



**Mark Kramer**, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union”, Parts I-III, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, (Fall 2003): 178-256; 6 (4) (Fall 2004): 3-64; 7 (1) (Winter 2005): 3-96.

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According to one story, when Hitler met Mussolini for the first time in Venice in 1934, he saluted the Duce by saying “Ave Imperator!” to which Mussolini is said to have responded “Ave Imitator!” The Italian dictator, in this telling, could not resist noting the emulation effect of his fascist idea all over Europe, from Primo de Rivera in Spain, and Dollfuss in Austria, to Pats and Ulmanis in Estonia and Latvia, perhaps even to Pilsudski and Smetona in Poland and Lithuania. The impact of an important influence on the *Zeitgeist*, “spillover,” “diffusion,” “snowballing,” “demonstration effect,” is a natural topic for political scientists. And for historians. The French revolution cast its rays on every European state for at least half a century, as did the Russian revolution. So it makes sense to suppose that the events that took down Communism in the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted from a spillover originating in the East European revolutions of 1989. One could even say that 1989 itself was in a certain sense a spillover from other east bloc rebellions of 1953, 1956, 1968, and 1980. Mark Kramer, in a series of articles for the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, has traced the diffusion with great skill following along the lines of inquiry originally used by Jiri Valenta and others and developed in a considerable literature.

Kramer has long been associated with the Harvard Project on Cold War Studies and the Davis Center for Russian Studies and has written widely on the death agony of Soviet Communism. He is among the most astute of those who have kept track of the various newly available materials. He has consulted East German, Russian, and Ukrainian archives, recently released documentary collections, including those of the Cold War International History Project, and the memoir literature left us by East Bloc officials and publicists. He has also made use of a now vast body of writings on the fall of the Bloc, much of which he cites in his bulging footnotes. Despite these copious credits to the work of others, there is the inevitable trail of broken hearts of those not cited, among whom I, a lone 49er and historian in a world of political scientists, must be counted. The articles in Kramer’s series have ample citations from sources in German, Russian, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian, even Hungarian. He is a tireless and effective researcher and, one must assume, a linguist of genius.

The spillover thesis, as Kramer explains it, is complex, flowing, he thinks, from Soviet Russia to the Bloc in 1986-1988, in both directions in 1989, from the Bloc back to Soviet Russia in 1990-1991. Yet it is also very simple: “democratization, economic liberalization, and separatism” on the rise as a result of “the discrediting of Marxist-Leninist ideology.” (part three, 3) He assembles an impressive mass of evidence in the name of an argument that is, to boot, powerfully intuitive, not to say undeniable, to begin with. So it is almost irrelevant to ask whether the argument is convincing. You are already convinced before you start reading. Kramer means to show you how the newest sources will reinforce your conviction. He admits,

to be sure, that spillover is only one among a number of factors that must be considered to tell the story of the fall of Soviet Communism. So the question becomes: how much does it illuminate the landscape? At times, very much: it is like a freeway through broad vistas. Sometimes, however, it is a rope bridge over a chasm. And sometimes it is a dirt track through a deep thicket.

Where did the contagion originate? In Gorbachev's Soviet Union in 1988, says Kramer. But why? Because "it would simply have been infeasible" in the first years of Gorbachev's rule before "his priorities had become more radical." (part one, 83) So we begin in media res as in other studies of the Gorbachev revolution, presumably taking Gorbachev's drive for what ends up as "democratization, economic liberalization, and separatism," the thing that needs to be explained, as a given. But Gorbachev gave no such indications in his first years in power, when the slogan was uskorenie (acceleration, that is, acceleration of the perfection of the Brezhnev system). He only started to break with Stalinism in January 1987 after coming up against fierce Politburo opposition for the first time. This was prompted by domestic and foreign policy factors, and it held out the menace that he would be limited henceforth by collective leadership norms as in the days of Mikhail Suslov. His response was to tag his opponents, led by Yegor Ligachev, with Stalinism. Uskorenie (acceleration) was discarded for perestroika (reconstruction). Even so, later in the year, in his "history speech" on the seventieth anniversary of the revolution, he actually defended Stalin. But in spring 1988, prompted by the attacks of Madame Andreeva, he was back on the de-Stalinization wagon. This is where Kramer finds the first indications of an attempt to change relations with other ruling Communist parties, in an approach to Yugoslavia, by analogy, one might suppose, with Khrushchev in May 1955. Any new Soviet leader would have tried to start anew with Yugoslavia and China. But one year prior to this, on a trip through the bloc, Gorbachev had already run up against an almost solid bloc of opponents. Vasil Bilak in Czechoslovakia, Ceausescu in Romania, Nemeth and Grosz in Hungary, as well as the East German leadership, all criticized perestroika in the same language as his rivals in Russia, and seemed to make common cause with them. Only Poland's Yaruzelski encouraged him. Gorbachev resolved to unseat the others, and finally did so in 1989.

Gorbachev deliberately stirred up dissident nationalist opinion inside the Soviet Union in much the same way. He and Boris Kurashvili called for Popular Fronts for perestroika, a truly Leninist policy on nationalities, they said, to oppose the Stalinist line that had been established decades ago and was presently defended by Ligachev. The Popular Fronts soon took root in the Baltic republics and, to Gorbachev's horror, began to talk independence. Kramer draws a straight line from the Hitler-Stalin pact that brought the Baltic states under Stalin's control and the nationalist organizations of 1988, giving little heed to the internal situation in the Bloc and Soviet leadership. It is interesting to note that the anniversary of the 1939 pact occasioned only a small protest in 1988, but a huge one in the following year with the Bloc unraveling. The collapse of the Bloc immediately led to Lithuania being set against the Union and Croatia against Yugoslavia. The gravest effect of national separatism in the Soviet Republics, however, was to stir Russian nationalism in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as a response. The mood seemed to be: "if you Republics want to go your own way, then see if you can get along without Russia!" This was to be truly fatal to the Soviet idea, the one spiritual force which, for better or worse, held the country together.

Kramer credits Gorbachev with avoiding “the Khrushchev dilemma,” that is, a repetition of the invasion of Hungary in 1956, and even writes of “benefits” Gorbachev presumably gained from losing the Bloc. (part one, 186, 204) Of course, Khrushchev did save the Bloc and Gorbachev did lose everything. After losing the Bloc, Gorbachev turned away from perestroika and toward “consolidation.” Kramer gives the dates for this “hardline backlash” as September 1990 to April 1991. (part two, 4) Here he seems to be following the periodization in my Gorbachev's Revolution (1998) especially when he refers to Gorbachev's “shift to the right” using the inverted commas, indicating perhaps that this is a familiar thesis. But later he gives the dates of the “resurgence of hard-line forces” as autumn 1990 to summer 1991. (part three, 40). The point is that Gorbachev turned sharply from perestroika in September 1990 when he apparently was frightened by troop movements and feared a putsch. He dropped the “consolidation” line just as suddenly at the April 1991 Central Committee plenum, in order to head off a vote to remove him from power. The champion of saving the Union who had demonstrated its popularity in a referendum in March turned just as sharply to breaking it up. He who had accused Yeltsin of aiming to destroy the Soviet Union became Yeltsin's ally in the project. Not that he had the slightest idea what he was doing. He was and had to be preoccupied with defeating opponents. He had by this time become adept at announcing every new project as a revolution, while assuring his critics with some improvised ideological formula that nothing was being changed at all.

Indeed, the most fascinating part of the story is the “paradigm ecstasy” in which presumed reinforcement of the doctrine in fact led to an exit from Marxism. One can hardly say that anyone taking part in this struggle really understood what he was doing much better than Gorbachev, who understood nothing. Although I have carped at Kramer about a number of things, his studies of the spillover effect continue to produce insights and revelations even for the closest students of the subject. And he makes a contribution to political science on the general idea of the travels of the anti-Communist Zeitgeist. The only substantial objection that can be raised is, I think, that he takes Brezhnev era Stalinism as a given. He does not seem to appreciate the predicament of Communists and Russian nationalists who wanted to de-Stalinize without completely rejecting the heritage of the state that defeated Hitler. The glasnost writers tried to carve out a new path only to find that it led to the New Europe of the flat tax. Much of this is distorted when one merely thinks in terms of bland formulas like “the discrediting of Marxist-Leninist ideology.” It would not do to sum up the defeat of Napoleon in terms of the “discrediting of anti-monarchist ideology.” In fact, if there had been a frontal challenge to Communist ideology as such, it would have been defeated and the Soviet Bloc would still be with us. It is on the Communists' efforts to make their ideology more vital and dynamic and, of course, on their struggles for power, that this tale hangs.

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