

*Imposing, Maintaining, and Tearing Open the Iron Curtain: The Cold War and East-Central Europe, 1945–1989*. Edited by Mark Kramer and Vít Smetana. (The Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series.) Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014. xviii + 563 pp.

Recently, an ambitious work was published under the editorship of Mark Kramer and Vít Smetana on the history of East Central Europe in the period beginning with the end of World War II and concluding with the fall of communism in the Eastern Bloc in 1989. The volume, entitled *Imposing, Maintaining, and Tearing Open the Iron Curtain: The Cold War and East-Central Europe, 1945–1989*, consists of twenty-four essays organized into four chapters. The essays in the first chapter deal with the period of the formation of the Iron Curtain. The opening essay, which was written by Kramer, examines the goals of Moscow's politics and policies with regards to Eastern Europe between 1941 and 1948 and the role of the leading stratum of the emerging communist camp. The chapter also contains an essay on the role of the United States in Eastern Europe between 1943 and 1948. We are then offered comprehensive pictures of the various countries of the emerging "Soviet Bloc," namely Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. The essays by Vít Smetana, László Borhi and Mark Kramer draw on a remarkably impressive array of sources in their analyses of the distinctive features of the time. Kramer stands out even among this superb trio of authors. He is thoroughly familiar with the primary and secondary literature that has been published in the West, but he also has a dazzling knowledge of the Russian primary sources that have been published over the course of the past two decades and the essays and monographs that deal with Soviet–Yugoslav relations. The last two essays in the first chapter analyze the roles of Austria and Germany following the war.

The second chapter contains essays dealing with the "German question" and the politics of the era within the Eastern Bloc following the death of Stalin. One essay examines how London perceived the evolution of relations between Germany and Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Another offers a discussion of the "German question" from the perspective of France. The essay by Csaba Békés, which brings the chapter to a close, attempts to summarize the coordination of the foreign policy conduct of the countries of the Eastern Bloc in the period beginning with the death of Stalin and ending in 1975.

The third chapter examines the roles that were played by Eastern Europe, the United States, and the Soviet Union in bringing the Cold War to an end. This is

perhaps the most exciting part of the book, perhaps simply because the history of the “end game” still raises innumerable questions that will challenge historians. For instance, what role did the people who were affected by the process play in the collapse of the Soviet societies? (This is a question that is the subject of debate in many circles.) In this process of collapse or transformation, which was more significant, the internal changes that took place within the Eastern Bloc, the influence of U.S. foreign policy on the Soviet Union, or the inclination of the Soviet leadership to “yield”? It is clearly not easy to give a simple answer to this question, in part simply because almost all of the terms and concepts that are used to describe the process beg interpretation themselves. For instance, what does it mean to say that the leadership under Gorbachev proved “inclined to yield”? Does it mean that Moscow deliberately presented itself as prepared to “let go of” the countries of the Soviet Bloc? Or does it mean that Russia could do little else, since after a point it would have had to have used violence in order to maintain control over the states of Eastern Europe, and this would have undermined a politics based on attempts to reach a compromise with the West? Or does it mean simply that Gorbachev inaccurately assessed the popularity of the system in the region and concluded that the countries of Eastern Europe would remain within the Soviet Bloc and would preserve their Soviet systems of governance, even if Moscow did not exert any pressure on them or threaten them with intervention? Given that Gorbachev and his immediate circle realized only very late—sometime around late 1988 and early 1989—that they might face problems when it came to the countries of the Bloc, one could conclude that Moscow regarded it as self-evident that these countries would remain committed to socialism.

In his superb essay, Alex Pravda, another one of the contributors to the volume, examines the background of this enduring “optimism.” He discusses, for instance, the talk that took place in Budapest in November 1988 between Károly Grósz, the secretary general of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, and Alexander Nikolaevich Yakovlev, a member of the political delegation of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. This meeting merits discussion in this context, for in all likelihood it was here that Yakovlev was first confronted with the deep divisions within the Hungarian party leadership. Grósz spoke with remarkable openness in the course of their private meeting on the situation in Hungary, which was increasingly dire, as well as on the tensions within the party and the mutual mistrustfulness. Clearly this experience played a role in Yakovlev’s decision, which was made soon after his meeting with Grósz, to ask four institutes in Moscow to prepare analyses of the situations in the countries of the Soviet Bloc.

By February 1989, the Bogomolov Institute, a research institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR which dealt with the socialist world order, the International Division of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the KGB submitted their reports. Of these four reports, three were made public some time ago, thus we have a fairly clear idea of what the Soviet leadership thought about Eastern Europe towards the late 1980s. Of the four, the one submitted by the Institute of the Academy was unquestionably the most interesting, and it was the most critical of Soviet policies. At the beginning of the analysis, it contained an emphatic ascertainment according to which “the attempt to build socialism that was done with Soviet participation and Stalinist and neo-Stalinist methods was a dead end.” These were harsh words, but they revealed a great deal about the political mood that had emerged in Moscow in the late 1980s. Specifically, they reveal that by that time a great deal was permissible among the circles at the Academy that would have been unthinkable in earlier times. In consequence, the social sciences gradually ceased to serve the function they had earlier had of legitimizing the regime. In the spirit of this shift, the analysis left no doubt as to the fact that, in the European allies of the Soviet Union, the position of the communist parties, which earlier had maintained control over events, “had weakened significantly.” Their social support was dwindling, and indeed “in some cases one can speak of a complete lack of trust.” The report divided the countries of Eastern Europe into two groups on the basis of the nature of the crisis-processes that were underway in them. In one of these groups (Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia), “the crisis-processes have become open and intense,” while in the other (Czechoslovakia, the GDR, Bulgaria, and Romania), “for the moment the social and political conflicts are taking place in a concealed manner, but at the same time they are clearly discernible.” In spite of the fact that the analysis that was submitted by the Bogomolov Institute dispelled all doubt regarding the crisis in the region, the Soviet leadership continued to conduct affairs as if it were still in control of the situation. The shorthand text of the minutes of the summit that took place in Malta in December 1989 between the American president and the secretary general of the Soviet party demonstrates this (the text was made public a few years ago). The minutes make very clear that Gorbachev was still convinced that unless the United States and its allies forced “Western values” on the states of Eastern Europe, these states would in all likelihood vote in favor of a form of socialism that was simply more humane and more effective than the socialism to which they had become accustomed. According to the minutes of the meeting, Gorbachev did not explicitly say this, but it was nonetheless implied, for instance

by the fact that both in the meetings in private and the plenary sittings the secretary general returned to this question. In the course of the first private meeting he made the following very clear: “I am under the impression that U.S. leaders are now quite actively advancing the idea of conquering the division of Europe on the basis of ‘Western values.’ [...] At one time in the West there was anxiety that the Soviet Union was planning to export revolution. But the aim of exporting ‘Western values’ sounds similar.” It is bit surprising that the essays in this chapter essentially do not deal with the meeting between George Bush and Gorbachev in Malta, in spite of the fact that many people are firmly convinced that it was in the course of this meeting, on December 2 and 3, 1989, that the Soviet secretary general and the American president reached an agreement on the re-division of Europe. Of course, the hesitancy on their part to do this is understandable. The Malta Summit continues to be enshrouded in mystery and uncertainty. We do not even know how many times the two statesmen met in the course of these two days or within what frameworks. It is quite certain, however, that they met at least twice in private and twice for the plenary sittings.

This is all revealed in a collection of documents in Russian that was published in 2010. Numbering roughly 1,000 pages, this collection (*Отвечая на вызов времени. Внешняя политика перестройки: документальные свидетельства*, Москва, 2010) is quite justifiably considered the most important and the most comprehensive publication of primary source material on the foreign policy of the Gorbachev period. It contains the shorthand minutes of all of the four meetings (pp.234–49), though none of the four is actually complete. Nonetheless, they are remarkably edifying. They are significant in part because the meetings did not lead to the drafting of any written agreement. This is one of the reasons why so many hypotheses have been made concerning the Malta Summit. For instance, the notion that there was a top-secret fifth meeting, in addition to the four meetings the minutes of which were kept in writing, has proven quite enduring. During this fifth meeting, Gorbachev allegedly accepted all the demands of the Americans. In other words, he agreed to dissolve the Warsaw Pact, dismantle the socialist systems in the Soviet satellite countries, and allow for the reunification of Germany. There may or may not have been a fifth meeting between the two heads of state. If there was, however, it is hardly likely that Gorbachev would have been prepared to make such concessions. If we read the shorthand minutes of the meetings held at the Malta Summit attentively, they suggest, rather, that Gorbachev simply misunderstood or misperceived the situation in late 1989. He seems to have failed to notice or appreciate the pace at which the events

had accelerated. What he said to Bush on the question of German reunification in the course of their first private meeting is revealing indeed. According to Gorbachev, it was impossible to foresee whether “a unified Germany [would] be neutral, not a member of any political-military alliances, or would it be a member of NATO?” He then added that, in his view, “it is still too early to discuss either of these options. Let the process take its course without artificial acceleration.” All this clearly indicates that Gorbachev continued to believe that European and global politics would be shaped by a kind of compromise between Western and Soviet values. It does not seem to occur to him that perhaps the societies of Eastern Europe would want nothing to do with “Soviet values” if they had a chance to choose freely.

The minutes of the Malta Summit, incomplete though they may be, are nonetheless immensely interesting in part because they clearly show the extent to which the Soviet leadership misunderstood the processes that were underway in Central Europe. And, because the Soviet leaders failed to understand these processes, they never realized that they would need to follow an alternative script. It is surprising that the extremely knowledgeable contributors to this collection of essays do not seem to be familiar with the collection of documents in Russian containing these minutes. They also do not seem to be familiar with the ambitious Russian undertaking that traces the political processes that were underway in the six countries of Central and Southeastern Europe from the beginning of the 1970s up to the collapse of the Soviet-type systems. This two volume, 1,600-page collection of documents (*АНАТОМИЯ КОНФЛИКТОВ. Центральная и Юго-Восточная Европа. Документы и материалы последней трети XX века. т. 1-2. СПб. 2012–2013*) is the only serious scholarly undertaking in Russia that could be compared to this collection of essays. The Russian publication does not attempt to present the history of the last two decades of communist rule in the Soviet Union and Central Europe in essays, but rather seeks “only” to make primary sources available. It achieves this goal on an admirably ambitious scale. However, the failure on the part of the contributors to the collection edited by Kramer and Smetana does not in any way detract from its importance or merits. The international group of authors has enriched the secondary literature on the history of the Cold War with an impressive collection of essays that bears testimony to thorough research and impressive knowledge.

*Translated by Thomas Cooper*

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