Explaining the Fall of European Communism in 1989

On 15–16 October 2009, the British Academy held a symposium on 'The Collapse of Communism in Europe: A Re-examination Twenty Years After'. The convenor, **Professor Archie Brown FBA**, *here offers his own reflections.*

IN EARLY 1991, as tensions rose within the Soviet Union, one of my Russian friends said to a colleague: 'We need a Bismarck.' 'Why Bismarck?' his friend replied. 'We've got Gorbachev. He also united Germany.'

The fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War, the unification of Germany, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union are all interconnected developments. The reasons for these dramatic changes, including the great symbolic moment of the fall of the Berlin wall on 9 November 1989, are many and varied. Yet, the jocular remark of the Russian scholar in 1991 points to one factor crucial to all these transformations of the political landscape – the changes in Moscow which saw not only a liberalisation and partial democratisation of the Soviet system but also the transformation of Soviet foreign policy.

Reagan and Gorbachev

Mikhail Gorbachev was determined to end the Cold War, and he found a much readier negotiating partner in Ronald Reagan than either Reagan's most fervent supporters or fiercest opponents expected. Indeed, it is worth recalling that, in addition to Reagan's conservative Republican allies, American politicians who thought of themselves as 'realists' – among them, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig and Brent Scowcroft – were highly critical of Reagan's readiness to sign the INF Treaty, authorising the removal of all intermediate-range nuclear missiles from Europe. The Treaty was signed during Gorbachev's visit to Washington in December 1987 (with the exact timing of the ceremony determined by the advice of Nancy Reagan's astrologer in California).

Figure 1. *People on top of the Berlin Wall, on the night of 9-10 November 1989. Photo: Ullstein Bild/TopFoto.*

Reagan's critics thought he had been seduced by Gorbachev's charm and had gone soft. Yet the Treaty meant that the Soviet Union would have to destroy more nuclear weapons than did the United States. The Soviet side also accepted for the first time intrusive on-site inspections. Moreover, this was the 'zero option' which Reagan had proposed early in his first term – dismissed out of hand at that time by the pre-perestroika Soviet leadership. As the American Ambassador to Moscow (1987–1991) Jack Matlock noted, many of the people objecting to the INF Treaty had been among the zero option's most enthusiastic original supporters, but that was only because they were convinced that the Soviet Union would never accept it.

By distancing himself from former allies and supporters, and preferring the advice of Secretary of State George Shultz to that of the Pentagon and the CIA, Reagan made a serious contribution to qualitative improvement in East-West relations during his second term. However, his presidency had overlapped with no fewer than four Soviet leaders – Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev – and nothing changed for the better in East-West relations or throughout Eastern Europe until the last leader of the Soviet Union emerged. Even before his first term ended, Reagan had concluded that it was high time the two sides began talking to each other, but, as he complained: 'These guys keep dying on me!' However, it was not only rigor mortis but the rigid policies and mindsets of the pre-perestroika Soviet leadership which prevented any progress.

Contrary to quite widespread belief, it was not Reagan's massive increase in military expenditure, his Strategic Defence Initiative (on anti-missile defence), or his rhetorical belligerence (referring, for example, to the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire' in 1983, the same year in which he announced SDI) that produced a change of heart in Moscow. The colder the Cold War became – and it turned very cold in 1983 – the stronger was the position of hard-liners in Moscow. It was the Ronald Reagan who was prepared for dialogue, and who shared with Gorbachev a desire to rid the world of nuclear weapons, who helped make substantial progress in East-West relations possible. His hard-line credentials, when accompanied by a growing

belief that the Soviet Union was changing significantly for the better, were an asset. Given that even Reagan came under severe criticism in Washington for his willingness to negotiate with his Soviet counterpart, it is easy to imagine how difficult it would have been for a president without such ironclad anti-Communist credentials to pursue exactly the same policy.

Easing of the Cold War tensions helped Gorbachev domestically. It is a widespread myth that he was popular only in the West. Removing the fear of world war mattered in the Soviet Union – even more than it did in the United States, given the devastation wreaked in the USSR by the Second World War, with 27 million people killed. At the midway point of his less than seven years as Soviet leader, the fruits of his foreign policy helped Gorbachev substantially. He was, in fact, the most highly esteemed person in the Soviet Union for his first five years in office. It was as late as May 1990 that Boris Yeltsin overtook him (as we know from the most professional survey research). By that time the new freedom of speech, publication and assembly had brought to the surface all manner of grievances and had given rise to expectations which were not being met, especially in the economy. But transition from a Communist system, in the Soviet Union as well as in Eastern Europe, had taken place one year earlier – in 1989.

The easing of international tension in 1987 and 1988, when Reagan made his first-ever visit to Moscow (and, strolling in Red Square with Gorbachev, told a reporter that he no longer regarded the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire' – that was 'another time, another era'), weakened the military-industrial complex, the KGB and party conservatives within the Soviet establishment. Gorbachev and his allies, among whom Alexander Yakovlev was particularly important, were able to push a programme of radical change through the Nineteenth Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1988. This included plans for the pluralisation of the Soviet political system, involving contested elections for a legislature with real power. The elections took place in March 1989, the first really significant electoral contest in the entire Soviet bloc.

Figure 2. *Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev during their walk in Red Square which symbolised a new Soviet-American relationship, Moscow, 31 May 1988. Photo: AP Photo/Ira Schwartz.*

Growing freedom

More dramatic elections were to be held in Poland less than three months later when Solidarity won an overwhelming victory in all the seats they were allowed to contest, following round-table talks with the Polish party-state authorities. The Soviet Union did not have an organised oppositional group remotely comparable to Solidarity, but party members had competed against one another in March 1989 on fundamentally different policy platforms. Yeltsin (still a nominal member of the party's Central Committee) was victorious in a constituency which embraced the whole of Moscow, faced by an opponent who had the backing of the party apparatus. This abandonment of 'democratic centralism' went a long way to vitiating also the 'leading role' (a euphemism for monopoly of power) of the Communist Party. The two major pillars of a Communist system had been undermined by the reformist wing of the party leadership itself.

The growing freedom within the Soviet Union – astonishingly, even Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* was serialised in the large-circulation journal *Novy mir* in 1989 – did much to raise expectations throughout Eastern Europe. The change in Soviet foreign policy was, however, the ultimate facilitator of all that happened in 1989. At the Nineteenth Party Conference and again at the United Nations in December 1988, Gorbachev declared that the people of every state had the right to decide for themselves what kind of system they wished to live in. This, he added, was a 'universal principle', allowing no exceptions, and applied both to socialist and capitalist countries. The UN speech was consciously designed to be a 'Fulton in reverse' – to bring to an end the division of Europe and the wider world which had been dramatised by Winston Churchill in his 'iron curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946.

This definitive rejection of the 'Brezhnev doctrine', whereby the Soviet leadership had accorded itself the right to intervene in any Warsaw Pact country in order to 'defend socialism', was, then, the decisive facilitating condition for regime-change in 1989. Important as Ronald Reagan was, and as indeed Pope John Paul II was (his triumphal return to his native Poland in 1979 was pivotal in the rise of Solidarity), neither Reagan's military power nor the Pope's moral authority could bring Communism down. It was the occupants of the Kremlin, not those of the White House or Vatican, who had locked the doors to change in Eastern Europe. It was they who held the keys that could open them.

Longer-term pressures

There were, of course, longer-term reasons for the demise of Communism, although they did not determine why it ended when it did. While command economies could have notable successes in particular areas – including, in the Soviet case, the space programme and weaponry – they were less successful than regulated market economies. China's remarkable economic progress of recent decades is not an exception to the generalisation. It has been achieved by the party leadership's jettisoning of the essential features of a Communist economic system and their embrace of the market and a substantial private sector. However, an authoritarian regime prepared to use the full panoply of coercive power at its disposal, and with a sophisticated system of rewards for conformist behaviour and a hierarchy of sanctions for political deviance, is not doomed to collapse merely by a slowdown in the rate of economic growth or the poor quality of its consumer goods.

Communist systems would have come to an end throughout most of East Europe decades earlier but for the perfectly valid perception of the peoples of Poland, Hungary, East Germany and post-1968 Czechoslovakia that behind their local party bosses stood a Soviet military superpower willing to use whatever means they found necessary to retain what they saw as their legitimate geopolitical gains from the Second World War. This reality had been amply demonstrated in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Poland was the most consistently obstreperous barracks in the camp, but there, too, leading oppositionists could not wholly rule out the possibility of a Soviet invasion.

Politburo minutes show that the Kremlin seriously contemplated military intervention in Poland in August 1980, only to decide that this would create more problems than it resolved. Throughout 1981 the Brezhnev leadership put pressure on their Polish counterparts to institute their own crackdown. With the imposition of martial law in December 1981, this happened. Polish workers had shaken the foundations of their supposed 'workers' state', yet Solidarity was reduced to a shadow of its former self in the years between 1982 and 1987, living an underground existence and holding meetings clandestinely in church halls. It was transformative change in Moscow in 1987–88 which enabled Solidarity to re-emerge and play a decisive role in Poland's transition to democratic rule.

Figure 3. *Speakers at the evening panel discussion on 15 October 2009: Professor Ferenc Miszlivetz, Professor Timothy Garton Ash, Professor Robert Legvold, Professor Archie Brown FBA (Chairman), Dr Lilia Shevtsova, Dr Andrei Grachev, Bridget Kendall. The occasion produced a fascinating range of perspectives from the contributors, whether as western observers, or as key participants at the heart of events in 1989. The presentations are available as a podcast from www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/*

Figure 4. *Vaclav Havel waves from a balcony in Prague's Wenceslas Square, on 10 December 1989, after the constitution of the new Czechoslovak government. Photo: Lubomir Kotek/AFP/Getty Images.*

Over the long run it was not only the failures of Communist systems which eroded their authority. Some of the successes did so as well. Karl Marx argued that capitalism contained the seeds of its own destruction. By nurturing a highly educated population, Communism planted the seeds of *its* destruction. The more educated the population were and the larger the higher education sector, the more dissatisfied the recipients of that education became with the censorship and with their inability to enjoy the same rights of foreign travel as their professional counterparts in Western countries. Of those who *were* allowed to travel abroad, party intellectuals from research institutes made up a disproportionately large number, in addition to party and government officials.

Travel does not automatically broaden the mind. Former Soviet Foreign Ministers Vyacheslav Molotov and Andrei Gromyko offered in their time ample evidence to the contrary. Yet foreign travel in many cases did play an important part in changing mindsets. Groucho Marx, not Karl, once asked: 'Who are you going to believe? Me, or your own eyes?' Gorbachev was an especially important example of an official who preferred the evidence of his own eyes to Soviet propaganda about life in the West when he made a number of short visits to Western Europe in the 1970s. Alexander Yakovlev spent an entire decade as Soviet Ambassador to Canada. He returned to Moscow in 1983 much more critical of the Soviet system than he had been ten years earlier.

In the course of 1989 the pace of change in Eastern Europe was driven by a combination of massive popular discontent, emerging oppositional associations, remarkable individuals such as Lech Wałesa and Václav Havel, and in at least the case of Hungary (especially in the person of Imre Pozsgay) by serious reformists within the Communist leadership. Massive street demonstrations, whether in Budapest (for the reburial of Imre Nagy), Warsaw, Leipzig or Prague, played a large part in hastening the end of Communist rule. Yet that end would have come far earlier had the peoples of East-Central Europe not believed that overt resistance would merely make a bad situation worse. In this anniversary year, the pictures from 1989 tell an important part of the story, but far from all that matters. The key decisions that made the events of that year possible were taken not in 1989, but in 1988, and they were made not in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin or Prague, but in Moscow.

Archival research for Professor Archie Brown's book, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (Bodley Head, London, 2009), was supported by a British Academy Small Research Grant.

Did Civil Resistance End the Soviet Empire?

A second panel discussion, held at the British Academy on 27 October 2009, provided another perspective on the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The new book *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, edited by Sir Adam Roberts FBA and Professor Timothy Garton Ash, examines the experience of non-violent action from Gandhi to the present. To discuss the specific role of civil resistance in ending the Soviet Empire, the two editors were joined on the panel by Dr Janusz Onyszkiewicz (a leading figure in Solidarity in Poland in the 1980s, and Polish defence minister in the 1990s) and General Lord Guthrie (who was a British army commander in Germany at the time the Wall fell). The discussion identified the significance of the 10 years of resistance by the Solidarity movement, which set an early example for other East Europeans, and the dramatic events at the Wall on 9 November 1989, when the huge crowds of East Berliners turned a planned concession by the regime into a victory for people power. A recording can be heard via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/

Speakers at the evening panel discussion on 27 October 2009: Timothy Garton Ash, Adam Roberts (President of the British Academy), Janusz Onyszkiewicz, and Charles Guthrie.