

The Revolutions of 1989

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The idea of writing a contribution to Routledge's "Rewriting Histories" series on the Revolutions of 1989 ten years after the event was certainly a good one, and Vladimir Tismaneanu, the editor of *East European Politics and Societies* was an obvious choice to assemble the contributors. Tismaneanu writes an excellent introduction, which sets out clearly many of the dilemmas which require to be addressed. He reminds us, beyond the cynicism of the intervening decade, of the enthusiasm with which these revolutions were greeted both in Eastern Europe and beyond its confines. It is difficult to argue with the notion that "these revolutions represented the triumph of civic dignity and political morality over ideological monism, bureaucratic cynicism and police dictatorship" (p. 1). Equally he is right to stress that, at the beginning of 1989, there was little evidence that the whole edifice that was Eastern Europe was about to collapse. As Tismaneanu noted: "if there is a main moral of the great revolutionary drama that unfolded in Eastern Europe in 1989, it is that history is never a one-way avenue and that the future is always pregnant with more than one alternative" (p. 2).

So far, then so good. Having set the scene, Tismaneanu explains that he has brought together seminal analyses of the revolutions of 1989 and their aftermath, which will, he hopes help students "to avoid any myopic simplifications as well as unfounded speculative generalisations" (p. 5). Four more narrow ambitions are then advanced: to explain the marginalization of the first post communist elites, the recovery of the former communists, the ethical confusion of post communism, and the rampant cynicism among the citizens of Eastern Europe in more recent years. Few would argue with this list; the problem for Tismaneanu is that not all the fifteen pieces he has selected, all previously published elsewhere, do not address these issues very effectively.

One of the dilemmas for any student of Eastern Europe is whether to adopt a country by country approach or to deal with the countries en masse. Tismaneanu makes clear in his introduction that he has decided not of adopt a country by country perspective. He does so even though he concedes himself that "it cannot be denied that in all the countries that used to be referred to as the Soviet bloc, the once monolithic order was

replaced by political and cultural diversity" (p. 6). Later he goes on to assert: "while the structural causes of communism's collapse were similar, the dynamics, rhythm, and orientation of these revolutions depended to a large extent on local conditions" (p. 9).

This last phrase is particularly telling. What made historians address the diverse countries of Eastern Europe as a common unit was communism; with its collapse the logic for such an approach disappeared. Diversity triumphed over monolithism, and Tismaneanu should have followed the logic of this through. While a country by country approach risks being rather scrappy, the countries concerned group themselves quite neatly into Central Europe and the Balkans. The first section of Tismaneanu's collection, "Causes", works quite well, since the starting point for the collapse of communism in each country was similar; but in the subsequent sections the decision to stick with a common approach results in the inclusion of a series of contributions which are excessively general. The book works when a common approach works, and fails when a common approach fails.

Two articles address the central issue of why communism collapsed in Eastern Europe. The better of the two is the very first essay, Daniel Chirot's "What happened in Eastern Europe in 1989?". Students will find his simple explanation of communist economics easy to understand; political will, he stresses, was ultimately the primary determinant of economic action, a political will based on the world view of Lenin and Stalin. Students will similarly relate with ease to his colourful assessment of the Soviet Union, "the world's most advanced nineteenth century economy, the world's most inflexible rust belt" (p. 22). Chirot's case is simple: as the economies of the Eastern Bloc began to be reformed in the seventies and eighties little was done to eliminate the rigidities of the Stalinist system, but much was done to exacerbate corruption, increase political cynicism and create a debt problem. The result was widespread malaise, to make the system work everyone had their own little fiddle; all this created "a sense that they were living a perpetual lie". (p. 28) When the crunch came, people simply stopped pretending that the system worked.

Having filled in the background, Chirot turns to the role of Gorbachev and puts him centre stage: "in the end he was the reason revolution came in 1989 rather than in the 1990s; but sooner or later it would have happened"(p. 36). Gorbachev allowed the Poles to agree to round table talks and allowed the Hungarians to open the border with Austria. This had a profound impact on the elites of Eastern Europe: without the external framework imposed by the Soviet Union the elites lost confidence in their own legitimacy and the moral basis of communism collapsed. As Chirot puts it, in another eye catching phrase, the explanation for the collapse of communism is "utter moral rot" (p. 38).

The other essay in the opening section "Causes" is "Amidst Moving Ruins" by Leszek Kolakowski. Not surprisingly given Kolakowski's preeminence in Soviet scholarship, this a wide-ranging piece which also singles out the role played by Gorbachev; he it was, Kolakowski argues, who sapped the elite's confidence by constantly repeating that fundamental yet ill-defined changes were urgently needed. However, although one of Kolakowski's main arguments is to take scholars to task for not predicting the collapse of communism, his sparkling intellect takes him on towards new problems. His final fascinating remarks relate not to the collapse of communism but to its disappearance from history. He expresses concern at the way history is being rewritten and a new official gloss put on events. Accepting that "self deception is a necessary part of life" (p. 62), he nevertheless worries about the fact that "one sometimes has the impression that through the decades of communism the population consisted of a handful of miserable traitors and a mass of noble rebels" (p. 61). The reality was rather different. Most people adapted and survived. Kolakowski is rightly concerned that politicians in Eastern Europe prefer to gloss over the communist past as an aberration and link the present to the inter-war past. He concludes: "it is difficult and unpleasant to include communism in the continuous course of the national past because then the nation as a whole must carry the burden of responsibility... It is nice to live with the innocent conscience of the rape victim" (p. 62). A similar point is made later in the collection by Tony Judt in his "1989: an End to which Era". However tempting it is to erase the communist era from the public record, he states, that would be wrong: "in Eastern Europe, as in Western Europe something important happened in the years 1939-89" (p. 171).

Tismaneanu's collection begins to drift with the second section "Meaning". It is sometimes difficult to see

how this differs from "Causes". S. N. Eisenstadt in "The Breakdown of the Communist Regimes" sees 1989 as a rebellion against societies perceived as blocking and distorting modernity. Timothy Garton Ash in "The Year of Truth" stresses that by the late 1980s the regimes no longer mobilised anyone, although they could still prevent "the public articulation of shared aspirations and common truths". (p. 112) These are astute perceptions, but add little to earlier contributions. Jeffrey Isaac's "The Meanings of 1989" is more reflective and tries to explore what it meant to be a liberal in Eastern Europe in 1989. He usefully reminds a student audience that the dissidents of pre 1989 Eastern Europe were not liberals in the American sense: when organising civil society against the state they did not have any interest in party politics. Havel, he reminds readers was close to western extraparliamentary groups such as CND and argued that Soviet totalitarianism was a particularly grotesque version of modern society in general. This tradition of civil disobedience and "anti-political politics" made the dissidents rather strange liberals.

The final section on "The Future" is the weakest of all. The strongest piece is "The Leninist Legacy" by Ken Jowitt; but as the title suggests this concentrates on what was inherited from the common past and therefore works within the common approach. Jowitt's points are important, although expressed in a rather jargon laden style. "The Leninist experience in Eastern Europe reinforced the exclusive distinction and dichotomic antagonism between the official and private realms"; well in Eastern Europe people were turned off politics and did retreat into their private worlds, and, as Jowitt does point out, the relevance of this for "the future" is that there was in the communist past no shared political identity as citizens. Very soon after the thrill of revolution had died and former apparatchiks had carved a new life for themselves in the new order, a majority of citizens in the new Eastern Europe retreated into the safety of their private lives and have stayed there, deeply suspicious of all politicians who claim to act in their name.

The other contributions to this section suffer from being overly general. Only in passing does Jacques Rupnik, in "The Post-Totalitarian Blues", address where is the discussion of social democracy? The social democrats of Eastern Europe are not just post communists; in Central Europe social democrats have done much to limit the market and restore the essential safety net of a welfare state.

There are some excellent articles in this collection; within individual essays there are perceptive insights; but overall the quality is decidedly patchy. The decision to avoid the country by country approach works well for the "Causes", but thereafter works to the disadvantage of the reader. Authors cover the same ground in their introductions, and then make rather general points, almost always including references to the Soviet Union, as well as Eastern Europe, and often ranging across countries as distant as South Africa and Argentina. This makes interesting journalism, or even historical journalism, but prevents issues being addressed in depth. The opportunity to celebrate in style the tenth anniversary of the 1989 revolutions has been missed.

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