

The Dynamics of 1989

Reassessing a Momentous Year

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Stephen Kotkin, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York: The Modern Library, 2009), xviii + 197 pp.

Of all the books published in 2009 marking the twentieth anniversary of the upheavals that brought an end to Communism in Eastern Europe, the one I enjoyed the most was Stephen Kotkin's *Uncivil Society*.¹ The book is written with elegance and wit (as is typical of Kotkin's work) and provides an excellent corrective to more romanticized accounts of the events of 1989. *Uncivil Society* is a follow-on but also in some sense a prelude to Kotkin's superb analysis of the demise and aftermath of the Soviet Union, *Armageddon Averted*, which was first published in 2001 and then republished in 2009 in a slightly revised and corrected edition.²

In contrast to authors who attribute the collapse of Communism to the long, heroic struggles of opposition movements in the East European countries, Kotkin convincingly argues that in all the Warsaw Pact countries other than Poland nothing like a true civil society actually existed. Kotkin avers that scholars would be much better off focusing on what he calls "uncivil society," the Communist Party establishment (including the state security apparatus and military commanders) that until the late 1980s had been staunchly committed to the preservation of Communist rule. Kotkin maintains that the de-

1. The title *Uncivil Society* has been used by several previous authors, none of whom conceives of the term in the way Kotkin does. See, for example, Richard Boyd, *Uncivil Society: The Perils of Pluralism and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004); Peter Kopecky and Cas Mudde, eds., *Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Routledge, 2003); and Judith Squire, ed., *Uncivil Societies* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997).

2. Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For my assessment of the original edition of this book (published in 2001) see Mark Kramer, "The Demise and Residue of the Soviet Union," *SAIS Review*, Vol. XXI, No. 2 (Summer-Fall 2002), pp. 339–347.

mise of East European Communism in 1989 is best understood as the implosion of the uncivil societies in these countries.

The process of implosion, in Kotkin's depiction, was complex, but the fundamental wellspring of it in every case was Mikhail Gorbachev's determination to eschew the use of Soviet military force in Eastern Europe, no matter what the consequences. For a long while after Gorbachev began carrying out major changes in Soviet foreign policy, hardline Communist leaders in Eastern Europe held out at least some hope that, if an extreme situation arose, the Soviet Union would not allow Communist regimes to collapse in any of the member-states of the Warsaw Pact, especially East Germany. But as events in Eastern Europe accelerated in 1989 and Gorbachev refrained from intervening to forestall the collapse of Communist rule, the East European hardliners increasingly realized, to their horror, that they no longer could count on Soviet military protection against destabilizing unrest. This dawning realization undermined the morale of the highest leaders in Eastern Europe and spurred East European elites at all levels to abandon their uncivil society in ever larger numbers, a phenomenon that Kotkin (drawing on Steven Solnick's illuminating study of the Komsomol as a microcosm of the collapse of central Soviet institutions) characterizes as a "political bank run."³ Essentially, elites in Eastern Europe had an incentive to leave the party establishment while they still had some hope of gaining from their defection, in much the same way that depositors desperately try to withdraw all their money from the local bank if they learn that the bank is about to go under. The implosion of the uncivil societies thus had a rapidly accelerating dynamic.

Kotkin emphasizes that the loss of will within the Communist establishment was crucially fueled by economic constraints, especially the pronounced slowdown of economic growth and the debilitating accumulation of foreign debts, and in most cases by mass mobilization. He writes that whenever "the uncivil society was determined to hold on, it had to be, and was, given a shove by mass social mobilization" (p. 7). Despite the absence of civil society, "mass protests broke out" and spread through the region once the uncivil societies no longer had an external guarantor. Millions of East Europeans who never would have dared to take part in protests before 1989 were suddenly willing to engage in collective action.

Kotkin's book is immensely rewarding and insightful, but he presents his case with a bluntness that has raised the hackles of some readers. When I was on a panel at a conference in Los Angeles in November 2010 that discussed *Uncivil Society*, most of the participants accused Kotkin of ignoring social mo-

3. Steven L. Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

bilization and discounting the role of people who were not part of the Communist establishment. This charge is wide of the mark. Kotkin repeatedly stresses that in most cases mass mobilization gave the uncivil society a strong push out the door. The mass protests play an important part in Kotkin's account, which highlights the "cascade of activism on the part of formerly inert masses" (p. 8). But what Kotkin argues, in contrast to many previous authors, is that the surge of protests did not emanate from an already well-developed civil society in any country other than Poland. The literature on the supposed emergence of civil societies in Soviet-bloc countries is, in Kotkin's view, "claptrap."

My only significant reservation about Kotkin's argument is his heavy emphasis on economic pressures. No doubt in Poland, with its rampant shortages, high inflation, and soaring hard-currency debts, economic pressures were severe, but this factor in itself would not normally cause dictators to lose their will to rule. The economic constraints facing Poland in 1980–1981 were in many respects more onerous than in 1989, yet General Wojciech Jaruzelski's regime (under relentless, vehement pressure from the Soviet Union) mustered the will in December 1981 to impose martial law with remarkable effectiveness. The Polish regime confronted a rebellious society in 1981, led by a Solidarity opposition movement with nearly 10 million members (almost half the adult population), yet the regime successfully crushed Solidarity and introduced military rule with surprisingly little bloodshed. The suppression of Solidarity in December 1981 is a textbook case for authoritarian rulers to study if they might someday want to quell mass protests with minimal casualties.

The economic travails in Poland in 1981 did not eliminate the Jaruzelski regime's determination to maintain Communist rule. In 1988–1989, officials in Poland's Ministry of Internal Affairs again drafted plans for the possible imposition of martial law in Poland, but the Polish government did not end up seriously pursuing the plans.⁴ What changed in 1989, as compared to Decem-

4. "Instrukcje w sprawie postępowania wobec osób zagrażających bezpieczeństwu i obronności państwa w okresie stanu wojennego," Nr. 803-A (Top Secret), compiled by the Rzeszów branch of the Security Service, 13 June 1989, in Arch. OUP, Sygn. 22300, Tom (T.) 12. See also "Wykaz osób przewidzianych do przeprowadzenia rozmów ostrzegawczych na wypadek wprowadzenia stanu wyjątkowego," Memorandum No. OA-S-003/89 (Secrecy of Special Importance), 13 June 1989, from Lieutenant-Colonel Józef Gaj, deputy head of the MSW regional branch in Rzeszów, in Archiwum Delegatury Urzędu Ochrony Państwa w Rzeszowie (ADUOPR), Sygn. 617/44/90, Wydział V WUSW w Rzeszowie; and "Wykaz osób przewidzianych do internowania na wypadek stanu wyjątkowego," Memorandum No. OA-S-002/89 (Secrecy of Special Importance), 13 June 1989, from Major Andrzej Czerwiński, deputy head of 5th Department of the MSW regional branch in Rzeszów, in ADUOPR, Sygn. 617/44/90, Wydział V WUSW w Rzeszowie. Other valuable documents are reproduced in Jan Draus and Zbigniew Nawrocki, eds., *Przeciw Solidarności 1980–1989: Rzeszowska opozycja w tajnych archiwach Ministerstwa Spraw Wewnętrznych* (Rzeszów, Poland: Zarząd regionu NSZZ "Solidarność" w Rzeszowie, 2000).

ber 1981, was the stance taken by the Soviet Union. That is a sufficient explanation for the change in the Polish regime's approach in 1989.

In other East European countries the role of economic considerations in the collapse of elite morale in 1989 was even less salient. In Czechoslovakia, for example, foreign debt was low, and macroeconomic conditions were sound. Czechoslovakia was never close to an economic crisis in 1989. The plunging morale of Czechoslovak Communist elites had nothing to do with economic trends; it had everything to do with the growing realization that the Czechoslovak Communist regime would no longer enjoy Soviet protection against mass internal unrest. In Hungary, unlike in Czechoslovakia, large foreign debts had accumulated (and indeed on a per-capita basis were higher than in Poland), but economic pressures were not what spurred the Hungarian authorities to accept drastic political changes in 1988–1989.

Even though grave economic problems in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s caused anxiety among elites and reinforced public disaffection with the Communist regimes, economic privation had long been a feature of life in Eastern Europe. Grievances about this matter had spawned mass unrest from time to time when dramatic new hardships were suddenly imposed, and elites worried a good deal about how to handle this issue. But the upheavals of 1989 were attributable not to these concerns but to fundamental changes in the structure of political opportunities. The Soviet Union's role in establishing Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and the subordination of those regimes to Soviet preferences and policies for many years thereafter, had thwarted efforts by the East European governments to acquire genuine legitimacy among their populations. The depth of popular opposition to the Communist regimes had been evident many times in the past—with the uprisings in Czechoslovakia and East Germany in June 1953, the rebellions in Poland and Hungary in June and October 1956, the public acclaim for the Prague Spring in 1968, and the rise of Solidarity in Poland in 1980–1981—but fundamental change during these earlier periods was infeasible because of the Soviet Union's commitment to uphold Communist rule, if necessary through the use of military force. Gorbachev's decision in 1989 to abandon that commitment drastically altered the structure of political opportunities, undermining the morale of East European hardliners and paving the way for mass political protests.

Kotkin aptly depicts the change in Soviet policy as the fundamental source of the events of 1989, and he is right that economic constraints were a crucial part of the story. But the emphasis he gives to concerns about pressures from foreign debts (colorfully described in the book as a giant Ponzi scheme) in undermining the will of East European Communist elites is excessive. The collapse of elite morale was ultimately driven by the dawning realization that

the Soviet Union would no longer prevent the downfall of Communist rule. Had it not been for that, the regimes never would have given in to pressures of other sorts.

Kotkin's outstanding book is a major contribution to the literature on the events of 1989 and has instilled greater attention to the role of "uncivil societies" in other political upheavals, including those in Iran in 2009 and in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. With the 25th anniversary of the events of 1989 now looming, Kotkin's analysis is well worth re-reading.