‘Twas the Best of Times
The Eastern European Revolutions of 1989

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When Charles Dickens wrote his immortal words, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” he was referring to the period of the French Revolution. As William I. Hitchcock would point out, those words would easily transcend history in describing the period “between 1989 and 1991, [when] political revolution swept over Europe” and communist regimes fell across the eastern half of the continent.¹ From the beginning of this remarkable period of political, economic, and social transformation, various scholars, journalists, and political scientists have viewed events from distinctly different perspectives. In this essay, I will attempt to unravel the conflicting opinions of those who have shared their observations, whether optimistic, neutral, or pessimistic, across time as those reforming societies evolved from the momentous revolutionary days of 1989.

Timothy Garton Ash was among the first to weigh in with his scholarship in the aftermath of the Eastern European “refolutions,” what he termed a mixture of reform and revolution, and he did so with a great flourish of optimism.² He had considerable advantage in establishing the initial discourse on the period, as he spent time in the field with the leadership of opposition movements, especially with Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia, while serving as a journalist in the region. Garton Ash chronicled the velvet revolutions from the inside in The Magic Lantern, placing great emphasis on the contributions of Václav Havel and other intellectuals for creating the “politics of the revolution.”³ He indicated that a new ideology of revolution was encouraged by the intellectuals, once the opening was provided by Gorbachev to be able to think and speak

more openly. He also credited the impact of the Helsinki accords and the “ruling elite’s loss of belief in its own right to rule” as critical factors in the ability of opposition groups throughout the region to overthrow their communist masters.4

Like Garton Ash, Daniel Chirot indicates that the leadership of the revolutions lay in the hands of intellectuals, who “disseminated [the] sense of moral despair and corruption [of the party elite] to the public.”5 From Chirot’s perspective, the beginning of the end for the Communist bloc was to be found both in the breakdown of authority in Poland and in a crisis of confidence in the USSR. As Gorbachev indicated his hands-off policy toward eastern-bloc satellites, the communist governments in those satellites began to fall apart under the pressure of internal civic unrest which stemmed from the inherent weaknesses of the communist industrial model. He explains that Russia became a rustbelt, allowing the rest of the world to pass her by.

Paul Hollander echoes Chirot’s belief that structural economic dysfunction was the catalyst for accelerating civil opposition in the eastern bloc. With escalating economic failures resulting in production and distribution problems, material scarcities were rampant throughout the region. He explains that communism was always alien to Eastern Europeans and was only kept in place as a result of the threat of Moscow’s military intervention. Coupled with worsening economic conditions, “the opposition became emboldened once it believed that the Soviet army would not again intervene.”6

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Hollander concludes that “communist systems failed... because they could not deliver on their promises.”

Despite the widespread optimism expressed by Garton Ash, Chirot, Hollander and others, reactions varied from the start. Ivo Banac took a more pragmatic view of events in 1990, as he both acknowledged the revolutionary advances that came with the end of communism and the beginning of electoral politics in the region, while expressing his concern that the development of a civil society would not come overnight and that nationalism was rising from the ashes of those former communist regimes. Jan Gross and Norman Naimark each took the middle ground in the early nineties, as well, lauding the accomplishments in Poland and East Germany, respectively, yet reflecting on the difficulties faced by those Poles and Germans who were on the front lines of transition. Naimark’s view of the East Germans thrust into the broader European society represents the conditions encountered by those former communist subjects in other Eastern European countries as well. He indicated that the ruling party had “sought to create a closed, well-ordered, and passive society; that society [was] now exposed to a wide variety of new experiences and challenges.”

Where the optimists were many and the pragmatists were well represented, voices of caution were, however, raised, as well. Two of the most notable voices of dissent from the chorus of jubilation were Ken Jowitt and Ivan Szelenyi. Jowitt saw fascist and authoritarian tradition with little regard for liberal democracy in Eastern Europe. He believed that “the Leninist legacy” would “continue to shape developmental efforts and

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7 Hollander, 123.
outcomes in Eastern Europe [because] Leninist rule reinforced many salient features of traditional culture throughout” the region.⁹ He, thus, expected the eastern bloc countries which overthrew communism to slide back toward authoritarianism as a result of that cultural heritage.

Ivan Szelenyi gave early voice to a much more specific threat, arguing that “a united Germany [might] pose an economic threat to post-Communist Central Europe.”¹⁰ His concern was that an unfettered Germany would rise economically and subject Eastern Europe once again to a position of economic serfdom, going so far as to suggest that a reinvigorated Germany could lean toward a new Anschluss, or annexation of Austria. Szelenyi confidently wrote that “the economic, ethnic, and political problems are formidable. Central Europe is a powder keg that can blow up at any moment.”¹¹

With the writings of the early- to mid-nineteen nineties, there was a strong tendency to look to the antipolitical underpinnings of the opposition movements. As the revolutions neared their five-year anniversary, reactions continued to be mixed, with Rey Koslowski and Friedrich Kratochwil representing the more optimistic end of the spectrum, Gale Stokes representing the school of cautious optimism, and Jeffrey Isaac suggesting caution to those who sought to celebrate the triumph of liberal democracy.

Koslowski and Kratochwil did their work from the overarching perspective of how the communist collapse transformed the international political system. These men argue that the imposition of communism on Eastern Europe had been flawed from its inception, suggesting that it was Stalin’s recognition of those shortcomings that led him

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¹¹ Szelenyi, 241.
to opt for “imperial expansion rather than hegemonic leadership.” Koslowski and Kratochwil, like Garton Ash and Chirot before them, credit intellectuals with fueling dissent within the population of the subject countries. They conclude that “anti-totalitarian movements in Eastern Europe changed the way people thought and felt. This new attitude undermined the legitimacy of communism, which had as an observable result new forms of civil disobedience.”

Stokes centers his argument on the Prague Spring in 1968 being the critical turning point, where intellectuals recognized that socialism could not improve itself. He primarily focuses on the antipolitical nature of the opposition groups Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, Solidarity in Poland, and the Democratic Forum in Hungary. While he pays tribute to the impact of these groups and their leaders, he also accepts the difficulties inherent to the task of rebuilding these societies in the liberal democratic tradition, saying that “the antipolitical strategy of living in truth and creating a civil society has proven less useful” in the postcommunist environment. Yet, Stokes concludes in 1993 that the revolutions of 1989 have a far greater opportunity to take hold in a far shorter period of time than did their American and French predecessors. “Theirs was not a revolution of total innovation, like the great classic revolutions, but rather the shucking off of a failed experiment in favor of an already existing model, pluralist democracy.”

Isaac posits a far more ominous message in 1996, as he reviews the celebration of liberal democratic victory in Eastern Europe. The author explains that the revolutions

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13 Koslowski and Kratochwil, 237.

have come to be seen as the “fulfillment of the democratic opposition to Communism,” but that this was not the intended result. Rather, he argues that the revolutions were much more anti-political in nature. In fact, Isaac laments the loss of purity that he sees as being a result of the politicization of the erstwhile antipolitical movements, suggesting that once you systematize the energy and ideology of the revolutions into a liberal democratic format, you lose the vital essence of the movement... and of the hard-won freedom itself.

As 1999 ushered in the ten-year anniversary of the revolutions, three significant works came on the market, one a new version of Timothy Garton Ash’s influential book, *The Magic Lantern*, and two new collections of work edited by Romanian émigré Vladimir Tismaneanu. Tismaneanu’s *The Revolutions of 1989* and the special spring edition of *East European Politics and Societies* on the lessons of the first postcommunist decade each yielded a variety of opinions which were as mixed as ones had been a few years prior. However, where in 1989 the optimists carried the day, by 1999, the academic world was taking a much more ambivalent view of the unresolved issues surrounding the revolutions.

Tismaneanu sets the stage for both of his collections, saying that the first ten years after the revolutions were “filled with high expectations, noble dreams of justice and freedom, as well as frustration, neuroses, and painful disappointments.” He certainly expressed the positives, writing about the fundamental changes wrought on the political, economic, and cultural environments of Eastern European countries, acknowledging that

“popular sovereignty has replaced the rule of the self-appointed ‘proletarian vanguards,’ [and] the rule of law is now part and parcel of the everyday life.”\(^{17}\) However, he also describes the nationalistic tendencies and the “Leninist legacies,” articulated earlier by Jowitt, which could yet undermine the democratic development of those countries. He further points out that new elites have been accused of hijacking economic reform through privatization and turning it to their own financial advantage.

Garton Ash remained true to the earlier version of his book, but with the addition of an afterward entitled “Ten Years After.” Here as before, the author espouses a healthy optimism writing what we have all come to recognize, 1989 was “the end of the Cold War [and] hastened the end of the Soviet Union.”\(^{18}\) However, he tempers his earlier enthusiasm by recognizing that there was fallout from the revolutions, including a worldwide identity crisis for the left.

Slavenka Drakulic and Grzegorz Ekiert take the middle ground with their essays in \textit{East European Politics and Societies}. Drakulic discusses how intellectuals can work either for or against the ultimate good of society, focusing her work initially on the notorious Radovan Karadzic. She describes the nature of his war crimes, but also points out that he was an intellectual and a poet. Likewise, she discusses Edward Limonov and Slobodon Praljal as intellectuals turned criminal and points out that the shooting war in Croatia and Bosnia was preceded by a media war – “the war of words.”\(^{19}\) Ekiert concedes that the “economic transition will involve enormous social cost… likely to produce prolonged political conflicts and instability, mass protests, and populist


movements.” However, he concludes that, despite hurdles faced during the early years of the transition, there is cause for cautious celebration.

Not all writers in 1999 took quite such an ambivalent tone. There were those who spoke with as great optimism as had been voiced a decade earlier. Among those were Philip Roeder and Norman Naimark. Roeder says that the 1989 revolutions resulted in the creation of new nation-states, “sundered the most fully institutionalized authoritarian regimes,” and “replaced administered systems of production and distribution with markets.” He argues that intellectual ferment played a significant role in the transitions and celebrates the successful national, democratic, and capitalist transformation that took place with the reunification of Germany and in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland.

Naimark, who had taken a more middle-of-the-road posture earlier in the decade based upon the challenging culture that East Germans would be thrust into, speaks with more optimism in 1999 as he takes broader Eastern Europe into consideration. First, he lauds the “national self-discovery and self-realization” which had taken place in the ensuing years and then concludes that what made 1989 different from twentieth-century revolutionary periods was that “potential threats from outside the region are few and the prospects for the peaceful realization of dreams of the original revolution are not bad at all.”

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G. M. Tamás and Melvin Croan represent the counter arguments of pessimism in their 1999 *East European Politics and Societies* essays. Tamás expresses a deep concern for the people, those upon whose aspirations for relief the revolutionary rhetoric was created. From Tamás’ perspective, the people were, indeed, the ones left out of many East European successes, as he observed, “The new popular elites are as indifferent to the fate of the poor as their communist forebears were, popular as they may be. The paternalistic caring of the civil service aristocracy has vanished without a trace. The orgy is accompanied by hunger in the hamlets and in ramshackle council estates of former industrial towns. Who will look after those?”

Croan expresses his concern directly in response to Garton Ash, saying that the “refolutions” may have been applicable to Czechoslovakia and Hungary, but not to all Eastern European countries across the board. Instead, Croan argues, “cynicism, corruption, and demoralization” have taken the day. This author says that the challenges facing the opposition as they became the establishment were myriad and that the postcommunist political class came up short in addressing political, economic and social issues. Nationalism was running amok and extremists were dictating the agenda in many locales; only Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic could be considered economically healthy; and great risk remained in how German reunification might play into ongoing political equations.

William I Hitchcock and Tony Judt introduced two new histories of Europe into the discourse in 2003 and 2005, respectively, which deal with the overarching themes of

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the continent from 1945 forward and expand the discourse related to the revolutions on 1989. As one might expect from the continuing juxtaposition of optimism and pessimism that flowed from the collapse of communism, each of these authors bring a unique and contradictory argument to the table.

Hitchcock takes a generally positive position on the nature and outcomes of the 1989 revolutions, yet also introduces a level of reality with his treatment of the disappointments which developed along the way. Primarily he gives credit to the intellectuals for keeping the opposition alive through very bleak times in the decades preceding the events of the late nineteen-eighties. Early in his synthesis, he expresses the core victory achieved during the dark years of Soviet control, saying that “embers [of reform] were kept burning by the courageous efforts of thousands of dissidents who circulated banned publications, met in small groups, and smuggled their literary work to the West, [as] they simply tried to sustain the sinews of an oppositional life that could counteract the dehumanizing banalities of Communist rule.”

Hitchcock tells us that the world witnessed the end of the Cold War, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, the beginning of Eastern Europe’s foray into democratic politics, and the demise of the Soviet Union in just a few short years. However, the author also suggests that Europe has notoriously and ironically demonstrated a propensity over the past half century to dash the hopes of its populace. In evidence of that point, he reminds us that the upheavals in Eastern Europe also included the Yugoslavian civil war, “nationalism, ethnic chauvinism, and race war,” and growing immigration barriers.

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25 Hitchcock, 4.
26 Hitchcock, 343.
Never one to praise the intellectuals, Judt takes a pessimistic view of the revolutions’ basis and ultimate outcomes in *Postwar*. His argument challenges traditional views of the period in several key areas. First, he describes Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, as having been naïve in his belief that he could restructure the Soviet system while maintaining communist control. Judt says that “communism depended on control – indeed communism was control,” so Gorbachev’s glasnost, or openness, was an invitation for political disaster. Second, he argues that the American model of free market capitalism was never the goal of the revolutions. He writes that “the opposite of communism was not ‘capitalism,’ but ‘Europe.’ Europe stood – squarely and simply - for normalcy and the modern way of life.” Where Judt acknowledges tentative success in several Eastern European countries, he points out disappointments in Romania and Bulgaria, economic problems in reunified Germany, and the break-up of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

In an era such as that of 1989 and its aftermath, one can easily recognize the critical importance of dissent. In reviewing the observations of those academicians and journalists who have written about the period, we can also recognize that dissent remains alive and well. We have seen where very wise historians have come to dramatically different conclusions, confirming the critical role which those intellectuals continue to play today.

While honoring the various conclusions offered up by these celebrated intellectuals, it remains important to consider the basic tenets of what transpired in 1989.

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28 Judt, 630.
Those revolutions discussed here were a watershed event of the twentieth-century, redefining national boundaries, national identities, and political, economic, and social order. They were largely non-violent, termed velvet revolutions for the peaceful manner in which most regime changes took place. They ushered in a new age of antipolitics, based upon civil society as opposed to grandiose nationalistic aims. They largely followed the liberal trajectory based upon ideals established in an earlier time, during the original Age of Revolutions.

As Gale Stokes so eloquently put it, “every end has a beginning… [and] beginnings are only that.”29 Great things were accomplished and great challenges remain. Much of Eastern Europe has come home to the greater “Europe.” We have seen nine former Eastern European states enter the European Union, including Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and a united Germany. Likewise, those same countries can now be counted among the membership of the NATO alliance. However, ethnic tensions and nationalism have torn at the fabrics of other former eastern bloc nations. Russia has slid back toward conservatism under the Putin administration. The world remains a mystifying labyrinth, with change afoot in all places and transition the norm.

29 Stokes, 259.
Selected Bibliography


