

THE ENIGMA OF 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe

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Introduction

The book is among the many other books that describe the collapse of the communism in Eastern Europe while at the same time focusing on the successor states. However, Levesque's book offers a first systematic study of the Soviet Union (USSR) in regard to these events. The book is based on a careful review of the contemporary histories, Levesque's own interviews, some archival materials and memoirs. This is in a bid to reconstruct Mikhail Gorbachev's course from the mid-1980s during perestroika started through Poland's breakout in spring and summer of 1989 until the opening of the floodgates that fall. Levesque concludes that the revolution was caused by the Soviet leadership's poor understanding of the deeper forces at work in Europe and particularly Eastern Europe. This paper will discuss the subject matter and some particular issues and themes that the book covers which seem more interesting. It is in fact the unexpected collapse of the Eastern European regimes in 1989 that removed the initiative Gorbachev had held on the international scene. As a result, his ideologies on transition, the overwhelming support and the weaponry were thrown into disarray.

The author introduces the book by stating the meaning of the events that changed the world and calls 1989 an extraordinary year. The extraordinary year (1989) saw the world watch some of the most spectacular events: the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe that indeed changed the face of the world. The "great enigma" in 1989 must have been the permissiveness of the USSR that was possible through the Soviet behavior. Most important was that war was avoided and the changes just took place without any major international tension

although the author relates the same more to Gorbachev's reform project. The big question was and still is how a regime that was trigger-happy with a full arsenal of powers could allow the collapse. Levesque addresses some of the imminent questions regarding this collapse including elucidating the behavior and policies of the Soviet Union towards Eastern Europe, especially during Gorbachev's era. The book thus provides important insight into Gorbachev's foreign policy design and the shadowy changes that were actually transforming the Soviet politics.

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 was sudden with a rapid-fire character. However, the most peculiar feature of this collapse was a peaceful way in which it happened. This was very much astounding for several reasons. First, it was the earlier assertion by Marxists that the ruling class never lets off power that easily or willingly. Usually, regime transitions are very bloody for obvious reasons and, indeed, this collapse was surprisingly a peaceful one. The second reason is the fact that the Soviet Union had shown and was willing to use force to protect socialism. So the question was how did Mikhail Gorbachev stand by and watch Communism in Eastern Europe collapse? Why didn't he act by use of force?

Jacques Lévesque's book in fact addresses the above questions in a very careful way. Levesque uses a number of ways to provide new fascinating data that includes the interviews that he carried out with a number of Soviet Union and Eastern Europe members. The interviews helped trace the end of the Soviet bloc. In the process, Lévesque was able to examine the Soviet policies towards Eastern European countries that were initially members of the Soviet Union, reaction of policy makers in the Soviet Union as well as the reaction of analysts that led to the end of the supremacy of the Communist party in Eastern Europe. He also examines the rapid unification of Germany as well as the near termination of the Warsaw Pact.

From the book, we get to synthesize many significant conclusions that Lévesque draws including the following: although socialism was facing a number of serious economic problems, by the end of the Brezhnev era, Gorbachev's reforms that he had introduced were far from inevitable. This implies that choice was an important matter as was Gorbachev's role in formulating and amending the reforms. This included discussing when and how socialism could end. The other reason was that the reform changes introduced by Gorbachev included a lot of learning not just from Eastern Europe but also from the European communist experience. This implies therefore that the reforms called for a profound transition in the thinking way of the Soviets and the way they acted. This new set of reforms saw a shift in the way of thinking of the Soviet leadership especially Gorbachev's supporters from an earlier understanding of socialism as a static, anti-western and undemocratic to one that embraced the western culture and its social democratic ideals. The other reason why Gorbachev and his allies failed to comprehend the changes was that they needed to dispense the dictatorial regime and its central planning with a fundamental assumption that informed them and their traditional Soviet practices of what Lévesque calls "illusion of control". It was due to the fact that Gorbachev's reforms had been revolutionary maybe by design or even by accident. Consequently, Gorbachev and his leadership were not at a position to help their control at home or even abroad. This therefore implies that they never got what they wanted. As a result, socialism as well as the bloc collapsed.

Levesque argues that the adaptive institutional change was a prerequisite to the collapse of the Soviet Union. He implies that when an adaptive change stagnates, there is a possibility of a regime collapse as was seen in the Eastern Europe. He argues in the first chapter that by the early or even mid 1980s, it was hard to see the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was an interesting thought on the role of the US in the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Lévesque, American politicians had an interest in protecting

the *perestroika* and implementation of the new thinking. The Americans were interested in introducing an element of unpredictability into the development of the international system. It was interesting to read that before the inauguration of George Bush in January, the then president Henry Kissinger had visited Moscow in mid-January and carried a letter of good intentions to the new president Gorbachev. He expressed his opinion that the states of Eastern Europe were imposing threat to the US and the USSR including the resurgent German nationalism and some centrifugal forces that had increased in Europe. Kissinger suggested that some high level talks had to be held in which the USSR was not to oppose the liberalization of Eastern Europe. In exchange, the US could then agree not to interfere with the changes but to respect the Soviet interests. Gorbachev became receptive albeit with some caution and the USSR actually accepted the proposal although it was not in writing. In July, George Bush arrived in Warsaw for an official visit. In fact Bush went ahead and praised the evolution before the Polish parliament and asked Congress for \$100 million for the same. Moscow considered the move as a positive one.

The other interesting fact was how events finally started to spill out of control in the culmination of the collapse starting with Poland. There was an impasse in Poland that neither Bush nor the election of a new president was able to solve. The summer of 1989 saw the first opening of the Berlin Wall in Budapest. Hungary had at the same time (towards the end of the summer of 1989) had its own evolution. In knowledge of the opening of the Iron Curtain by Hungary, thousands of East Germans flocked to Hungary. Moscow insisted that Hungary should uphold its obligations to the GDR. The USSR was concerned with the opening of the Berlin Wall because it had never been consulted about it. Gorbachev was perturbed by the information that the Berlin Wall had been destroyed and Lévesque says that it marked "the defining moment of glory for Gorbachev" (159). There were suggestions of a reunification but Gorbachev was worried about the risk it

posed.

It is easier to say that the fall of the Berlin Wall made the German reunification possible although most leaders at the time did not consider the reunification possible. After the reunification, the Soviet leaders realized that they had to adjust to the new situation and they did so reluctantly. A united Germany tied to NATO. By this time, Gorbachev had been chased out of power by some radical pro-Western Russian leaders. They wanted to dissolve the USSR to better integrate Russia into a civilized world.

Conclusion

It is not often that history presents us with the above scenario where a policy of a great power is guided by an idealistic view based on a universal reconciliation that the enemy becomes blurred. It is true that Gorbachev's policy was an inevitable impasse in which the USSR found itself. The policy was in fact a social democratic transformation through which the Soviet leadership went. The critical phase of political idealism to the Communist Party was the introduction of social democratic transition. Levesque states that Eastern Europe was concerned with dismantling of the regimes and Gorbachev's interventions in the form of reforms only precipitated their collapse. The most interesting thing however is the fact that the collapse occurred in such a peaceful way (not like the bloody change of regimes that we are used to seeing across the globe). This is the most remarkable event of 1989 and it left the legacy of hope not just to the people of that time but also to future generations.