

# The Making of a (Partly) New Order

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According to the narrative of the cold war that has become conventional wisdom, the end went like this: We (the United States and its allies) won; they (the Soviet Union and its Eastern European minions) lost. But history, of course, is messier than that.

We all know that 1989 marked the end of the cold war and the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. What is less certain is precisely why the cold war ended then. In the United States, a triumphalist, zero-sum interpretation has taken hold among those who embrace the victors' privilege to write, and simplify, the history.

But what if someone wrote a history that told the story from all sides, one that drew not only on memoirs and press accounts and the earlier work of scholars but also on the archives of nearly all the principal parties to the conflict, a history that included interviews with the diplomats, politicians, and activists who took part in the events? And what if someone wrote this history analytically, parsing out the major decisions and events, remaining sensitive to the grays that shade human behavior, and avoiding definitive, black-and-white judgments designed to score political points?

Mary Elise Sarotte of the University of Southern California has written such a history. It is called *1989: The Struggle To Create Post-Cold War Europe*. A masterful work, fluently written, it weaves into its narrative diverse perspectives that help tell the story of the demise of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe and the unification of Germany after nearly half a century of division.

## VISION-FREE

Actually, *1989* tells two stories. One of them focuses on East Germany, the end of Soviet rule there, and the lack of widespread violence surrounding that transition (in contrast to Romania

and Yugoslavia in the years to come). The other story, which Sarotte believes is more important to understand, describes how the end of the cold war marked a new beginning, a new order—yet an order that was, and remains, without new institutions or a new political-military architecture, in part because, as President George H. W. Bush said, he didn't do “the vision thing.” Nor has anyone since.

The first of Sarotte's narratives features Washington, Bonn, and Paris striving together—via the personalities of Bush, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and French President François Mitterrand—to grasp the new reality and openings created by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and by his desire to reinvigorate a sclerotic Soviet Union. Sarotte vividly captures the events that rapidly followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and how Kohl especially was able to use them to his, and Germany's, advantage.

The second story delineates a new international politics that has continued to this day, but one still based on cold war institutions and, to a great degree, cold war thinking. Arguing against Francis Fukuyama's view that a new post-history beyond the old geopolitics began with the end of the cold war, Sarotte sees lost opportunities with regard to Russia and the continuation of a post-World War II mentality, according to which NATO was seen as essential even as the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact became history.

Twenty years after Germany's reunification, the postwar structure of NATO and the European Union still secures Europe's political and economic foundations. Whether this is necessarily a negative outcome is unclear, and Sarotte does not argue that it is. But it does entail loss, in the sense of squandered chances to develop a new strategic architecture. Sarotte's book in this respect conveys a much-needed appreciation that history, even at its hinges, is anything but simple. ■

**1989: The Struggle To Create Post-Cold War Europe**  
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