
1989 as a Lens for the Communist Past and Post-communist Future

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Abstract

Political scientists have documented significant variation in political and economic outcomes of the 1989–91 revolutions. Countries bordering on western Europe have become relatively democratic and economically successful, with both democracy and wealth dropping off as one moves east and south. Explanations for this variation and the replication of an older pattern on the Eurasian landmass have moved farther and farther into the past. Yet in moving to the longue durée, more proximate events such as the revolutions of 1989, the demise of communism and even the communist experience itself recede into the background and are themselves accounted for by antecedent conditions. The article discusses how two more proximate factors helped to change older patterns in central and eastern Europe: the impact of communist modernisation and the prospect of European integration.

In my family, only my grandfather, Isadore Kopstein, appreciated my career choice. He loved speaking Russian and especially enjoyed correcting my grammar and word choice. Having attended school only until the age of nine, he was nevertheless a keen and not untalented amateur Sovietologist. In the months before he died in 1992 he expressed two regrets, first, that he never visited Russia after leaving it (in some haste) in 1911 and, second, that he would not live long enough to see the final chapter of communism's demise.

He did make some predictions, however. First, he said that Czechoslovakia would once again become democratic. Germany, having basically learned its lesson, would play a much more positive role in the region than before the Second World War, ensuring that Poland and Hungary also became democratic. Russia and the east Slavic countries would toy with democracy but ultimately give it up in favour of a new tsar, and Central Asia would return to the barbarism from which, in his opinion, it had never strayed too far. What about the revolutions we had just watched on television,

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I asked? Not surprisingly at the age of ninety-six he took the long view and did not believe that very much would change. Nothing ever really did, after all. 1989s come and 1989s go. Russians, they stay the same.

Crude stuff, to be sure, but cleansed of his stereotypes and recast in terms of ‘culture’ and ‘history’, he was on to something. In any case, social scientists have not done much better than my grandfather in predicting the final outcomes of post-communism. The countries of the post-communist world turned out pretty much as any thoughtful person would have predicted – those bordering on western Europe ending up (relatively) democratic and (relatively) wealthy, and both democracy and wealth dropping off as one moves east and south. What social scientists have done, however, is to try to pinpoint causes behind the variation in outcomes. In doing so they have moved farther and farther into the past to account for variation in the present. This is something historians should welcome: thoughtful comparative historical accounts that search for ever deeper contextualisation. Yet as we move into the *longue durée*, the more proximate events such as the revolutions of 1989, the demise of communism and even the communist experience itself recede into the background and are themselves accounted for by antecedent conditions. Of course, these are familiar problems to everyone engaged in comparative historical research, but for scholars of my generation – those who were fortunate enough to see the dull tyranny of Brezhnev’s communist world end in a ‘carnival’ of revolution – the thought that these countries lie on some kind of ‘equilibrium path’ shaped by much longer-term historical forces and from which they cannot easily depart is somehow sobering, even depressing.¹ Did communism change anything? If so, what? Did 1989 matter? What has really changed?

In what follows, I address these questions. Getting to them, however, requires a short detour through the thickets of comparative politics theories on the historical roots of post-communism.

In search of the relevant past

The collapse of communism led to important changes in political science. Students of communist countries had long been ghettoised in the discipline.² They viewed 1989 as a perfect opportunity to reintegrate themselves into the broader field. It should not be surprising that students of post-communist politics looked to their colleagues who had been studying transitions to democracy in other parts of the world since the beginning of the ‘third wave’ in 1974.³ Of course, there was much debate, some

¹ Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

² On dissatisfaction with this ghettoisation see Jerry Hough, *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). Huntington identifies three ‘waves’ of democratisation – a long, first European wave, running from the middle of the nineteenth century until the crisis of the inter-war period, a second, post-colonial wave from 1945 to 1960, and a third, ‘global’ wave that he dates from Portugal’s re-democratisation in 1974.

of it heated, about whether the ideas and concepts of ‘transitology’, which had been developed using the cases of southern Europe and Latin America, were appropriate for studying the post-communist experience.⁴ The critics of transitology remarked not only on its teleological character – it appeared to anticipate no other possible outcome than democracy – but also on its lack of attention to the history of particular cases. It was probably inevitable, however, that once the totalitarian regimes of eastern Europe disappeared, students of other areas would find it easy and irresistible to apply their methods and concepts to a new region. Additionally, the kinds of question that the transitologists asked *were* important ones. What are the modal sequences by which authoritarians cede power to those committed to multiparty elections?⁵ Under what conditions is the transition peaceful or violent?⁶ How can a sense of community be reconstructed after a brutal dictatorship?⁷ How can the competing demands of different ethnic communities be accommodated?⁸ Do some kinds of constitutional structures and political institutions work better than others?

The transitologists never claimed that democracy was inevitable, but the answers to these questions implied that whether it did take root was a function of human will and choice. The literature on transitions to, and the consolidation of, democracy expressed a deep commitment to the importance of human agency.⁹ In doing so, it was responding to an earlier generation of theorists who claimed to have found a set of preconditions for democracy, the most important one being economic development.¹⁰ Yet the collapse of communism and the rapid fielding of multiparty elections almost everywhere appeared to demonstrate that there were no preconditions for democratic rule, or, if such preconditions existed, they were minimal and could easily be compensated for by committed leaders, sensitively handled transfers of power and cleverly crafted institutions.

What was really wonderful about the transitological episode in political science is that if you were excited about 1989 and followed it closely, this paradigm told you that you had learned something very important. The events leading up to 1989 – the demonstrations, the roundtables – and the events immediately after – the first elections and constitution-making – mattered a great deal. Of course, it is always good to know about the histories of the countries you are studying – even political

⁴ Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, ‘The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How Far to the East Should They Attempt to Go?’, *Slavic Review*, 53, 1 (1994), 173–87; Valerie Bunce, ‘Should Transitologists be Grounded?’, *Slavic Review*, 54, 1 (1994), 111–27.

⁵ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolutions in Europe* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990).

⁶ Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

⁷ Jon Elster, *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁸ David Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁹ Giuseppe DiPalma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1963).

scientists believe this – but one did not need to know about the differences between Habsburg, Russian and German Europe in order to account for the variations in the way in which these countries exited from communism or even why some appeared to be having an easier time of it in re-establishing viable institutions of democratic representation or even just state authority.

Or so it seemed. It was only a matter of time, however, before comparativists took the next step and attempted to identify the conditions under which democracy became ‘the only game in town’.¹¹ Using cross-national research designs and drawing on the experience of Latin America and southern Europe, students examined the impact of different executive–legislative and electoral system designs on democratic outcomes. One finding was that the stronger the presidency, the less likely a country was to become and remain a democracy.¹² The lesson was clearly to choose the right institutions. Other comparativists remarked on the importance of driving the communists from office quickly in order to set the stage for good economic policy and economic recovery, which in turn would help to consolidate democracy.¹³

Some comparativists maintained that while comparisons are crucial, the concepts and ideas drawn from other regions may not easily travel to the post-communist world. The most salient distinguishing feature of the post-communist context, of course, was the experience of communism itself.¹⁴ Empirical research quickly confirmed that there was indeed something different about the post-communist world. For example, Marc Howard’s cross-national research on civil society showed membership of social organisations to be systematically lower in all post-communist societies than in other formerly authoritarian countries.¹⁵ Likewise, transition economics repeatedly noted how different the political economy of post-communism would be due to the lack of a pre-existing moneyed middle class.¹⁶ Last but not least, the Balkan wars of the 1990s and the initially hot and then frozen conflicts in the southern portions of the former Soviet Union demonstrated how difficult it would be to construct viable national communities after decades of ethnic ‘gardening’ from above.¹⁷

But if the legacies of communism were ubiquitous, their impacts were unevenly distributed. Some countries managed to establish stable institutions of democratic

¹¹ Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹² Linz and Stepan, *Democratic Consolidation*; M. Steven Fish, ‘Democratization’s Requisites: The Post-communist Experience’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 14, 1 (1998).

¹³ M. Steven Fish, ‘The Determinants of Economic Reform in the Post-communist World’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 12, 2 (1999).

¹⁴ Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Stephen E. Hanson, ‘The Leninist Legacy and Institutional Change’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 28, 2 (1995).

¹⁵ Marc Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-communist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Michael Burawoy, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Amir Weiner, ‘Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism’, *American Historical Review*, 104, 4 (1999), 1116.

representation, viable market economies and reasonable modes of intercommunal relations. Others could not. If the difference between the cases of success and failure was really one of human will that set some countries on the right path and others on the wrong path, what explained this distribution of choices? In fact, looking at the map of the former communist world, it became apparent that the virtues associated with the right choices (parliamentary versus presidential government, removing communists from office in the first election, quickly marketising the economy, finding a mode of coexistence between ethnic groups) were distributed in a remarkably neat and regressive geographical pattern across the Eurasian landmass.¹⁸ If post-communist outcomes were path-dependent, if there was a significant lock-in effect from the initial institutional and policy choices made by post-communist societies and elites, then a natural question to ask was, what determined the path?

It was at this point that political scientists took a deeper, historical turn. The first and most prominent example of this was the work of Herbert Kitschelt.¹⁹ Kitschelt was one of the new ‘trespassers’ in the field who had come to the study of east-central Europe from west European politics. The team of researchers from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria whom he led attempted to explain why some post-communist countries managed to establish Western-style political parties that competed with each other on the basis of platforms expressing different visions of the public good, whereas others fielded Latin American style patron–client parties or, worse, charismatic one-man shows. Kitschelt’s explanation was that despite external appearances of institutional uniformity, communist regimes were actually very different from one another. First, East Germany and Czechoslovakia built their communist regimes on the basis of strong bureaucratic authority that could incorporate an already mobilised working class. Hungarian and Polish communism was built and stabilised on the basis of an accommodation during the 1960s with a mobilised nationalist elite.²⁰ Bulgaria’s communism was patrimonial (so, too, by extension were all communist regimes of the non-Baltic Soviet Union) in character because it could only be built on the basis of a highly personalistic state administration already in place when the communists took over after the Second World War. There was, in short, not one communist legacy but three: bureaucratic–authoritarian, national–accommodative and patrimonial.

Of course, the finding of significant differences between the European and Eurasian communist regimes was not new. Historians had already shown this to be the case even within east-central Europe.²¹ Yet in the hands of those trying to

¹⁸ Jeffrey S. Kopstein and David Reilly, ‘Geographic Diffusion and the Transformation of the Postcommunist World’, *World Politics*, 53, 1 (2000).

¹⁹ Herbert Kitschelt, Zdenka Mansfeldova, Radoslaw Markowski and Gabor Toka, *Post-Communist Party Systems: Competition, Representation, and Inter-Party Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²⁰ In Hungary and Poland, following the crises of 1956, communist rule was stabilised through selective compromises with the traditional elites and institutions that catered to nationalist sensitivities, such as the Catholic Church, the family farm, writers of village prose and historians representing ‘national’ perspectives.

²¹ John Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

account for the broad variation in contemporary outcomes, the relevant past became highly salient. Other political scientists also located the sources of different post-communist outcomes in important variation in the communist experience. Anna Grzymala-Busse, for example, found that the degree and form of embeddedness of the communist parties in the societies of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic determined the extent to which these parties managed to recast themselves as viable left-of-centre parties in the post-communist era.²² Ekiert and Kubik found in Poland's history of contentious politics and highly mobilised civil society under communism a source of democratic dynamism and robustness in the post-communist era.²³ Still others pointed to the long record of economic experimentation and its history of contact between Hungarian economists and their counterparts in the West in accounting for Hungary's willingness to craft early and effective economic reforms.²⁴ Clearly what kind of communism a country experienced mattered.

But what determined the nature of the communist experience? Kitschelt himself noted that East Germany and Czechoslovakia could only build their 'bureaucratic authoritarian' communism because the Party came to power in countries with highly developed and efficient bureaucracies.²⁵ Bulgarian communists, by contrast, were forced to work with the patrimonial bureaucracy established and nurtured in inter-war Bulgaria. Communist parties, it turned out, had to work with the raw material they encountered and had only a limited ability to alter their administrative environments. Ultimately for Kitschelt, the determining factor was not the communist past but the state traditions established during the inter-war era. Pre-communist state traditions shaped communism (bureaucratic-authoritarian, national-accommodative or patrimonial), which in turn determined the quality of democracy after 1989.

Keith Darden and Anna Grzymala-Busse go even farther back into the past in explaining post-communist outcomes.²⁶ In their case, the explanatory variable of interest is the timing of mass literacy. Once mass literacy spreads over a region, they maintain, national and state identification is all but unchangeable and appears to the outsider as nearly primordial. Literacy itself, however, frequently took root not only before communism but before the advent of the nation-state itself. The logic is complicated but compelling: a precondition for 'success' in post-communism was removing the communists from office as quickly as possible, but the willingness of a given population to do so required

²² 'Embeddedness' means the percentage of Communist Party members occupying positions in politics, society and the economy. Anna Grzymala-Busse, *Redeeming the Communist Past: The Regeneration of Communist Parties in East Central Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²³ Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989–1993* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

²⁴ Jason McDonald, 'Transition to Utopia: A Reinterpretation of Economics, Ideas, and Politics in Hungary 1984–1990', *Eastern European Politics and Societies*, 7, 2 (1993).

²⁵ Kitschelt et al., *Post-Communist Party Systems*, 40.

²⁶ Keith Darden and Anna Grzymala-Busse, 'Literacy, Nationalism, and the Communist Collapse', *World Politics* 59, 1 (2006).

mass opposition to the regime – and that opposition in turn rested on notions of statehood and legitimate governance first inculcated by mass schooling. Attainment of literacy under a non-communist regime led to the transmission of a national identity separate from, and often directly opposed to, the communist regimes. Pre-communist schooling thus lowers the magnitude of support for the communist party and increases the likelihood that widespread opposition to the communist party will arise.²⁷

From very early on, then, the die is cast. Some form of pre-communist modernisation (in this case, the spread of mass literacy) determines the nature of public authority under communism (that is, whether communism was accepted or rejected), which in turn determines the path of exit from communism, which in turn determines the course of the post-communist journey. Clear enough. It is not my intention to take issue with any of these accounts. In fact, identifying critical junctures in a country's or a region's history is what good historians and social scientists are supposed to do.

If, however, convincing accounts of comparative historical outcomes require that we move ever farther into the past, clearly the seemingly momentous events of the not-so-distant past lose some of their historical significance. If, for example, Poland's post-communist present was largely determined by social processes that occurred in the nineteenth century, does not the early and sustained collective mobilisation against the communist regime (in comparison with, say, Czechoslovakia which remained largely quiescent from 1968 until 1989) diminish in explanatory importance? Why should we care that the Romanians shot their communist leader, while the Bulgarians merely imprisoned theirs? Or whether the Poles went into the streets early whereas the Slovaks did not? What difference does the kind of communism a country experienced or the path of its extrication from communism make if the outcomes in question can be convincingly tied to events long past?

Are we then, in some way, not back with Isadore Kopstein, with the *longue durée* washing out the importance of even momentous kinds of change – in this case the experience of communism and its overthrow?

Perhaps. But the only convincing way of dealing with this question is with a counterfactual thought experiment. Would things really have been the same in 2008 had there been no communism or 1989? I suspect not, and this is where the matter gets interesting. The counterfactual is a convenient way of saying that communism and its downfall did matter, that it did change the course of this (big) region's development. The question is, how? The most obvious place to start is with the huge socio-economic changes that occurred everywhere that communists ruled.

The impact of communist modernisation

Political scientists have found very few regularities or 'laws' (in the Russian sense of *zakonomernosti* or the German *Gesetzmässigkeiten*). Two come to mind. The first is that democracies do not fight each other – this is the so-called democratic peace thesis, one which caused much mischief in the first decade of the twenty-first

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

century. The second, however, is more germane to the question at hand. Starting with Lipset, comparative politics specialists have examined the apparent correlation between wealth and democracy. To be more precise, the richer a country is, the more likely it is to be democratic. The state of the art on this debate presents a variation on this theme. According to Przeworski and Limongi's cross-national exercise involving dozens of countries over many decades, a country may become democratic at any time, but whether it stays democratic is a function of its per capita gross domestic product (GDP).²⁸ No country that has become democratic and has a GDP/capita of more than US\$6,000 in 1993 dollars has ever reverted to authoritarianism. This is true. Always. Everywhere. Except Argentina. Even with this one exception, it remains an important finding, one that is especially relevant if we consider that the countries of communist eastern Europe became democratic in 1989 just after or just before they passed through this threshold. To the extent that Przeworski and Limongi have identified a critical economic threshold for democratic stability, the big differences in regime type after 1989 (democratic versus something else) may be accounted for.

Of course, it would be wrong to attribute to the communists the achievement of having brought prosperity to their countries. For one thing, as Andrew Janos has shown, the aggregate incomes of all European countries grew between 1945 and 1989, and those of eastern Europe would probably have risen under virtually any political order.²⁹ Furthermore, the relative income disparities between East and West grew or remained unchanged, providing further evidence that even if communism can be considered a form of developmentalism, it was not an especially effective form. The case of East Germany is especially instructive because, depending on the data one uses, its GDP per capita was roughly 80 per cent of that of the West in 1949 but fell to approximately 50 per cent by 1989.³⁰ Despite decades of murderous effort, what can be said at best for the comparative communist economic record is that things could have been worse: the Czech Republic has now caught up with Portugal, and Bulgaria may in the foreseeable future surpass Greece.

But if these were not terribly efficient developmental states, they did effect decisive and lasting transformations of the social structure. Here they were far more effective. Rural societies became urban societies. Literacy became universal. Life expectancies shot up. But this is the stuff of mainstream modernisation and might have been expected to occur under virtually any political order, accomplished perhaps with less brutality but the end result may have been the same. What was really different about communism was the social structure left in its wake. As Georgi Derluguian maintains in his brilliant study of the Caucasus, the Soviet development project built a society with just three effective classes: a tiny nomenklatura elite, a massive proletariat including both white-collar professionals and blue-collar manual labourers

²⁸ Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, 'Modernization: Theories and Facts', *World Politics*, 49, 2 (1997).

²⁹ Andrew Janos, *East Central Europe in the Modern World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³⁰ Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945–1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 186.

(both being wage-dependent workers with levelled-out life chances) and a more amorphous 'sub-proletariat' of criminal elements, black marketeers and the semi-homeless with no permanent address.³¹

For those in the proletariat, life chances improved steadily. Educational opportunities provided a path upwards and one could take a measure of pride in being part of an alternative world power.³² This was especially true for the inhabitants of the European and Eurasian periphery – Russians, Central Asians, and the peoples of the Caucasus – but in a related way it was also true for the 'captive nations' of eastern Europe. The proletariat of these countries was large, a very different group of people from that which existed in the West, and, to repeat, it included groups not normally associated with the proletariat (doctors, lawyers, judges and teachers – all of whom received wages from the state). The income of all of these 'workers' rose steadily from the 1950s to the 1980s. They enjoyed job security and they were surly.³³

For the inhabitants of the 'captive nations', however, the communist social structure provided something new. Whereas for Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Soviet developmentalism entailed the equivalents of what had already occurred in much of the West, for central and 'eastern' Europe, the main impact was different. There what communism did was to deconstruct and reconstruct deeply hierarchical, early capitalist societies. Inter-war Poland and Hungary were not simply societies of deep and abiding material inequality, they were also places of unbridgeable status gradations, the kinds of differences that are not easily overcome with money. Both were clubbish in an old-world sense, the kinds of society where democracy was constantly undermined by the remnants of noble political culture.³⁴

Communism, with an effect even more important than its impact on material conditions, undermined the status culture that acted as a natural barrier to democracy in the inter-war era. In an ironic way, then, by destroying the old status hierarchies of central Europe, communism may have paved the way for democracy. If this observation does not sound original, it is not. It has been shamelessly lifted from a similar insight offered by Ralf Dahrendorf in his classic study *Society and Democracy in Germany*.³⁵ Dahrendorf's book and many others like it illustrate how difficult it was for Germany to break with a closed, status-based society. Brutal as it may have been, 'the break with tradition and thus the strong push toward modernity was the

³¹ Georgi Derluguian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³² Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Victor Zaslavsky, *The Neo-Stalinist State* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1994).

³³ György Konrád and Ivan Szelényi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1979); Linda Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why it Failed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁴ Gale Stokes, 'The Social Origins of East European Politics', in Daniel Chirot, ed., *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 210–36; Andrew Janos, *The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary 1825–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

³⁵ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967).

substantive characteristic of the social revolution of National Socialism'.³⁶ Among the many tragedies of the Nazi dictatorship, Dahrendorf found one most ironic and painful. If the resistance to Nazism, which was largely aristocratic in composition and which he labels 'counterrevolutionary', had succeeded in assassinating Hitler and taking power, Germany's chances for democracy in the post-war period would have been far less certain

While the social revolution of National Socialism was an instrument in the establishment of totalitarian forms, by the same token it had to create the basis of liberal modernity; the counterrevolution on the other hand can be understood only as a revolt of tradition, and thus of illiberalism and of the authoritarianism of a surviving past.³⁷

Although Nazi ideology was in many respects traditionalistic, the practice of Nazi rule broke down the traditional loyalties on which German authoritarianism depended. One need not be a Nazi to appreciate the ironies of history. So too, one need not be a Marxist-Leninist to note that, in certain places in the communist world, the social-structural changes wrought by communism exercised a beneficial impact on democratic development.³⁸

Could it not be true that part of the Leninist legacy in places like Poland and Hungary was to create a rough and ready material and status equality, and therefore, the basis for democracy of the sort that could not have possibly existed in the interwar period? Of course, the privileges of the nomenklatura contradicted the official egalitarian idea, but once the party bosses could be pushed aside, the social reality that remained, both in material and status terms, was much more favourable to healthy liberal democracy than ever before.

Two caveats on this point are in order. First, four decades of communism were probably more than anyone needed in the region. There is no reason to assume that a certain amount of social engineering could not have been achieved with much less violence. Second, in Czechoslovakia (or at least Bohemia and Moravia), which already had a reasonably well-functioning democracy before the Second World War, communism was developmentally 'unnecessary' and left instead an economic mess and a corrupt and demoralised society.³⁹ Even so, in most countries the rough and ready egalitarianism of communism changed the culture forever, all but destroying the social bases of deference.

If communism altered the social structure, it also changed the nature of communal solidarities. We know far too little about the genuine basis of social groups in

³⁶ Ibid., 403.

³⁷ Ibid., 412.

³⁸ The general point is that democracy does not do well under conditions of deep status inequality. One is reminded of Tocqueville's comments on the United States, where he maintained that what distinguished America from Europe was that differences in material wealth were not overlaid with stark distinctions in status. This characteristic made for an essential equality of condition and created the climate for a healthy democracy. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Classics, 1972 [1835]), 129–185.

³⁹ Which may account for why, in the twenty years after 1989, the Czech Republic had not achieved much more than Poland or Hungary; based purely on expectations of historical continuity, this would not have been the case.

communist society. Discussions of ‘civil society’ usually concern a small group of Westernised intellectuals, most of whom were known to nobody before 1989 (it is remarkable how few Czechs or Slovaks knew who exactly Václav Havel was before his inauguration as president of Czechoslovakia). Real society under communism, however, remains more elusive. Somewhere between the intellectuals and the criminal gangs were the networks of solidarity that increasingly bound many people to each other. The case of Poland shows us how important religious institutions could be. As Jason Wittenberg has shown, in Hungary, too, Catholic institutional resilience may provide a clue to historical continuities between the pre- and post-communist eras.⁴⁰ Yet Poland and Hungary may be exceptional. In most cases the result of communism was the destruction of the religious bases of communal solidarity. An evening spent with almost any group of the remarkably de-Judaised Jews of the Soviet Union is enough to make the point (in Munich, where my children went to the Jewish school in 2001, half the students were ‘Russian’ Jews – rabbis taught the children Jewish prayers and rituals so that they could go home and teach the parents, a fascinating experiment in reversing the mechanism of cultural transmission).⁴¹

What was true for the Jews was also, of course, true for Christians (outside Poland) and perhaps even more significantly for Muslims. Despite various attempts by Muslim groups, both moderate and radical, to penetrate and organise Central Asia and the Caucasus, they have been remarkably unsuccessful.⁴² In fact, Central Asian dictators have easily rounded up small groups of radical Muslims. In Chechnya, where the rebels hoped to organise society around an anti-Russian Islam, the real story is how easily in the end the Russians have been able to impose ‘their man’ on the province, who has dispersed most of the resistance. The contrast with Afghanistan could not be more striking. Without communism it would be easy to envision Uzbekistan or Tajikistan as not too different from Afghanistan, where it is unimaginable at the present time for any government to create an alternative solidarity to that provided by Islam.

In sum, communism profoundly and decisively changed the socio-economic order and private bases of social solidarity. Of course, it also left these societies to build capitalism without capitalists, but the experience of central Europe and even the former Soviet Union shows that this was not nearly as large a problem as was imagined in 1989. Where they built it, the capitalists came. From the standpoint of politics, the important part of communist socio-economic modernisation was the destruction of the social bases of deference. And it is here where Russian society appears so different from the one my grandfather left almost a century ago. It may be true that Russians have run back to an authoritarian order after a decade of chaos, but Putin and his successors should not be mistaken for tsars. They are

⁴⁰ Jason Wittenberg, *Crucibles of Political Loyalty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Jeffrey Peck, *Being Jewish in the New Germany* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

⁴² Adeb Khalid paints a convincing picture of essentially apolitical religious revivalism in the former Soviet space in *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

now in charge of deeply modern societies that do not accept the current order unquestioningly.⁴³

The impact of 1989

The revolutions of 1989 changed not only the societies in which they occurred; they altered the nature of Europe. The drastic reduction of deference in east-central Europe produced by communism itself was crowned by a huge upswell in feelings of personal efficacy among the citizens of Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, who finally saw the prospect of changing their position in the global hierarchy from vassal states to full partners in the global capitalist order.

In this they had been encouraged for forty years by the West.⁴⁴ The central message of the West to the East during the cold war was simple and powerful: but for communism the captive nations could rejoin the wealthy democratic West. Of course, the addition of the prefix 're' to 'join' cleverly elided the question of whether Hungary (first free election in 1990) and Poland (last free election 1922) or the Baltic states were really considered part of the 'West' before the Second World War, but the promise was an easy one to make as long as the Soviets blocked the way. Mutual deterrence during the cold war meant that the real action took place in the realm of ideas and comparative living standards.

Nothing unified Europe more powerfully than its division. It nurtured a romantic project, initially one mostly of intellectuals (though not primarily intellectuals on the left), to 'overcome' the divide.⁴⁵ The politically and ideologically divided continent provided the perfect vehicle for intellectuals on both sides to argue that the divide had no deeper source than communism itself. As late as 1985, it seemed that the proposition could and would never be put to the test.

Then came 1989. It was a magic moment, but part of what made it so magic is that sovereignty was regained and then, almost instantaneously, handed over to the West. But how would the West deal with this gift of simultaneous national self-assertion and self-abnegation? The student of east-central Europe in 1990, looking back on the year 1919, could have been forgiven for believing that history was about to repeat itself. In both eras inexperienced political elites confronted relatively backward economies, collapsed trading blocs, polarised politics and intractable ethnic conflicts. In both eras the countries of east-central Europe found themselves as bit players in the game of global capitalism. After 1919 these problems quickly led to the collapse of democracy in the region (with the exception of Czechoslovakia).

⁴³ The best evidence for this assertion is the deeply sceptical attitude of Russians towards their government, as seen in survey research produced by the Levada Analytical Center. For a large sample of this work see www.russiatvotes.org.

⁴⁴ George R. Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy: My War within the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

⁴⁵ On the explicit comparison of the romantic role of intellectuals in 1989 with their role in the Spanish Civil War, see Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History*, where he writes 'Poland was my Spain' (p. 251).

What changed? Not only had communism and the revolutions of 1989 yielded modern and assertive societies that were ready to claim their place in the West, but these revolutions occurred in a Europe that had unified in part to avoid the very tyranny from which east-central Europe had just emerged. In 1989, to join (or rejoin) the West meant to be part of the broader project of European integration, in particular the European Communities. But European integration had in the meantime picked up considerable steam. Not only did the collapse of communism induce almost everyone on the continent to bind Germany to 'Europe' more securely, but the experience of admitting Spain and Portugal to the European Union some three years before 1989 and the rapid economic growth of both thereafter came as a surprise to everyone and provided a model for emulation in east-central Europe.⁴⁶

It is now commonplace in the political science literature to note the power that EU 'conditionality' exercised on these countries. Not only were the big decisions now made in Brussels, but the prospect of EU accession induced 'good behaviour', the most important being a retreat from the kinds of hardball ethno-nationalism that had poisoned politics in the inter-war era.⁴⁷ Even with the beneficent influence of the EU, it was less than clear that the EU intended to follow through on the promise implicit in the ideal unity of Europe articulated in the late communist era. The French quickly developed cold feet but so, too, did a number of other countries, including those which had most benefited from the previous rounds of enlargement, such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, which stood to lose structural funds once they went from being poor to rich states in the EU.

In the run-up to enlargement in 2004 not only did the candidate states behave well during 'negotiations', they were also highly assertive, demanding their right to accession, 'shaming' the west Europeans, as Frank Schimmelfennig has put, it into keeping their promise.⁴⁸ This shaming undoubtedly made it more difficult to break the promise of integration. Even so, politicians are known to break promises and shame on its own would probably not have been enough to secure enlargement. What really changed, temporarily, was the fundamental purpose of the EU itself.⁴⁹

Over the course of the 1990s the EU took on the role of geopolitical landscape architect. The EU has been many things since its inception in 1957. Starting off as a trading bloc with the intention of securing peace between West Germany and its neighbours through economic interdependence, by the 1980s it became possible to conceive of the project as essentially political, creating a common set of institutions and identity.⁵⁰ Even though the EU already had expanded from six to fifteen members

⁴⁶ Milada Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration After Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Judith Kelley, *Ethnic Politics in Europe: The Power of Norms and Incentives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ Frank Schimmelfennig, *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴⁹ Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4–26.

⁵⁰ Desmond Dinan, *Europe Recast: A History of the European Union* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

between 1957 and 1995, the revolutions of 1989 put on the agenda a potentially huge new enlargement of the EU, which threatened to disrupt or even derail the project of integration altogether. Most west Europeans believed that, in the language of Brussels, ‘widening’ could only come at the cost of ‘deepening’. Yet the risk of instability in the post-communist states if the regulative ideal of European unity were cast aside induced the political elites of western Europe to have the EU take on a new, geopolitical role. In this, it must be said, the EU succeeded spectacularly. For the next fifteen years, politics throughout the region became a contest over which party was most competent to bring its country into the promised land of Europe.⁵¹

It is true that, once admitted to the EU, the politicians of east-central Europe were free to misbehave, which they wasted no time in doing, but the big changes were already locked in. Having bound themselves Ulysses-like to the mast of ‘Europe’ against the temptations of the nationalist sirens, the path back to the inter-war periphery would not be an easy one at this point. The political geography of the European continent appeared to have changed, in large measure due to the revolutions of 1989, for good.

It was, however, a fleeting moment. By 2007 the European Union’s geopolitical moment had passed. Among the old member states, the sentiment quickly spread that the 2004 enlargement was a mistake and even among the new member states little appetite remained for expanding the geopolitical project to Belarus, Ukraine, Russia or the western Balkans, much less Turkey.⁵² Political elites were unable to devise a convincing account of how further enlargement would answer broad-based demands for sustaining the west European social model, a consensus favouring increased environmental protection, and rising concerns about cultural heterogeneity. Arguably enlargement addressed none of these issues. As Europe grew larger, so the conventional wisdom went, it could in some fundamental sense cease to exist.

Politicians in the new periphery were quick to pick up on these signals and responded with a combination of disappointment, resentment and nationalist bravado. Both the domestic politics and international relations of the new periphery were oddly reminiscent of the old periphery – the whole affair seemed to have simply moved several hundred kilometres to the east. Under such conditions liberal restraint was not easy. The elites of those excluded countries attempting to integrate themselves into European economic political and security structures paid a high price for their continued failure. Far easier than European integration was to retreat into a kitschy populism or vague expressions of hope for the resurrection of Moscow to provide structure to their chaotic environments. If, in the unlikely event that Russia returned to the project of changing rather than adapting to the international order, one could expect the politics of the new states to recapitulate even more strongly than they already have the political pathologies of their western neighbours in the inter-war years.

Perhaps, in this restricted sense, my grandfather was on to something.

⁵¹ Vachudova, *Europe Undivided*.

⁵² Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire*, 247–62.