universal declines. Yet often forgotten in the many critiques of “big” development and modernization is that what was an experience of dislocation and oppression for some was freedom and unprecedented opportunity for others. On this topic, Marshal Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981) remains a useful guide for historians trying to understand the allure and impact of, and resistance to, “high modernist” development. Precisely because ambitious projects attacked local hierarchies, they had a leveling effect that opened up possibilities for those previously on the margins, including women. Community development, by contrast, often locked those earlier hierarchies in place. Historians of U.S. foreign policy have made important contributions to debates about development and foreign aid, but their impact will be even greater if they can connect their research into diplomacy, ideas, and culture with a closer reading of how these interventions play out on the ground.


Reviewed by Alpo Rusi, Helsinki University

In this well-documented book, Mary Elise Sarotte analyzes the key events in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the autumn of 1989 that led to the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November. In Sarotte’s view the opening of the Wall resulted first from unpredictable human factors, including ordinary citizens’ courage to protest Communist rule; second, from the mistakes of key decision-makers in the East German Socialist Unity Party; (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or SED); and third, from Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s refusal to countenance the East German regime’s wish to use force against civilians.

Sarotte challenges the common view that Communism lost because it was “contained” by the Western countries and in particular by U.S. President Ronald Reagan. Sarotte presents excellent arguments for her thesis, but the truth may be more complicated. However, *The Collapse* is an important contribution to understanding the specific human factors involved in the end of the Cold War in the autumn of 1989.

One can agree with Sarotte that the sudden opening of the Berlin Wall, so long the concrete symbol of the Cold War, constituted a major surprise even for the intelligence communities and policymakers in both East and West. The chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), Helmut Kohl, would not have paid a state visit to Poland one day before if the Bundesnachrichtendienst (West German foreign intelligence service) had informed him about the forthcoming events in East Berlin. The opening was not even wanted in some of the capitals of Western Europe, fearing that it might undermine Gorbachev. Furthermore, why did thousands of East Germans risk their freedom and lives just days before the collapse by trying to escape
the country if change was imminent? Today we know that a de facto shoot-to-kill policy for escapees remained in place even after the mass emigration through Czechoslovakia was in full flow during the summer of 1989.

Sarotte mostly neglects systemic analyses of the Cold War. The Germans had been uncomfortable with the division of Europe, but the superpowers had by and large been satisfied with the status quo—or, as Sarotte correctly describes it, “the brutal status quo” (p. 6). Economic problems, the arms race, and foreign military adventures had weakened the Soviet imperium, and East Germany had become more dependent on West Germany. The push for unification was vindicated by various measures undertaken by the West German government, such as choosing the small city of Bonn, rather than a big city, to be the capital of the country. Furthermore, instead of a constitution, the FRG had its Basic Law, whose article 146 stated that “the Constitution would take its place at some unspecified date when the German people could freely decide upon it” (p. 6). West Germany’s long-term goal for unification also played an important role in encouraging the East Germans.

Sarotte has scrutinized archival materials of the East German Ministry for State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, or Stasi) and those of the SED. She is able to reconstruct the decision-making chaos in the highest East German party organs, the SED Politbüro and Central Committee, from September to the collapse of the wall. Erich Honecker, the party leader since 1971, was willing to use force against the protesters. Sarotte describes how China’s deployment of the People’s Liberation Army against student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989 had appalled nearly all foreign observers—except those in the East German Politbüro. “East Berlin had earned the gratitude of Beijing by praising the Chinese for their decisive action” (p. 43). Honecker’s deputy, Egon Krenz, even visited China to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in September 1989. Average citizens of the GDR, however, were horrified by the regime’s support for such violence. Krenz’s visit was well covered in the East German media, and during his trip mass protests in East German cities were brutally suppressed by the police and state security agents, and thousands of East Germans tried to escape to the West via Hungary.

During Gorbachev’s visit to East Berlin in early October 1989 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the GDR, Honecker’s colleagues on the SED Politbüro realized that he had lost the support of Moscow. Despite these signals Honecker still insisted on 16 October that the demonstrations should be crushed with Stasi special forces and an aerial assault by paratroopers. By this stage, however, as Sarotte avers, Honecker “had lost too much ground” (p. 78). Stasi Minister Erich Mielke forwarded to Krenz a report showing that Honecker’s hard line was generating sympathy for the protest movement not only among workers but also among party members throughout East Germany. The following day during a Politbüro meeting, a coup was mounted against Honecker, and he was removed. Mielke, who had earlier shared Honecker’s position, had changed his line by the time of the meeting, declaring: “We simply cannot start shooting with tanks.” But, as Sarotte notes, “once the coup was publicized, it did not have the hoped-for effect” (p. 88). Too little too late.
Under increasing pressure, Krenz desperately tried to find a solution for loosening the travel restrictions because, as he stated at a Politbüro meeting, “the Czech comrades” were complaining bitterly. At the time, more than 4,000 East Germans were in the West German embassy in Prague. Krenz asked a small working group to draft a statement in the name of the GDR Council of Ministers, and it was discussed in the SED Politbüro in the early afternoon of 9 November. “While these discussions were taking place, the peaceful revolution in East Germany kept going from strength to strength” (p. 95).

Sarotte describes how a SED Politbüro member, Günter Schabowski, was supposed to clarify the loosening of travel restrictions during a televised press conference on 9 November. He was supposed to use the text approved at the SED Politbüro meeting a few hours before. But he had missed most of the meeting and did not have the text immediately at hand. Unprepared, he instead read out routine agenda matters from the Politbüro meeting protocol, almost forgetting to mention the text until an Italian journalist asked a simple question about travel possibilities for East Germans. Schabowski then “accidentally” said, “[the] party has decided to issue a regulation that will make it possible for every citizen . . . to emigrate.” The next question was: “When does this go into force?” Schabowski, who had finally found the text he was supposed to have used earlier, hurriedly spotted a phrase and read it out, “Right away.”

One more decision was needed. The Stasi officer in charge of the checkpoint at Bornholmer Strasse, Harald Jäger, had to decide how to interpret Schabowski’s comment. “Should we shoot all these people or should we open up,” he wondered (p. 146). A crowd numbering in the tens of thousands was awaiting his decision in the streets of East Berlin. At 11:30 p.m. Jäger called his commanding officer, Rudi Ziegerhorn, and said he was going to let the people out. Ziegerhorn disagreed, but Jäger did not care and opened the gate—an act of defiance that vindicates the main finding of The Collapse: namely, that a single individual can matter during the turning points of history.


Reviewed by Tvrtko Jakovina, University of Zagreb

This volume is published by Routledge in its “Studies in the Modern History of Asia” series. The three editors—Nada Boškovska, Nataša Mišković, and Harald Fischer-Tiné—are Swiss scholars at the University of Zurich, the University of Basel, and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, respectively. Fischer-Tiné is a specialist on South Asian colonial history; Mišković and Boškovska focus primarily on different aspects of Yugoslav history. Although the listing of three editors might imply that the book is polished and unified, with essays smoothly grouped around