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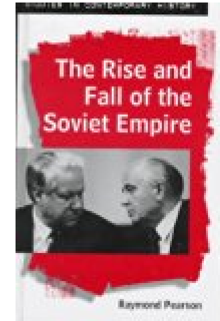
Raymond Pearson. *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. xix + 194 pp. $39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-17407-1; $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-17405-7.



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The Last Empire?

There is now quite a long list of works, usually aimed at the undergraduate reader, on communist Eastern Europe. As Michael Waller puts it, we can now view that era "in the round."[1] But it is not an easy story to tell in one narrative, and authors have experimented with a number of frameworks. Some are entirely (or nearly so) focused on political developments; Joseph Rothschild's classic, of which a third edition is now being prepared, is one.[2] Others, like that by Geoffrey and Nigel Swain, focus more on the economic illogic and breakdown of the system.[3] The best story line, in turn, is in those works–Tismaneanu and Stokes are the major examples–which highlight the rise of dissent.[4] Some take the unfortunate step of examining each country in a separate chapter–these can have limited value except as references.[5] To my knowledge, only one has attempted a fully synthetic, comparative framework; long out of print (and out of date–or at least lacking closure), L.P. Morris' *Eastern Europe Since 1945* is, I believe, still the best study of communism in the region.[6]

Of course, domestic developments are only part of the story; one can also study Eastern Europe as a bloc whose history was not of its own making. What is lost by viewing the region as an artificial creation living out an imposed scenario is balanced by an easier comparative framework and a clearer focus on the relationship between the Cold War and domestic developments. Charles Gati's *The Bloc That Failed*[7] has been the most useful of this genre, but it, too, has just gone out of print.

Gati's book had Berlin Wall revelers on the cover; Raymond Pearson's *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire*, though covering essentially the same ground as did Gati, has a picture of Gorbachev conferring with Yeltsin: presumably the fate of Eastern Europeans is being decided man-to-man. Pearson intends to treat the Bloc as an empire, and makes his case convincingly. With some caveats, one can recommend this as a replacement for Gati in an undergraduate course. It could not stand as a sole textbook on the region, however, for reasons which shall become clear below.

One of the most intriguing things about this book is the table of contents. The first seven chapters are entitled "Yalta 1945," "Belgrade 1948," "Budapest 1956," "Prague 1968," "Gdansk 1980," "Berlin 1989," and "Moscow 1991." A story thus structured around these set-pieces, moments of crisis which presumably could stand for the whole, could allow the reader at once a macro- and micro-view of Soviet-East European relations. Pearson did not write his book this way; instead, he supplies a more traditional narrative. Nevertheless, this narrative is worth the reader's time, for Pearson has a gift for making broad historical comparisons, as his previous essays on East European history have shown.[8]

Pearson begins with a vivid portrayal of the division of Europe at Versailles and its effect on Stalin. The sheer implausibility of economic and political survival of the states of Eastern Europe, and Western capitulation to Hitler at Munich, convinced Stalin of the need for an offensive posture toward the region both in 1939 and at the war's close. Yet Pearson argues that "Yalta 1945" did not

"establish any certainties for post-Second World War Europe" (p. 22). That is, Stalin's hold over the region was not foreordained. Rather, the "Soviet Empire" emerged over the next several years, as the victors moved logically from occupation to exploitation of conquered territory; to the creation of a buffer zone against American imperialism; to political subordination, which Pearson places in the context of the Yugoslav crisis of 1947-1948. Pearson's Stalin is a pragmatist–though an insecure one–who makes use of East European ideological inclinations to build his buffer zone even as the Soviet Union itself had become "ideologically indifferent" (p. 40).

Those who would draw from the preceding the inference that Pearson is some sort of apologist will not easily reconcile this with Pearson's discussion of empire. He notes that the Soviet Empire was created just as other empires (Britain's, for example) were being dismantled. If empires are a standard stage in the development of modern states, then this empire, he suggests, was yet another symptom of Russian backwardness–an "anachronism" (p. 44) doomed to failure.

Pearson's treatment of the three great upheavals in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland is the weakest part of the book. To be sure, he builds the story around a useful set of insights. First, after 1956, the Soviet Union found itself running a rather bizarre type of empire, in which the center heavily subsidized the colonies. Symbolic or ideological value, in other words, outweighed the economic costs of running the empire. At least in the postwar era, communist rule (both domestically, as in Poland or East Germany, and internationally) has indeed followed this pattern of punishment followed by reward.

Prague 1968 provides the next turning point: in fits and starts, Brezhnev moved away from the ruinous policy of buying off trouble, toward some type of intra-Bloc cooperation. As sound as this may have seemed, it had the effect, Pearson suggests, of leading bereft East European leaders to look elsewhere for their subsidies, which they found in Western banks.

The third contribution Pearson makes to study of these years is awareness of the effect crisis in one country has on peaceful resolution in another. Thus Gomulka benefits from Hungary's disaster in 1956; Ceausescu gets away with "flamboyant insubordination" (p. 74) in part because of the problem of Czechoslovakia; an invasion of Poland was unlikely while the Afghan war raged. Pearson devotes more attention to this aspect of the story than have others.

Two important areas, however, receive much less attention. First, in a book on empire, there should be a detailed explanation of the institutions like COMECON which made the empire run. Even when they existed, they were often hard to fathom; Pearson's intermittent attention to them is insufficient when few undergraduates today have even heard of the Warsaw Pact.

Second, Pearson does not handle society with the same authority he brings to macropolitics. When he describes society in the 1960s-70s as "sullen" (p. 91)–to take just one example–the adjective seems out of place amidst his otherwise precise terminology. What does a sullen society look like? How should one reconcile this blanket statement with the Brezhnev-Husak-Gierek-Kadar-Ulbricht "Big Deal"[9] of the era to which Pearson here refers? Did Soviets and East Europeans sullenly build dachas, buy cars and washing machines, and so on? The symptoms of malaise (alcoholism, etc.) that Pearson cites are powerful, and he does not neglect the economic expansion of the era, but it is nevertheless a significant oversimplification. As we begin to view communism in the round, we need also to develop a more nuanced understanding of societal responses to the political leadership.

More perplexing is Pearson's analysis of social unrest from Solidarity onward: he calls it "people-power." Particularly in his account of 1989, Pearson does not explore why unrest emerges, what its dimensions are, or how (or whether) it provokes change. It simply occurs, and inspires others to follow. The term allows for none of the comparative study so evident elsewhere in the book; "people-power" occurs in Poland, East Germany, Romania, and Ukraine alike. This lack of analysis means that students newly acquainted with Eastern Europe will need to have their understanding of 1989 supplemented by one of the books mentioned at the outset.

The conclusion brings us back to Pearson's strengths. He reexamines the concept of empire and defends its use: the Soviet Bloc was "a multinational sovereign state [sic] in which political, economic and social power is wielded by a readily identifiable elite for the purpose of an involuntary membership of subordinated colonies and groups" (p. 160).[10] He then counters the obvious question of why the empire fell apart so quickly with the less-obvious problem of why it lasted so long; this leads to a review of the "vices and virtues" (p. 174) of the Soviet imperial system.

This text will not reveal much that is new to anyone familiar with the region. Still, the analysis is of-

ten provocative in ways that will be refreshing for the expert, and should be comprehensible even to the undergraduate. Not least, the "imperial" approach should make it possible to incorporate Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltics more smoothly into a course on post-1945 Eastern Europe. There are few errors–a reference to an "organization" called Konspira in the Polish underground after 1981 (p. 100) seems to be the worst–and a helpful chronology and bibliography make the book quite accessible.

Notes

[1]. Michael Waller, *The End of the Communist Power Monopoly* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 2.

[2]. Joseph Rothschild, *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe Since World War II*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3]. Geoffrey and Michael Swain, *Eastern Europe Since 1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

[4]. Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: The Free Press, 1993); Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[5]. For example: Patrick Brogan, *The Captive Nations: Eastern Europe 1945-1990: From The Defeat of Hitler to the Fall of Communism* (New York: Avon Books, 1990). This phenomenon is more common with books about 1989 and, oddly, those on the interwar years.

[6]. L.P. Morris, *Eastern Europe Since 1945* (London and Exeter: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984). Though it is quite different, and often short on detail, I think the most useful book in print today on this topic is Thomas W. Simons, Jr., *Eastern Europe in the Postwar World*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

[7]. Charles Gati, *The Bloc That Failed: Soviet-East European Relations in Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[8]. See for example Raymond Pearson, "Empire, War and the Nation-State in East Central Europe," in Paul Latawski, ed., *Contemporary Nationalism in East Central Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 25-40.

[9]. The term is of course Vera Dunham's: *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, enlarged edition (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1990).

[10]. Here and elsewhere in the book, it is sometimes hard to tell whether Pearson means to refer to the entire Bloc or just the Soviet Union.

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