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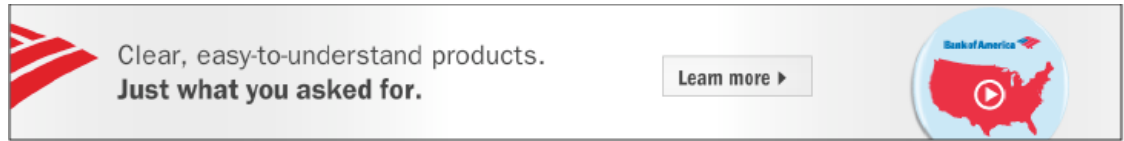
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Books & Arts

The fall of Communism

Wall stories

Nov 5th 2009

From *The Economist* print edition

How communism in eastern Europe collapsed, and what came next. Scholars and journalists give their account



eyevine

Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment.

By Stephen Kotkin. *Modern Library*; 197 pages; \$24. Buy from Amazon.com

1989: The Berlin Wall: My Part in its Downfall. By Peter Millar. *Arcadia*; 220 pages; £11.99. To be published in America by Arcadia in April 2010; \$16.95. Buy from Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk

The Year that Changed the World. By Michael Meyer. *Scribner*; 254 pages; \$26. *Simon and Schuster*; £16.99. Buy from Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk

Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire.

By Victor Sebestyen. *Pantheon*; 451 pages; \$30. *Weidenfeld and Nicolson*; £25. Buy from Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk

'89: The Unfinished Revolution: Power and Powerlessness in Eastern Europe.

By Nick Thorpe. *Reportage Press*; 320 pages; £12.99. Buy from Amazon.co.uk

1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe.

By Mary Elise Sarotte. *Princeton University Press*; 307 pages; \$29.95 and £24.95. Buy from Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk

WHY all the fuss about 1989? Twenty years on, the idea of millions of people yearning for the humdrum joys of daily life in welfare capitalism no longer seems so startling or moving. Familiarity has dimmed the excitement of the freedoms won: to travel, to shop, to exchange currency, to change jobs, to move house, to think, to speak. Experience has scarred the belief that "Western" life is a self-

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The respective publishers post excerpts from "In the First Circle: The First Uncensored Edition", by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "The Year that Changed the World", by Michael Meyer, "The Struggle to Create Post-cold War Europe", by Mary Elise Sarotte and "Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment", by Stephen Kotkin. Peter Millar, the author of "The Berlin Wall: My Part in its Downfall", wrote an article it about in the *Times*.

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correcting nirvana, where officials are efficient, politicians public-spirited and justice incorruptible. For about a third of the world's population, the fall of the wall is probably history, not real life.

The best way to appreciate the significance of 1989 is to remember what it was a revolution against. The new edition of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's epic novel, "In the First Circle" (Harper Perennial, \$18), captures better than any other work of fiction the quintessence of communist rule at its Stalinist peak: all-pervasive, paranoid, oppressive, incompetent, lethal.

By 1989 that system had become more rotten and less frightening, especially in the east European satellites of the evil empire. But the climate of fear and lies was still there, with political prisoners, murders, beatings and blackmail, especially in the grimmer places such as East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania. Eight hectic months in 1989 turned the winter so starkly described by Solzhenitsyn into spring.

The new edition of the novel differs subtly but importantly from the version published in English in 1968. That was based on a self-censored text that the author had prepared in the hope of getting it published in the Soviet Union. It left out the hero's espionage for America, the Christian faith of his friend and other details that the Soviet authorities would have found utterly intolerable. The longer text is deeper and darker.

For all its malevolence, the Soviet empire was like a Ponzi scheme, dependent on ever-increasing amounts of money. When that ran out, its regimes imploded. That is the story told in Stephen Kotkin's slender but snappy book, which concentrates on demoralisation and divisions in what he calls "uncivil society", the circles of power. This side of life, he argues, was more important than the dissidents, who were lionised in the West as "civil society", but ignored and unknown at home.

Mr Kotkin is right that bankruptcy forced some regimes to make concessions, but he greatly overstates his case. Czechoslovakia was under little immediate economic pressure to change. As the grim examples of Romania then and North Korea now both show, a sufficiently determined communist leadership can survive economic failure through repression. Moreover, 1989 is the story of people as well as processes. Although the reformers and ship-jumpers inside the regimes were important, in most countries it was the dissidents who forced the pace of change.

The real point, though, is that fitting a dozen complex stories into a single analytical straitjacket is a nonsense. Communism collapsed differently in every country, as the journalists who reported the story could see. Their accounts published for this anniversary are necessarily episodic: too much was happening for one person to witness it all. But each book carries the vital touch of personal experience.

The best read is the irreverent and engaging account by Peter Millar, who writes for the *Sunday Times* among other papers. Fastidious readers who expect reporters to be a mere lens on events will be shocked at the amount of personal detail, including the sexual antics and drinking habits of his colleagues in what now seems a Juvenalian age of dissolute British journalism. He mentions his long-suffering wife and children rather too often, but the result is full of insights and on occasion delightfully funny. The author has a knack for befriending interesting people and tracking down important ones. He weaves their words with his clear-eyed reporting of events into a compelling narrative about the end of the cruel but bungling East German regime.

View from the top

At the other end of the spectrum is the Olympian perspective of a former *Newsweek* bureau chief for Germany and eastern Europe. Michael Meyer ranges widely and not always deeply. His best reporting is on Hungary, particularly on the decision by the reform-minded leadership there to open the border with Austria. That destabilised the East German regime, first creating an embarrassing outflow of refugees, and then forcing the Berlin authorities to restrict travel freedoms still further. This is a competent and professional account—though it



does not quite merit its claim to be the untold story.

A more solid and less pretentious book comes from Victor Sebestyen, who has covered the region since the 1970s. His book deals more thoroughly with both history and geography. He starts the story, rightly, with the election in 1978 of John Paul II, the Polish pope. He highlights Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, the other two giant figures who ended the communist epoch. Unlike his rivals, the author devotes at least some space to developments in other continents.

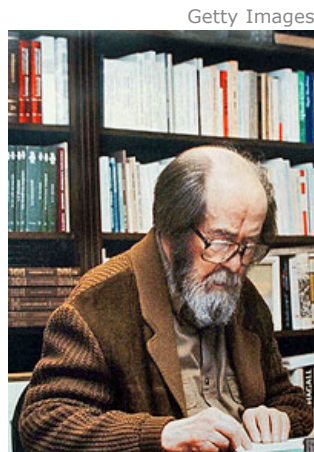
Few journalists covering the region lived there in the communist era, inevitably giving their accounts a second-hand feel. An exception is Nick Thorpe, who moved to Budapest in 1986 and has mastered Hungary's beautiful, impenetrable language. His account of the interplay between dissidents and reformists inside the regime shows a level of sympathy and nuance that is missing from more ambitious accounts—and makes his own chapters on events in other countries look skimpy.

Almost more interesting than his description of the collapse of Hungarian communism are Mr Thorpe's insights into what came next, told through the unlikely prism of obstetrics. Abominable practices stayed in place after 1989, treating birth as a medical emergency in which painful and humiliating procedures such as episiotomy, shaving and enemas were mandatory. Parents' wishes were habitually ignored. Mr Thorpe and his wife decided they wanted their children born at home: a normal procedure in western Europe but illegal in Hungary. The medical bureaucracy's cartel-like resistance gives a pungent flavour of the lingering communist-era mindset that the region still has to shake off.

No whiff of the personal contaminates Mary Elise Sarotte's scrupulous account of the high politics and diplomacy of 1989. With remarkable diligence, she has interviewed almost all the surviving participants, and quarried government archives and other libraries for documents that illustrate the decision-making (and lack of it) that year. The result is a tale of hypocrisy and indecision in high places.

Some of it, however, is commendable. After the Tiananmen massacre in June, communist leaders could not quite summon the willpower to use mass murder to stay in power. On the Western side, it is sometimes deplorable. For all her fiery freedom-loving speeches, Margaret Thatcher, then Britain's prime minister, privately loathed the idea of German unification and tried to sabotage it, covering her tracks as she did so. The then American president, George Bush senior, comes across badly too, giving tepid and unemotional responses in public and missing the chances that 1989 presented.

Ms Sarotte debunks myths: the opening of the wall on November 9th was not planned, let alone forced. It was the result of a bungle: a bureaucratic rule-change misleadingly announced and over-excitedly reported. German unification was not inevitable: outsiders, the new East German leadership and many West Germans wanted something else. It came thanks to a combination of electoral pressure in the East and highly effective arm-twisting by the West German chancellor, Helmut Kohl.



No worthy successor, yet, to Solzhenitsyn

psychological order destroyed five decades previously is a gripping story. It has yet to be fully told.

Getty Images The author comes across as more at home with her sources than with the region's wider history. The pope, she writes, "continued to dominate the Vatican" in 1989. That is what popes normally do. In analysing the question of whether NATO's eastward expansion broke a promise to Mr Gorbachev (it didn't), she overlooks the worries of countries in central Europe about Russia's ominous drift back to old habits in the 1990s.

Missing in all this is a powerful voice from the countries concerned. Writers such as Solzhenitsyn, Czeslaw Milosz, a Polish poet, and Czech novelists such as Milan Kundera, Ivan Klima and Josef Skvorecky helped the world understand life under communism. But no writer from the region, in fact or fiction, has produced a matching account of the collapse of the Iron Curtain and its aftermath. The way in which the countries of central Europe, the Baltics and the Balkans emerged from communist captivity, made peace (mostly) with their history, and rebuilt the economic, legal, moral and

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