Although the Soviet conservatives had lost just about every major policy battle between 1988 and 1990, Kramer points to the interesting fact that by late 1990, they had nonetheless effected a kind of political retrenchment in Moscow. Their ideas and their demands generally found few takers in the public at large either at home or abroad, but somehow, they had managed to increase the pressure on Gorbachev to alter course. Kramer does not explore how this happened, but implicit in his account is that the accelerating humiliation of the USSR in Eastern Europe throughout 1990 had added at least some weight to their general criticism of Gorbachev’s “new thinking” in foreign policy. The rapid collapse of the Soviet position gave them the weapon of outraged patriotism to use against people like Shevardnadze, who resigned suddenly in December 1990 with the warning that “dictatorship” was coming.

Although Kramer does not discuss them, there were realignments of personnel that should have been the tip-off of darker things to come, and it would be interesting to know how they happened. The clearest sign of danger is that in early 1991, Boris Pugo, known for his tough tactics as a KGB chief in the Baltics, was moved to the Interior Ministry; his new deputy was Boris Gromov, who had commanded Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Putting the Interior Ministry in the hands of a KGB leg-breaker, with an experienced Soviet Army combat commander as his deputy, should have set off alarm bells in both East and West. (On a personal note, I was working for a U.S. senator at the time, and advised him that this meant a coup was likely in the offing in the spring of 1991, so I will claim one right call among some bobbled ones—such as my mistaken support for the first President Bush’s “Chicken Kiev” speech in the summer of 1991.)

What is still unclear—not least because Mikhail Gorbachev will not explain how he stupidly allowed it all to happen—is just how the debate over the loss of Eastern Europe in 1990 turned into a sudden, last-gasp rally for the conservatives. Did Gorbachev panic? Was there a critical mass of opinion among even his own advisors that things were now dangerously out of control?

What we do know, as Kramer tells us in a revealing fact, is that the Soviet leadership directed the CPSU International Department in early 1991 to provide major policy recommendations regarding the situation in Eastern Europe. Kramer describes the resulting document as a “dour assessment” of Soviet policy since 1991 which called for “vigorous action” to ensure that “under no circumstances will a real or potential threat to the military security of the Soviet Union arise in the East European region.” (III, 51-52)

Again, this is almost hallucinatory language, given that the USSR itself was on the verge of collapse, and one can only imagine what tortured and silly military scenario Soviet planners would have had to cook up in which Eastern Europe threatens Soviet territory, but it is testimony to the enduring power of ideology and history on human thought.

The International Department should not have bothered with its report, for as Kramer notes, the Eastern European governments reacted to the resurgence of the hardliners by threatening to dissolve the Pact unless a meeting of its political body, the Political Consultative Committee, was held immediately. The Soviet military tried to paint dire pictures of a world without the Pact, but to little effect. On February 25, 1991, a meeting lasting only three hours resulted in an agreement to disband the Warsaw Pact within a month.

Needless to say, the broadsides against Gorbachev escalated, again rising to hysterical levels. Intelligent attempts by people like Aleksandr Yakovlev to argue that a nation's "greatness" no longer could be measured in purely military terms fell on deaf ears; indeed, the new Chief of the General Staff, Mikhail Moiseev, argued that the Soviet loss of Eastern Europe would mean that "the correlation of forces between the USSR and NATO from 1-to-1 at present to 1.5-to-1 in NATO's favor, and even 2-to-1 for certain types of weapons." (III, 57-58)

This kind of accounting of relative East-West strength, in a theater where Soviet forces held an overwhelming advantage, can only be considered either mendacious or ignorant, and Moiseev was by all accounts an intelligent officer. But he was not alone in such thinking, or at least in taking such a position publicly: I once publicly challenged a Soviet Air Force officer in 1989 to provide me with the data that showed the Soviet General Staff genuinely believed that NATO, at something like a 1-to-6 disadvantage, could actually initiate an attack against the Warsaw Pact. He told me he believed it possible, and that he would provide me the information. (For the record, I never got it.)

In the end, the Soviets attempted to negotiate bilateral arrangements with their former "allies" that would prevent them from joining NATO. The Eastern Europeans would have none of it. By mid-1991, the Pact was to all intents and purposes dead, and the USSR was soon to follow.

Kramer persuasively argues that the loss of Eastern Europe was one of the issues that bound the August 1991 conspirators. Indeed, it would be shocking if it were otherwise. While the proximate cause of the coup was the Union Treaty, the underlying causes were many, and the collapse of the Soviet system in Eastern Europe, with the consequent damage to the entire Soviet *raison d'être* itself, had to be prime among them. As Kramer writes:

It was not surprising that the reunification of German "on the West's terms," the "sacrifice of gains achieved in the Great Patriotic War," and the "loss of our fraternal alliance" were among the concerns cited by the instigators of the attempted coup d'état in Moscow in August 1991. The start of the putsch on 19 August sparked intense anxiety in Eastern Europe, where some officials worried that a new, hardline regime in Moscow might seek to reestablish a dominating presence in the former Warsaw Pact countries....Not until the rebuff of the coup

on 21 August and the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a whole four months later was it clear that Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe was gone for good. (III, 67)

Implications for Theory

To read the democratization literature of the 1980s and early 1990s was often frustrating for scholars studying the events in Eastern Europe (and not just because so much theoretical work in political science is so painfully convoluted and arid). The literature tended to draw heavily from experiences in Latin America, making the resulting models difficult to apply to the collapse of the Soviet empire. Many influences, including the experience of Stalinism, the utter destruction of previous social institutions, and the warped effects of central planning made the Russian and Eastern European path to democracy difficult to compare to what had happened in other areas of the world.

But perhaps most important, in terms of Kramer's study, is that other authoritarian nations were not part of an international *system*, in which events in one state were unavoidable linked to events the others. Kramer notes that the previous literature on democratization, including the seminal work done by O'Donnell, Whitehead, and Schmitter, focused on local actors who come "under little or no influence from events outside the country." (III, 71) Other studies (such as Huntington's *Third Wave*) tried to grapple with the issue of "snowballing" and "demonstration effects" but as Kramer notes, these kinds of terms (including "diffusion," "contagion" and "spillover") "have not always been well specified in the literature..." (III, 72)

To say the least. Indeed, the concept of "spillover" is one of those elusive concepts—like "deterrence," perhaps—that we seem to know somehow *happens*, but we don't know how or why, and we usually only see it operating in its result, rather than in progress.

Kramer tackles this imprecision, although his definition of "spillover" boils down to (1) the spread of reform and democratization from the USSR to Eastern Europe, and then (2) the effect of the implosion of Eastern European Communism on the USSR. The first stage is fairly clear in its mechanics: it turns out that when offered a choice, people in the region did not want to live under Communist dictatorships and overthrew them when the Soviets opened the door to that possibility. More important, however, is that Kramer fills in the actual steps in the next phase of the interaction between the USSR and its former allies:

Direct effects [of the collapse of the Eastern European regimes on the USSR] included the emergence of new actors and governments in Eastern Europe that provided support to separatist and pro-democracy groups; the measures adopted by hardline Soviet officials to try to prevent the spread of unrest from Eastern Europe to the USSR; the steps taken by Soviet opposition groups and by newly-elected leaders in some of the union-republics (especially Russia and the Baltic republics) to counter the hardliners' rearguard actions; and the high-level recriminations and acrimonious public debate in Moscow about the "loss" of Eastern Europe, a debate that led to ever greater political polarization in the USSR but also detracted from the legitimacy of the Soviet regime. These effects, in combination, contributed to the collapse of the Soviet state. (III, 72-73)

This, Kramer notes, is the tracing of the *microprocesses* of cross-border diffusion of ideas and practices, and this alone makes his study of extraordinary value. Kramer then takes us through six broad theoretical approaches about why this kind of diffusion takes place:

1. The realist explanation that stronger states simply impose their own preferences on weaker ones.
2. Structural realist explanations that states will adopt practices from each other to become more competitive.
3. Models of “rational learning” that may not necessarily be tied to structural considerations.
4. Constructivist notions of diffusion via social mobilization in response to changed international norms.
5. Spatial models emphasizing “neighborhood effects” due to geographic proximity.
6. “Concrete” spillover, as in the case of ethnic violence, when refugees from one state physically flee to another.

Kramer sees his study clarifying these explanations in a number of ways, and without doubt he has made a significant contribution in several areas.

First, he makes the interesting observation that the Eastern European case turns the realist explanation on its head, as a group of far weaker states promoted changes they wished to see in a far more powerful neighbor. “The ability of East European leaders and groups to intervene, with impunity, in the USSR’s internal affairs underscored how drastically the Soviet-East European relationship had changed.” (III, 81)

But central to this is the puzzle of why the Soviet Union tolerated this behavior, and Kramer’s study answers that question: because Soviet leaders, for ideological as well as practical reasons, were intent on implementing a set of policies whose logical effect was to render the use of force impossible as a matter of first principles.

Kramer also makes much of an obvious, but still important point, about communication. In another of the many ironies of the situation, he notes that insistence by the Warsaw Pact regimes for years that all their citizens study the Russian language became a “policy that came back to haunt them,” as those same citizens now eagerly followed the daily events of perestroika and glasnost in the USSR. (III, 83)

Not only were Eastern Europeans deeply informed about changes in the USSR, the effect rebounded as Soviet citizens likewise began to follow events in Eastern Europe, thus bearing out, as Kramer notes, the theory that diffusion is likelier to occur when the sources of change and the adopters of those changes are linguistically and culturally similar (or at least see themselves as culturally similar.) Further along, Kramer makes the similar point that the geographic clustering of the Warsaw Pact states also lends support to the idea of “neighborhood effects.”

Likewise, Kramer believes that the effects of the events in Eastern Europe on the ideological foundations of the USSR “shed interesting light on constructivist notions of norm diffusion and identity change,” and he is correct, although he needn’t have brought constructivism per se into it. What primarily makes constructivism useful, in my view, is that it proceeds from a common-sense assumption that the beliefs and identities of human beings matter in international relations, a necessary corrective to the silly and soulless grand-strategic billiard balls of stubborn realists. (Realism, we should recall, is a school of thought that led one of its most famous practitioners to make the bizarre suggestion that it would be a good thing if more states gained nuclear weapons. But cataloguing the strange recommendations of realist theory is a project for another time and venue.)

Kramer’s study, insofar as it relates to constructivist issues, brings into stark relief how changes in human beings make changes in states possible. Kramer describes how even diehard Communists found themselves increasingly drawn toward norms associated with Western European style social democracy. “By all indications, the acceptance of these democratic norms was, for many, a genuine process of social learning, rather than a mere tactical ploy.” This partly explains why the Soviet leadership did not just start shooting people left and right—as their Chinese colleagues were more than happy to do. “Gorbachev’s (and others’) reluctance to use large-scale force,” Kramer tells us, “to hold the USSR together was not simply a matter of expediency or an effort to avoid antagonizing the West. Rather it reflected a fundamental change in the reformers’ collective identity.” (III, 85)

Kramer does not investigate more deeply why the men in the Kremlin came to see themselves differently, but one possibility is that Communist leaders—who primarily always saw themselves as Europeans—were somehow convinced that their fellow Europeans (and even those cursed Americans) were right, and that they were wrong, and that they were increasingly nagged by the growing sense that they were doing something fundamentally wrong to other human beings. (Anatolii Chernaev once remarked that among a certain group of older Soviet leaders, for example, Reagan’s reference to the USSR as an “evil empire” truly stung them, not least because it was an insult they feared they might have genuinely deserved.)⁶

The degree to which moral pressure by leaders like Reagan or Pope John Paul II, or the examples of virtue found in people like Havel, brought about change in the minds of Communist leaders is a tantalizingly interesting question, and ripe material for a future study (hopefully while these former leaders are still alive to be interviewed).

Kramer also notes that his study informs some of the previous work done on how protest movements can “spin off” into other regions, with the case of Solidarity providing a detailed look at how such spin-offs happen. Of particular interest in the Soviet case is that internal Soviet conditions had to change enough for a spin-off movement to take root, thus illustrating the interplay of external and domestic change in bringing about regime collapse. He also applies his data to the idea of Sidney Tarrow’s “cycles of protest,” although I found this to be a less interesting section, primarily because I see Kramer’s narrative as already having gotten inside the “cycle” and explained it usefully without a need for a theoretical apparatus to be appended.

⁶ See Nina Tannenwald, ed., *Understanding the End of the Cold War, 1980-1987: An Oral History Conference* (Providence, RI: Watson Institute for International Studies, 1999), p. 251.

Finally, Kramer reaches a conclusion that could almost be a word of advice to future dictators: when faced with protest, if you're going to use violence, go all the way. Kramer's findings validate the general findings in the literature that "violent repression can halt the spread of political unrest, provided that it is used consistently and decisively. The inconsistent and irresolute use of force is likely to stimulate, rather than diminish, the level of protest." (III, 91)

Conclusion

In the end, Kramer is too modest about his findings. He refers to the spillover from Eastern Europe as only one of many factors that led to the Soviet collapse, but his study makes a good case that it was an incredibly important one. As Kramer notes:

The momentous changes that Gorbachev introduced in the Soviet Union would have made it difficult for him to preserve the Soviet system (and perhaps even the Soviet state) under the best of circumstances, but the repercussions from the collapse of East European Communism greatly complicated his task. (III, 96)

This is tremendous understatement. While I continue to believe that the ideological and military competition with the United States forced the USSR to seek a truce, and to retreat from its ambitions as a global revolutionary power, Kramer has presented us with an extremely powerful explanation of why, in the midst of this disengagement from global conflict with the West, the Soviet leadership suffered a truly existential loss of self-confidence that led their accepting the collapse of their empire, and then the euthanizing of the Soviet state itself.

Mark Kramer's study is a ground-breaking piece of scholarship that goes far toward answering the question of why Soviet leaders chose not to fight the end of their regime. It also illuminates important theoretical questions about how ideas find their way across borders and change people and institutions. He has shown us, at least in one corner of the world, how dictators begin to lose their stomach for rule, and how more virtuous ideas can displace fundamentally inhuman or corrupted ones, thus leading to change on a global scale.

The events in Eastern Europe demonstrated clearly to the Soviet leadership that their model of government was a failure more clearly than any insult that Ronald Reagan could fling at them; worse, the collapse of the Pact's regimes opened the chilling possibility that Reagan, and others like him who had warned for years that Communism was unviable and even evil, were right. In 1989 and 1990, the men in the Kremlin, as well as ordinary Soviet citizens, were forced to face the terrible reality that their putative "allies" deeply hated the Soviet Union and everything it stood for. The trauma of seeing the lie revealed and the illusion dispelled was too much for many of them to bear, and years of carefully constructed self-delusion came crashing down in pieces. And when Soviet demonstrators began to emulate their Eastern European counterparts, their leaders had no compelling answer to give them about why the Union should even exist.

Some years ago, I visited an Israeli military commander on the West Bank during the Palestinian protests collectively called the Intifada. Pointing to the amount of military force at his disposal,

he said: “I could end the Intifada tomorrow if I chose to.” Well, why didn’t you, he was asked. “Because I am a human being,” he said simply.

Mark Kramer has shown us how, and why, Soviet leaders similarly reached the decision to be human beings. I sincerely hope he intends to expand these three articles and then release a full volume. But even these three installments easily stand as one of the most important studies on how one of the most dangerous empires in history came to the quiet end it did, and he is to be commended for adding to our knowledge about a page in history that is far more important than we may have ever realized.

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