

Reviewed by Jeffrey Gedmin, *American Enterprise Institute and the New Atlantic Initiative*

On 13 August 1989, East Germany’s Communist Party daily, *Neues Deutschland*, marked the 28th anniversary of the construction of the Berlin Wall in the usual way by hailing the “anti-fascist defense wall” as a source of stability and peace in Europe and a protector of socialism in East Germany. Three months later, the Wall was gone. By March 1990, the Communists were gone. By October, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) itself had disappeared. The Soviet Union, its entire empire now in shambles, was soon to follow.

A number of excellent books and useful memoirs in recent years have contributed to a deeper understanding of events in this dizzying period of international upheaval and change. A new book by Georgetown University professor Angela E. Stent and a newly translated book by three German scholars—Karl-Dieter Opp, Peter Voss, and Christiane Gern—both make interesting and distinct contributions to the ongoing discussion and debate.

Stent’s book, focusing on ties between Germany and Russia both past and present, is divided into three parts. The first shows that the Soviet Union’s relationship with East and West Germany was a central feature of the Cold War. The second provides a detailed analysis of Soviet decision making during the crucial moments of the 1989 East German revolution and the subsequent negotiations over Germany’s unification. The third part of the book looks at Russian-German relations over the last eight years, and assesses the impact of this relationship on European security.

Stent has synthesized a great deal of secondary literature, carefully reviewed new archival material, and conducted numerous interviews with key participants, including former German, Russian, and American officials. In some instances her conclusions reaffirm the findings of earlier analyses. For example, Stent observes that even though it was never Mikhail Gorbachev’s intention to undermine the Soviet bloc, the Soviet leader did “set in motion a chain reaction that generated its own momentum [and] accelerated the fall of Communism in each successive country” (p. 82). Elsewhere, Stent provides fascinating details about the unraveling of East Germany. She demonstrates that the East German leader Erich Honecker failed to recognize the GDR’s increasingly precarious domestic and international position, and that other East German Politbüro members scrambled to react. By autumn 1989, Egon Krenz, Honecker’s heir apparent, and Günter Schabowski, secretary of the Berlin Communist Party organization, had begun secretly plotting to oust Honecker; Krenz even maintains that Gorbachev actively encouraged their enterprise.
Gorbachev’s desire to see Honecker removed is understandable, but once Honecker was out of the way, why did the Soviet Union give up so quickly on the GDR, the crown jewel of the Warsaw Pact? Why did Gorbachev assent to Germany’s unification and even its full membership in NATO? Stent concludes that such decisions were arrived at “almost serendipitously, with few clear decision-making landmarks” (p. 107). Russian elite opinion was deeply divided on these questions. Moreover, according to Stent, Gorbachev and Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze utterly lacked any clear, “coherent strategy” when they entered discussions on German unification (p. 145). By this time, Gorbachev’s only clear policy seemed to be the renunciation of the use of force to resolve intra-bloc crises.

Most of the East Germans who participated in the growing demonstrations in the autumn of 1989 seemed to recognize this shift in Soviet policy. In surveys conducted by Karl-Dieter Opp and his colleagues, 69 percent of the respondents expected a crackdown from East German security forces during the GDR’s revolution, but only one-third believed that Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops would intervene if upheaval in the GDR escalated (p. 140). One can surmise that this perception reduced fears of what became known as the “Chinese solution” (named after the crackdown in Tianamen Square) to curb popular protest in the GDR, at least in the eyes of ordinary East Germans.

Opp, Voss, and Gern have compiled an illuminating collection of data and observations about what motivated the citizens who participated in the East German revolution. Although the authors believe that Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost constituted a “revolution from above” (and Gorbachev’s central influence on regime change in the GDR is not challenged by the authors), they argue that in East Germany it was ordinary citizens who, with little warning or organization, took to the streets and, in the end, actually forced the East German Communists from power.

Opp and his colleagues surveyed 1,300 people in the city of Leipzig, where the revolution began. They supplemented these data by conducting detailed interviews with nineteen individuals who played prominent roles in the events of autumn 1989. They conclude that the 1989 revolution was spontaneous. Apart from the failed uprising of June 1953—and other minor incidents—East Germans had virtually no experience in protest; nor did the existing small opposition groups play any major organizational role. The East German revolution was, the authors maintain, a “revolution without revolutionaries . . . [with] no charismatic leaders, no analytical thinkers, not even real fanatics” (p. 155).

How did it happen that so many ordinary people were suddenly emboldened? What were the goals of the protesters? Why did the revolution remain peaceful? The authors make note of the difficult economic conditions in the GDR. The shortage of ordinary goods and services was appalling. Many people waited three months for an umbrella and years for bath tiles. Between 1970 and 1989, the number of taxis in the GDR increased by only about 260. “Trying to call a taxi in GDR times was next to impossible,” the authors write. “The state of streets, highways, and railways was catastrophic. There was no domestic air transportation. Late or cancelled trains were the norm” (p. 56). Add to this the severe environmental degradation, the frequently poor
and hazardous working conditions, and the ability of most East Germans to receive broadcasts of West German television, allowing them to make stark comparisons with the West. These, the authors argue, were important in stoking the disenchantment of ordinary East Germans.

Still, Opp and his colleagues conclude that it was primarily political dissatisfaction, not social or economic discontent, that spurred people to take part in the demonstrations in Leipzig. Freedom of travel, freedom of speech, freedom from the power and repression of the notorious secret police, the Stasi—these were the central goals that East German demonstrators were pursuing as they suddenly chose to risk life and limb.

The protesters themselves relied on nonviolent tactics for a number of reasons—and were encouraged by opposition groups and the church to avoid violence—but the authors also ask why the regime and its security forces were unable to prevent the revolution. It is striking that the Communist regime chose not to use force to crush popular protest. It is also striking that Erich Honecker himself often dismissed Stasi reports about domestic discontent, arguing that the analyses looked “like a summary of the reports by the Western press about the GDR” (p. 173). According to the Stasi’s own instructions, the use of armed force was indeed considered in the autumn of 1989 particularly in connection with a major demonstration in Leipzig on 9 October. Police units, combat groups, and Stasi officers had all assembled at and near the Karl Marx Platz in Leipzig. “Yet available materials,” write the authors, “do not show unequivocally who made the decision not to dissolve the demonstration” (p. 179).

Communists in both Moscow and East Berlin may well have lost their nerve by 1989 and decided not to defend Communist rule with the use of force. It is also possible, however, that one of modern history’s most remarkable events—the demise of Communism—took place because Communist leaders made serendipitous decisions and had no coherent strategy to deal with the upheavals they confronted. These two books do not provide a final answer to this puzzle, but they do help us a great deal in confronting it.


Reviewed by John Van Oudenaren, Library of Congress

This impressive volume consists of papers originally written for a conference in Cortona, Italy in September 1994. It thus is based on archival research conducted by West European and Russian scholars in the initial period of openness following the collapse of Communism, when documents were more readily available. The book covers three main topics: the Soviet Union and the postwar European order; the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) and the consolidation of a Soviet bloc; and relations between the Soviet Union and Western Europe. Italy is heavily represented, both among the authors and in the subjects of individual chapters, but the approach