they, as much as anyone, now wanted to join. Mass consumerism, by the closing decades of the twentieth century, had both adapted to and transcended national differentiations. Its iconography mixed both rebellion (often cultural and/or generational) and cooption; it was both radical and conservative. For better or for worse (especially in ecological impact), people throughout the world had come to embrace mass consumption as the look of the future, even as locally specific debates about the impact of consumerism and of "Americanization" continued.

How might the proposition that consumerism, rather than the US nation-state, "won" the Cold War affect the way that historians discuss the late twentieth century? Certainly, frameworks bounded by elite policymaking and by nation-state actors would appear increasingly inadequate. Instead, research agendas would broaden out globally (as is already occurring), to include diverse cultures of consumption, the economics of class and globalization, and the complexities of individual and national aspirations in an age of mass selling.

An 'incredibly swift transition': reflections on the end of the Cold War

ADAM ROBERTS

The end was dramatic, decisive, and remarkably peaceful: a rapid succession of extraordinary events, symbolised above all by the opening of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the end of the USSR in December 1991. It provokes the question: what factors caused this conclusion of the long-drawn-out and fateful rivalry of the Cold War; and how did interpretations of these events impinge on international relations in the post-Cold War era? Since these events, some beguilingly simple answers have been offered, always linked with simple policy prescriptions. This tendency, while by no means unique to the United States, has been particularly prevalent there. Some have seen the wave of democratisation around the world, of which the end of the Soviet empire was an important part, as leading towards a secure future thanks to the beneficent workings of the democratic peace. Some have seen the end of the Cold War as a triumph of American values and might, leading to the conclusion that US power could be freely used as an instrument for world-historical change. Some, having previously seen the Cold War as the problem of international relations, believed that its ending must mean that the future of world order would be completely different from its past. Such views exerted a pull on policy-makers after the end of the Cold War and shaped their actions.

This exploration is in four parts. First, it summarises certain characteristics of the Cold War that help to explain its ending. Secondly, it provides examples of how fundamental change in the Soviet sphere was foreseen by many acute observers. Thirdly, it explores six possible explanations for the end of the Cold War. Fourthly, it suggests that all six explanations are convincing, and that the manner of the Cold War's end influenced what came after, but did not mean the end of history.

What was the Cold War?

The Cold War had two unique characteristics. The first was the extraordinary fact that in the entire period 1945–91 there were just two major powers, each of
which had inherited from its revolution a rejection of colonialism and a claim to embody universal values. The universalist element in their respective ideologies meant that each needed to show global progress of its social system. The anti-colonial element meant that it was hard for the United States and the USSR to justify dominance of other societies except by reference to the extreme threat posed by the adversary; and it also meant that dominance often had to be exerted clandestinely. Even as the United States and the USSR sought to prevent states in their respective spheres from 'defecting', as in the cases of Cuba in 1961 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, some appearance of sovereign independence had to be maintained. The second unique characteristic of the Cold War was the nuclear confrontation, which became particularly serious in the late 1950s, when each side acquired the ability to destroy the other with ballistic missiles. This nuclear factor cast a shadow in many crises, including over Berlin in 1961 and Cuba in 1962, but also led to awareness of common interest in security, and to elements of prudence in policy-making.

These two characteristics help to explain why it is reasonable to characterise the East-West confrontation between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the end of the USSR in 1991 as one period called 'the Cold War', and they also help to explain its end. Yet the Cold War was far from being uniformly confrontational throughout; and the processes that ended it developed over decades. Indeed, the term Cold War has sometimes been applied to a shorter period. What may be called the short Cold War of roughly 1945–55 was a crisis period marked by high tension, rhetorical hostility, show trials in the East and McCarthyism in the United States, international disputes over the future political orientation and security arrangements of many countries, manoeuvring and external manipulation within states to change their external orientation, several simultaneous wars (mainly in Asia) between pro- and anti-Communist forces, deep uncertainties about where the fault lines between East and West lay including in Europe, and more frequent Soviet use of the veto at the UN than in any subsequent period. Yet even during this 'short Cold War' the hostility was not total. There was not the same visceral hatred between the major adversaries as there had been in some actual wars of the twentieth century. The period of wartime alliance was remembered. East-West contact, including diplomatic negotiation on a range of issues, was never wholly absent. The fault lines between East and West became more or less fixed, at least in Europe.

A partial easing of Cold War hostility followed the death of Iosif Stalin in March 1953. From the mid-1950s onwards, there were periods of improvement in East-West relations, but a tangle of problems remained. Although spheres of influence were tacitly accepted, they could never be explicitly recognised, events such as the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 drawing attention to their inherent inhumanity; and, although stability was seen as a value in its own right, the USSR only partially modified its Leninist language. The détentes of the 1960s and 1970s were an incomplete ending because they ratified rather than resolved the East–West confrontation and left behind many sources of further crises. The continued Soviet domination of Eastern Europe led to periodic challenges from within the region. Furthermore, the necessity for the Soviet leadership to demonstrate worldwide progress towards socialism contributed to wars and crises in many parts of the post-colonial world, including Cuba, Congo, Vietnam, and Angola. The US tendency to support or even impose authoritarian regimes provided that they professed strong anti-Communism exacerbated some of these ongoing conflicts.

Subsequent periods of the confrontation from the late 1950s to the late 1980s were at the time often characterised as stalemate, détente, and bipolar order. None of these terms was logically antithetical to the idea that there was still a Cold War, but they did imply a change in its character. Some observers called the renewed East–West hostility of the early 1980s the new Cold War. The term did not catch on, perhaps partly because the uncertainties of the 1980s were not as extreme as those of 1945–55. By 1987, within two years of the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev, the USSR's international conduct on a range of issues, especially arms control, was so notably co-operative that talk of an ongoing Cold War ceased to make sense. The denouement of 1989–91, sudden as it was, could occur only because of the crucial fact that the international environment and patterns of thought within the Soviet orbit, had already changed from the extreme confrontation, and frightening certainties, of the early Cold War years.

Who foresaw change?

While no one could have foreseen the precise way in which the Cold War would end, many suggested, before the mid-1980s, that the inherently flawed Soviet system would eventually collapse. In his famously anonymous article in Foreign Affairs in 1947, George F. Kennan had explored the possibility that, if the West contained the USSR, the inherent weaknesses of the system would be exposed in the process of the transfer of power from one leader to others: it is possible that the questions involved may unleash, to use some of Lenin’s words, one of those ‘incredibly swift transitions’ from ‘delicate deceit’ to ‘wild
violence' which characterize Russian history, and may shake Soviet power to its foundations.\(^1\)

Kennan was evidently referring to Lenin’s speech the day after his arrival in Russia in 1917. Other accounts mention a 'gigantically swift progression' in a different direction, 'from wild violence to subtle deceit'.\(^2\) Yet Kennan deserves credit both for his vision of 'swift transition' – which was to occur in 1989–91 – and for foreseeing that the 'long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies' that he advocated would require skilled diplomacy as well as military toughness:

it is a sine qua non of successful dealing with Russia that the foreign government in question should remain at all times cool and collected and that its demands on Russian policy should be put forward in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige.\(^3\)

That there could be a connection between maintaining deterrence, accepting the status quo in the Communist world, and assisting processes of change there was envisaged by other astute observers of East–West relations even before the word détente entered the lexicon of East–West negotiations in the late 1960s. In 1963, Philip Windsor had written: 'The essential preliminary to any Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe is an initial acknowledgement of the division of Germany.' In addition, he had foreseen that such a policy 'could invite revolution'.\(^4\)

Throughout the Cold War, and especially from the 1970s onwards, many who wrote about the USSR identified three types of structural failure that could lead to the end of the USSR or its extended empire.\(^5\) First, some saw the problem of rival nationalisms within the USSR as insoluble. Secondly, many writers emphasised the closely related idea of imperial overstretch. Thirdly, few saw this as leading to collapse or revolution. The Soviet Union’s doomed attempt to establish a socialist empire in Eastern Europe was the focus of many prescient analyses. As early as 1980, one distinguished journalist foresaw a drastic change in Soviet policy in response to overextension.\(^6\) In 1982, Zbigniew Pelczynski, an Oxford political scientist, correctly saw that Poland was on a road from Communism.\(^7\) By this time the troubles of the Soviet system were increasingly evident. Raymond Aron said in 1982: 'It is my view that the most important and indeed most neglected question in contemporary international relations scholarship is: what will the West do when and if the Soviets decline? How we answer that question will perhaps determine whether there will be war or peace in our time.'\(^8\) What few foresaw was that the process of Soviet collapse could be as peaceful as it turned out to be.

President Ronald Reagan famously spoke of the coming demise of the USSR. In a speech to the British Parliament on 8 June 1982, he advocated 'the common task of spreading democracy throughout the world', a process in which Marxism-Leninism would be consigned to 'the ash heap of history'.\(^9\) He and his colleagues were not consistent on how this was to be achieved. His ambassador to the UN in 1981–85, Jeane Kirkpatrick, famously argued that, whereas non-Communist dictatorships might change, there were 'no grounds for expecting that radical totalitarian regimes will transform themselves'.\(^10\) Consequently, the 'Reagan Doctrine', based on the belief that support for armed resistance movements was the only way to undermine certain Marxist regimes, was applied not just in Afghanistan but also in several other countries, including Angola and Nicaragua. After Gorbachev’s advent to power, Reagan put less emphasis on this doctrine, thereby worrying its stronger devotees among his advisers, at least one of whom in 1990 still saw Gorbachev as a dangerous adversary.\(^11\)

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1 X [George Kennan], 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', Foreign Affairs, 25 (July 1947). 578–79.


3 X, 'Sources of Soviet Conduct', 576. Kennan was not infallible: he was to denounce the 1975 Helsinki Final Act intertemporarily, though arguably it contributed to the end that he had earlier envisaged for the USSR. See also Matthew Connolly’s chapter in this volume.


5 Works forecasting drastic change in the USSR and Eastern Europe are listed in the bibliographical essay.


It has often been observed that few political scientists foresaw the end of the Cold War. In particular, many International Relations specialists got it wrong. As late as 1989, Kenneth Waltz wrote: 'Although its content and virulence vary as unit-level forces change and interact, the Cold War continues. It is firmly rooted in the structure of postwar international politics, and will last as long as that structure endures.' The historian John Gaddis memorably criticised International Relations specialists for failing to see the end of the Cold War coming. Actually, the academics he was targeting were overwhelmingly American – for it is US specialists in International Relations who have made the boldest claims to being capable of foreseeing and influencing the future, and whose supposedly scientific methodologies tend to be parsimonious, seeking to explain outcomes in terms of a limited range of considerations. With their emphasis on states and international systems, they tend to play down the human dimension of decision-making. They put more emphasis on abstract reasoning and hard facts than on understanding foreign languages and cultures. They easily miss the uniqueness of particular individuals, situations, and moments.

Six possible explanations of the end of the Cold War

The pace of events in 1989–91 was breathtaking and the process astonishingly peaceful. In the last six months of 1989, Communist governments gave way to non-Communist ones in five East European countries; on 10 November 1989, the Berlin Wall, which had become the very symbol of the Cold War, was opened; on 3 October 1990, German reunification took effect, with the agreement of Germany's neighbours as well as the two superpowers; on 1 April 1991, the Warsaw Treaty, the formalisation of the USSR's alliance system in Eastern Europe, was annulled; on 25 December 1991, the USSR ceased to exist, being replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States. In 1992, nine former republics of the USSR were admitted to the UN.

In this kaleidoscope of events, the Cold War definitively ended. But exactly when? The Cold War, even the 'long' Cold War, ended before the final collapse of the USSR. At the latest, it ended in 1990 or early 1991 when so many major problems of the Cold War were addressed. It can even be argued that the USSR collapsed despite the end of the Cold War, not because of it: the end of the Cold War gave its leaders an opportunity to reform that they failed to grasp. Yet the end of the USSR is inescapably part of the story of the end of the Cold War. This is because the long-standing crisis of the Soviet system was a mainspring of Gorbachev's decision to end the Cold War, and because the manner of the Cold War's ending in Eastern Europe in 1989 influenced what subsequently happened in the USSR. The parts fit together.

In the debates since 1991 about the peaceful end of the Cold War, many explanations have been advanced – sometimes in the belief that only one can be correct. However, great events often have multiple causes. The six propositions offered here are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

(1) The Soviet leadership reached a rational decision to liquidate a system that did not work

This approach highlights both the long-standing crisis of the Soviet system and the crucial role of Mikhail Gorbachev and the team with which he worked. The end of the Cold War in 1989–91 can be traced back to internal developments in the USSR and allied states as well as to the international situation that they faced. Both types of factors caused a gradual loss of ideological self-confidence on the part of the USSR and its East European allies. Internally, this process gathered pace in the 1970s and 1980s, as the Soviet system failed to develop in the manner foreseen in its ideology, or even to develop at all except in the area of military production. Internationally, there was growing awareness of the costs of foreign involvements, and a gradual acceptance of some basic facts and norms of international society.

The events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 not only showed what was wrong with Soviet-style Communism, but also how it might change. The Soviet-led intervention to suppress the 'Prague Spring' succeeded eventually in securing the dismissal of Alexander Dubček as first secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, but it left lasting doubts – including in the USSR itself – about the failings of a system of government that could be kept in place only by tanks. Communism was preserved as a system at the cost of being...
undermined as a faith, particularly among Communist Parties in Western Europe, which began to develop their own doctrines of ‘Eurocommunism’.

Above all, the Prague Spring showed that the leadership of a ruling Communist Party might initiate change. Some of those involved in that episode never lost sight of that possibility. There was a direct connection in the friendship between a leading Czech reformer, Zdeněk Mlynář, and Mikhail Gorbachev: they had been students together at Moscow University in 1950–55, and represented an idealistic strand within Communist Parties that took the idea of socialism seriously and sought to save it.

Similarly, in many Third World conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s, outward Soviet success could not conceal classic signs of failure and overextension. The US withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1973 and the fall of Saigon in 1975 were successes for the Soviet strategy of support for national liberation movements. However, other involvements were to cause greater doubts. The USSR gave continuous and expensive support to regimes which became involved in wars against opposition and/or secessionist movements: in Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, and Ethiopia.

The symbol of all that was wrong in the USSR’s encounter with the non-European world was the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan from December 1979 onwards. Based on the idea that an outside power, by force of arms, could assist socialist development in the unpromising environment of Afghanistan, it ran into difficulties of the kind that often confront modernising interventionists with little understanding of local culture. Afghan resistance was assisted with dollars and advanced weaponry from the United States and Saudi Arabia. The mounting Red Army casualties – and protests by the mothers of soldiers – caused the spread of corrosive doubt inside the USSR about the Communist Party’s claim to be the defender of the Soviet people. Afghanistan cracked the thin veneer of the Soviet–Third World solidarity which had been a significant success for Soviet political diplomacy in the 1970s. Gorbachev determined the end of the Afghan intervention when, on 14 April 1988, the Soviet government concluded a UN-brokered agreement on phased withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, duly completed by 15 February 1989. This was a sign of how Gorbachev could liquidate misbegotten enterprises. There was progress, too, on other regional conflicts with an East–West dimension. The agreement on Angola and Namibia, signed in New York on 22 December 1988, provided for withdrawal of the 50,000-odd Cuban troops from Angola as well as for the withdrawal of South African forces from Namibia. In 1987–88, there were numerous international landmarks in the process of ending the Cold War, mostly resulting from the USSR’s new approach to diplomacy. The US–USSR Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range Missiles (INF), signed in Washington on 8 December 1987, required the dismantling of two whole classes of nuclear delivery systems by the end of 1991: shorter-range (300–1,000 km) and intermediate-range (1,000–5,500 km). This was the first time that East–West disarmament negotiations had resulted in the elimination of an entire class of weapons. It suggested that Cold War issues were actually being resolved. At the same time, Soviet views of the UN changed: in September 1987, Gorbachev indicated a far more positive Soviet approach than before. Then, on 7 December 1988, in a major speech to the UN General Assembly, he announced that international relations should be freed from ideology, that the ‘common values of humanity must be the determining priority’, and that force should not be used to deny a nation freedom of choice. This last point was taken as a possible signal that force would not be used in Eastern Europe, emphasised by his announcement of a unilateral withdrawal of 50,000 Soviet troops from that area.

The evidence is overwhelming that, while Gorbachev did not have a convincing idea of the end-state of his revolution, he did not simply react to events, but sought to move them forward. He was clear in his view that, as long as East–West tensions remained high, he could not pursue internal reform, which required both a freeing of resources and co-operation with the outside world. He was equally decisive in avoiding the use of force in response to political developments – a conviction which appears to have deepened after the killing by Soviet forces of at least nineteen pro-independence demonstrators in Georgia on 9 April 1989. He was also influenced, as he has written, by his reluctance to destroy his relations with the West. His approach contrasts markedly with the willingness of the Chinese leadership to use force in Tiananmen Square on 3–4 June 1989.

In Soviet policy-making from 1985 onwards, there was much emphasis on certain ideas and policy proposals that were ‘non-realist’, marking a departure from inherited policies of military build-up and power projection. On 11 June 1986, in their ‘Budapest Appeal’, the Warsaw Pact leaders, including Gorbachev, stated that ‘the military concepts and doctrines of the alliances

16 See Silvio Pons’s chapter in this volume.
17 See Vladislav M. Zubok’s chapter in this volume, where he suggests that the USSR lost its way in this period; see also Chris Saunders and Sue Onslow’s chapter in this volume on how the Cold War wound down in southern Africa.

largely because of developments within the Communist world, including weakness in 1991 in the face of Boris Yeltsin’s bold stance embracing radical change within the USSR itself; and they were remarkably clear that they would not use force to prop up the system. In short, Gorbachev’s stewardship of the USSR from March 1985 is the leading explanation of how the Cold War ended. However, it is far from being the only theory, and it is perfectly compatible with certain other levels of explanation.

None of this alters the conclusion that Gorbachev and his close associates made rational decisions to change a system that did not work. They did so largely because of developments within the Communist world, including within the USSR itself; and they were remarkably clear that they would not use force to prop up the system. In short, Gorbachev’s stewardship of the USSR from March 1985 is the leading explanation of how the Cold War ended. However, it is far from being the only theory, and it is perfectly compatible with certain other levels of explanation.

(2) The US leadership turned the tide of the Cold War against Moscow

The claim that US policies won the Cold War has been widely made. It can draw strength from the fact that there were enduring bipartisan policies on a range of issues, including engagement in NATO and support for the mujahedin resistance in Afghanistan. The claim has been made in different forms, some of which have been triumphalist about the US role. In his State of the Union address in 1992, President George H. W. Bush declared: ‘By the grace of God, America won the cold war.’ He suggested that US military preparedness over a long period had been the key factor: ‘The American taxpayer bore the brunt of the burden, and deserves a hunk of the glory.’ This view of the past led seamlessly to a US-centric view of the future:

A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and pre-eminent power, the United States of America. And this they regard with no dread. For the world trusts us with power, and the world is right. They trust us to be fair, and restrained. They trust us to be on the side of decency. They trust us to do what’s right.

Some have suggested that it was not so much the United States in general as Ronald Reagan in particular, US president 1981–89, who won the Cold War. Two developments in March 1983 are seen as emblematic of Reagan’s approach: his denunciation of the USSR as an ‘evil empire’, and his call for development by the United States of an anti-ballistic missile system (Star Wars). It was easy to ridicule these speeches as oversimplifying politics and defying the laws of physics, but both had interesting consequences in the Soviet empire – the latter playing to an ancient Russian fear of superior Western military technology. Nevertheless, the view of Reagan as the victor of the Cold War is open to criticism on several lines. The first is that at the time some of Reagan’s close colleagues failed to notice their achievement. Thus, Caspar Weinberger, US secretary of defense 1981–87, wrote in 1988: ‘Mr. Gorbachev may be in power for a short or long period. But no general secretary will be allowed to alter in any fundamental way the never-changing Soviet goal of world domination, or the nature of the Soviet regime.

One Reagan biographer, John Patrick Diggins, has made the bold claim: ‘Since the era of Washington and Adams, Reagan was the only president in American history to have resolved a sustained, deadly international confrontation without going to war.’ Diggins can be criticised for casting Reagan in the top starring role, and for attributing to him a more coherent intellectual framework than the evidence supports. However, he is right to emphasise the value of creating a benign security environment. He suggests that both President Reagan and UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher responded to


21 For an assessment, see Beth A. Fischer’s chapter in this volume.

22 President Reagan’s ‘Evil Empire’ speech, 8 March 1983, and his ‘Star Wars’ speech, 23 March 1983, both in PPP: Reagan, 1983, I, 139–64 and 440.


Gorbachev with a unique mixture of firmness and friendliness. These leaders are seen as seizing a major historic opportunity, and as pursuing an active policy of bringing the Cold War to an end through communication, understanding, and trust.25

George Shultz, Reagan’s of state, confirms Reagan’s willingness to enter into constructive negotiations with the USSR, both in 1982–83 and then after the advent of Gorbachev.26 Jack Matlock, the ambassador to the USSR, presents a similar picture, with rich detail on the prime role played by Gorbachev and his colleagues. Both Shultz and Matlock suggest that US firmness in arms-control negotiations showed that the USSR could not win the arms race, and thus contributed to a major shift in Soviet policy. At the same time, both had difficulties with some of the hawkish ideologues who surrounded Reagan, though not with the president himself. Matlock sums up the US position thus:

While the Reagan administration articulated a strategy for ending the cold war, it did not have a plan to end Communist rule in the Soviet Union. Not that it would have considered that an undesirable goal, but the key members of the administration understood that the United States could not, from the outside, bring down the Soviet regime, and that direct attempts to do so would only strengthen it.

... if we are to credit any one individual for the collapse of Communist rule in the Soviet Union, it has to be Mikhail Gorbachev. It was, after all, he who insisted upon the changes that ultimately threw the Communist Party from its dominant position, and it was he who refused to sanction the use of force to preserve the old system.27

The claim that the United States caused the changes in the Soviet world, if not tempered by recognition of the other causes, is too simple. The conclusion seems inescapable that the policies of the United States and its allies towards the USSR constituted a necessary condition for the changes in the Soviet empire; but they did not constitute a sufficient condition. Moreover, inasmuch as they did influence the eventual outcome, it was because those policies, far from being uniformly hawkish, involved a combination of firmness, restraint, and engagement.

25 Ibid., 404-05.
26 George P. Shultz, Turnell and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State (New York: Scribner’s, 1993), 159-71 and 547-38.
Communist systems were languishing. The resulting magnetic pull was especially evident in Hungary, as the Soviet Politburo clearly knew by the beginning of 1989. Gorbachev was aware of the huge debts that East European countries had incurred in the West, and knew that the USSR could not take them on.

West Germany’s Ostpolitik had contributed to Western Europe’s pull. In the early 1970s, while much of the Third World was an area of contestation between the USSR and the United States, Europe was apparently stable. The government of Willy Brandt, by its Ostpolitik treaties with the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany (all concluded in 1970–73), recognised the post-1945 territorial status quo, including the western frontiers of Poland that had long been a source of contention. The division of Germany was accepted in so far as both were admitted to membership of the UN, but the treaty between them established special relations between the ‘two states in Germany’. Ostpolitik was controversial when it was introduced by Brandt, and remained so at least until 1989. In the eyes of critics, it involved passive acceptance of systems of Communist government and a weakening of West Germany’s ties with the West. Supporters of Ostpolitik argued that, in addition to the inherent value of the provisions for human and economic interchange, the policy made it harder for the Warsaw Pact governments to present West Germany as a revanchist threat, and thereby weakened the cement that held the communist bloc together. Poland became more restless after the alleged German threat had been removed.

Over a period of at least two decades, the pursuit by the Western powers of a stable international framework, including through the UN and also European détente, played some modest part in helping to weaken the control exercised by Communist regimes. It also contributed to the willingness of Communist leaders to risk basic changes, which they could hardly have done if they had felt seriously threatened by external meddling and war. The Western policies that contributed to this outcome certainly aimed at creating a stable international environment, but they were far from being pacifistic or status quo-oriented: they involved standing up to the USSR on key issues, such as the Soviet presence in Afghanistan; and they also involved enunciating a doctrine of human rights in an astute and remarkably effective way.

(4) The Helsinki process provided a basis for a new politics of human rights within the bloc

The Helsinki process has often been seen as the particular aspect of East–West détente in Europe that contributed most to the ending of the Cold War. The process was based on the Final Act of the Conference on Security and


32 On the debates, see ‘Soviet Record of Conversation between M. S. Gorbachev and the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), Egon Krenz, 1 November 1989’, in Cold War International History Project Bulletin, issue 12/13, 18–19.
Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), signed on 1 August 1975 at Helsinki by thirty-five heads of state and government. This document was the product of three years of difficult negotiations in which the Western side was led largely by the Europeans in the face of scepticism and even resistance from Washington. It addressed three subject areas, or baskets. Basket I contained a declaration of ten 'principles guiding relations between participating states'. These included the inviolability but emphatically not the permanence of frontiers, self-determination of peoples, non-intervention, and, remarkably, 'respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms' as 'an essential factor for peace'. Provision was also made for mutual observation of military manoeuvres and negotiations on force reductions. Basket II, on economic, scientific, and environmental co-operation, approved a notably wide range of activities as a contribution to security. Basket III, on 'co-operation in humanitarian and other fields', contained an array of practical measures on matters such as human contacts, travel, and the dissemination of information. If implemented there, these measures would have changed Communist states out of all recognition. The 'Final Act' was in fact just the beginning of a long process of diplomatic dialogue on all three baskets. It marked a significant stage in the decline of the Cold War, not least because all participating governments were formally committed to the idea that human rights were a legitimate matter of discussion between European states.\footnote{For a survey of the role of human rights, see Rosemary Foot's chapter in this volume.}

The Helsinki process had its limits. Any illusions of smooth and steady progress in human rights and European security generally were exposed by events such as the imposition of military rule in Poland in December 1981, and the 'Euromissiles' crisis in Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was triggered by a Western concern about simultaneous Soviet superiority in medium-range missiles and in conventional forces. However, once new missiles had been installed in certain NATO countries, the Helsinki process provided one basis for continuing negotiations on security matters. Helsinki harked back to an ancient theme of European diplomacy: the powers, while still pursuing their rivalries elsewhere, agree to maintain a degree of restraint in Europe. This time there was a key difference. The USSR sought stability in Eastern Europe, but the West, which could not endorse the status quo there, hoped that the Helsinki process would promote change.

The Helsinki Final Act, along with the ongoing process of conferences and exchanges, had multiple effects in the Communist world. The standards that it set, especially in Basket III, were a direct encouragement to movements such as Solidarity in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia; and they also had an effect on politics within the bloc more generally. Even at the time when the Final Act was negotiated, there was some awareness that it could provide a basis for change within the USSR and Eastern Europe – an outcome that some negotiators from Western countries had worked towards, and those from Communist states feared. Anatoli Dobrynin, the long-serving Soviet ambassador to the United States, wrote that the Soviet Politburo had paid little attention to the negotiations. 'But when the treaty was ready and the third basket emerged in its entirety before the members of the Politburo, they were stunned.'\footnote{Anatoly Dobrynin, In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986 (New York: Random House, 1998), 346.} In the United States, at least initially, the Helsinki process had been viewed with suspicion by many decision-makers, including Secretary of State Kissinger, who belatedly saw its merits.\footnote{See the informative and favourable account of the Helsinki meeting of 1 August 1975 in Henry Kissinger's final volume of memoirs, Years of Renewal (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 687–69.} Fierce denunciations of the Final Act as allegedly accepting the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe came from both Democrats such as Senator Henry Jackson and Republicans such as Ronald Reagan, then governor of California.

The evidence is that the Helsinki process contributed to the subsequent ending of the Cold War in three main ways. First, it reinforced the idea that a stable international framework could be achieved through restraint and co-operation. Secondly, it committed the leaders of participating countries, even Communist states, to accept the legitimacy of human rights dialogue. Thirdly, within Communist states it encouraged the development of independent political movements pressing for implementation of the human rights norms enunciated at Helsinki.

\section*{(5) Non-violent opposition in Eastern Europe and the USSR assisted change}

An extraordinary and central fact of the ending of the Cold War is the disciplined role played by opposition movements. Their reliance on methods of civil resistance made it difficult for Communist governments to portray them as a security threat and enabled them to keep up a dialogue with their adversaries that in the end assisted the peaceful transitions of power. In Eastern Europe, the movements had originated long before 1989 and had taken different forms: in Poland, the workers' movement from 1970–71 onwards, and the role of the Catholic Church; in Czechoslovakia, Charter 77, drawing on Helsinki and
UN-based human rights covenants for legitimacy; in Hungary, a combination of party-led change and gradual growth of civil society institutions; in East Germany, the key role of the churches, and also of emigration as an effective form of resistance to the regime.

It was never certain that the USSR would eschew force just because it had not been provoked by acts of opposition violence: the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was reminder enough. However, the form that the opposition movements took contributed to Soviet reluctance to intervene forcibly. This hardened into a principle only after Gorbachev came to power in 1985; and even then it might have changed if the opposition movements had used violence.36

The peaceful struggles in Eastern Europe, culminating in 1989, had two effects without which the final phase of the Cold War could have been different. The first was on the leadership of Communist Parties. These events showed that it was possible for a ruling Communist Party to allow the transition to a multi-party democratic system without bloodshed or vengeance. In this, as in the end of the Cold War generally, the crucial event was not the opening of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, but the conclusion of the Polish round-table talks in April 1989. This breakthrough led to elections in June and the formation of a mainly non-Communist government in August. Thus, Poland was the model for what some versions of Marxist theory said was impossible: a peaceful transition from one system to another. The same conclusion flowed from the compromise agreement in Hungary of 18 September 1989, providing for a new constitution and new electoral laws. The violent postscript in December 1989, the summary trial and execution of President Nicolae Ceaușescu of Romania and his wife after fleeing Bucharest (the only such occasion in the East European revolutions), was the exception that proved the rule that leaders saw more merit in a soft landing than in remaining inflexible to the last.

The second effect was on the peoples of the USSR. The methods of peaceful struggle were picked up and adapted not only in Soviet client-states, but also within the USSR itself. The rapid growth of civil resistance in the three Baltic republics of the USSR was shown by the 'Baltic Chain' on 23 August 1989, in which between 1 and 2 million people joined hands and called for 'the peaceful restoration of our statehood'. In the next two years the three Baltic

36 See Mark Kramer, 'The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union', Journal of Cold War Studies, 5, 6, and 7 (2003--05), 178--256, 3--64, and 3--96.

37 For a discussion of developments in the Baltic states and the dissolution of the USSR, see Alex Pravda's chapter in this volume.
The most crucial ripple effect of civil resistance came when, in response to the essentially conservative coup d'état in the USSR on 19 August 1991, there was massive opposition, leading to the coup’s collapse on the evening of 21 August. This event, more than any other, opened the way to the advance of Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian Federation, who famously stood on a tank to call for the end of the coup, and who, unlike Gorbachev, had no difficulty in advocating the end of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and indeed of the USSR itself. In this case, as in Eastern Europe in 1989, civil resistance could succeed partly because the ruling Communist Parties had lost the ideological certainty that had been so important in their systems of one-party rule.

Nationalism contributed to the end of the USSR and of the Cold War

Nationalism – in Afghanistan, Eastern Europe, and the USSR itself – presented Gorbachev with problems throughout his period of rule. Almost all the political developments of 1989–91 involved nationalisms, which assumed many different forms and functions. In the East European countries, there was a strong sense of national pride re-asserting itself against an externally imposed system of rule. Within the USSR, Stalin’s near-elimination of certain ethnic minorities contributed to a legacy of bitterness that found expression in 1991 in the rush for secession by the republics that made up the USSR. The Soviet government’s responses, and sometimes non-responses, were shaped by a growing awareness both of the costs of maintaining a vast empire and of the failure of the Communist dream of overcoming national divisions within a new classless society.

The role of nationalism in the breakup of the USSR cast a shadow on the future. Often a unifying force within states, assisting their transition, nationalism had the opposite role in some republics. The most violent consequences of the breakup of the USSR were in those republics that had large ethnic minorities and a history of inter-ethnic violence. In Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan, conflicts with ethnic and separatist dimensions had broken out by 1992. These wars, based on rival divisive nationalisms within the new post-Soviet states, were more a by-product of the end of the Cold War than a cause.

The end of the Cold War and after

The ‘incredibly swift transition’ of 1989–91 was the most remarkable case of large-scale peaceful change in world history. Two concluding questions arise from this process. First, which of the factors outlined above was the most critical in changing the mindset of Communist leaders in the USSR and Eastern Europe? Secondly, what impact did these events and certain simple interpretations of them have on what came after?

The historical evidence suggests a multi-faceted explanation of the end of the Cold War. Each of the six possible explanations explored above is well supported and has persuasive power. Thus, the factors that led to the end of the Cold War include what might easily be seen as ideological opposites and logical incompatibles: both force and diplomacy; both pressure and détente; both belief and disbelief in the reformability of Communism; both non-violent resistance in some countries and guerrilla resistance in others; both elite action and street politics; both nuclear deterrence and the ideas of some of its critics; both threat and re-assurance; both nationalism in the disparate parts of the Soviet empire and supra-nationalism in the European Community. A worrying possibility is that the Cold War would not have ended but for two myths: that Soviet-style Communism could be reformed, and that Star Wars could work. The complexity – indeed indigestibility – of this mix of factors helps to explain why they have not attracted the same attention as have the ideas of the great simplifiers.

The end of the Cold War shaped what came after for the better. The avoidance of major war in a process as vast and traumatic as the collapse of the USSR was astonishing, as was the subsequent consolidation of democratic systems of government in many East European countries. Yet the post-Cold War world had no shortage of problems. As with European decolonisation in earlier decades, so the collapse of socialist empires and the emergence of the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav states led to many wars and crises. Claims that there was a new world order were undermined by phenomena such as failing states in parts of Africa and Asia, the rise of Islamic fundamentalist visions of a non-Western order, the emergence of new forms of terrorist attack, the revivals of assertive nationalisms, and the tendencies towards authoritarianism in many superficially democratic states. In facing old conflicts and some new ones, the US role as the ‘one sole and pre-eminent power’ proved far more troubled and costly than the elder President Bush had foreseen in 1992.

Of the many simplifying views of the end of the Cold War, two merit special comment because they cast a shadow into the future. The first is the idea that the USSR was forced into change by Reagan’s arms build-up in the 1980s. As one would expect, the principal Soviet figures involved are critical of this interpretation, and suggest that events could have unfolded faster without some of Reagan’s early policies and rhetoric. More importantly, some of the key US figures involved, including George Shultz and Jack Matlock, while...
supporting a mixture of strength and diplomacy, resist simple conclusions about
the role of external pressures. The documentary evidence now available indi­
cates that the pressures for change felt by the Soviet leadership were of many
different kinds: some came from Europe rather than the United States, and
some dated back to long before Reagan's presidency. Much of it came from
generational change. The post-Stalin generation was better educated, less afraid,
more impatient with the failures of the system, and reader to relinquish the
wartime conquests of their parents. The huge Soviet arms burden was certainly
a factor. Not all of this arms burden can be explained as a reaction to US policy,
as the Soviet military-industrial complex also had its own internal dynamic. The
dreadful thought that pervaded Soviet debates in the Gorbachev years was that
all the USSR's vast military effort had not provided much leverage with the
West, and was largely unusable. While the Russian concern about Star Wars fed
into this state of mind, the defensive resolve and steadiness of the West over a
long period may have been more important, and the wretched performance of
the Soviet economy trumped both.

A closely related simplifying view saw the end of the Cold War as the end of
history. This reinforced the deep American sense that, if only tyrannies around
the world could be deposed, peoples would live in freedom and peace. Many
visions and policies - from the 'new world order' invoked by President Bush
in 1990 to the neo-conservative dreams of imposing democracy in 2003 -
reflected a belief in universalism: that all peoples basically want the same
political system, and the military force of democracies can assist the historical
process. In the excitement and confusion of the Cold War's end, the spirit of
imposed universalism fled from Moscow, but flourished as never before in its
other favourite haunt, Washington, DC.

In a speech in 1984, Henry Kissinger said: 'The Soviet Union must decide
whether it is a country or a cause.' 38 Under Gorbachev's leadership it eventu­
ally did so, embracing the norms of international society. It tried to become
a country. However, this led to the terrible discovery, which had not been
spelled out by Kissinger, that when the USSR ceased to be a cause it rapidly
ceased also to be a country. Although Kissinger did not say it, the United
States, too, is both cause and country. This truth, reinforced by simplistic
interpretations placed on the Cold War's ending, was to be its strength, and
also its weakness, in facing the problems of the post-Cold War world.

38 Speech in Brussels, 13 January 1984; text in Henry Kissinger, Observations: Selected
Speeches and Essays, 1982-1984 (London: Michael Joseph and Weidenfeld & Nicolson,
1985), 186.
Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1930s (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).


On Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia, see Orville Schell, pandaemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 35-44. Soviet commitments near and far, including in war-prone postcolonial states, formed one basis for historians of imperial overstretch to envisage trouble. The distinguished French historian, J.-B. Durosc, in Tout empire peut: une vision théorique des relations internationales (Paris: Sorbonne, 1981), foreshadowed the eventual collapse of the Soviet empire, but then backtracked, saying that totalitarian systems could resist change (347-48). Seven years later,
Paul Kennedy, in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), while seeing US decline as more likely, noted that Soviet imperial decline was possible, but might lead to war: "there is nothing in the character or tradition of the Russian state to suggest that it could ever accept imperial decline gracefully" (542).

There is continuing disagreement about whether East-West negotiations prolonged the Cold War or contributed to its end. On the question of whether the negotiations before and after the 1975 Helsinki Final Act were seen from the start as providing a basis for change in the Communist world, see the posthumous account by a UK diplomat who was deeply involved, Michael Alexander, *Managing the Cold War: A View from the Front Line* (London: Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2005).

The processes and events in 1985–91 that ended the Cold War, being so numerous and varied, are not all captured in any single work. The causes of change in the USSR, and the reasons for the reluctance of the Soviet leadership to use force, are outlined in Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (London: Doubleday, 1996). Another detailed account of the period 1985–91 emphasizing the decisive role played by Gorbachev in ending the Cold War is Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). For an exploration of the personal and political connections between the events of 1989 and those of 1989–91, see Mikhail Gorbachev and Zdeněk Milyáš, *Conversations with Gorbachev: On Perestroika, the Prague Spring, and the Crossroads of Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), including the introduction by Archie Brown. The Cold War International History Project is particularly strong on the end of the Cold War, offering a wealth of documentary evidence. See, e.g., Vladimir M. Zubok, "New Evidence on the ‘Soviet Factor’ in the Peaceful Revolutions of 1989," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 12/13, *The End of the Cold War* (Fall/Winter 2001), 5–21, the documents on the April 1989 Tbilisi massacre in the same issue, 31–48, and many other memoirs of the period. As various Cold War International History Project publications indicate, developments in Eastern Europe—especially Poland, where the first transition to non-Communist government occurred—played a key part in ending the Cold War. A useful account of the rise and impact of Solidarity is in *Archie Brown, Poland under Communism: A Cold War History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).


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25. The restructuring of the international system after the Cold War

There are a variety of literatures that illuminate the logic and character of the post-Cold War transformation of the global system. One literature explores the rise and decline of great powers and the international orders that they establish and dominate. Robert Gilpin’s *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) provides a seminal statement of the theory and history of these grand shifts in the rules and governance of the global system. Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987) provides a sweeping survey of these classic international dynamics, focusing on leading states in various historical eras and the political, strategic, and economic foundations of their preeminence and trajectory of rise and decline. These books are part of a larger literature that provides theoretical and historical accounts of long-term change in power dynamics and the character of the system. For statements that focus primarily on the realist foundations of the global system, see the standard texts, A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1968); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Knopf, various editions); as well as John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001). For more liberal-oriented statements of the logic of global change, focusing on industrialization and modernization, see Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Clark Kerr, *The Future of Industrial Societies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

For a classic treatise on the interconnections between geopolitical and international economic change, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944).


Another literature looks at the changing character of the orders themselves—looking at the ways in which powerful states have used their advantages after war or other upheavals in the international system to shape the rules and institutions of order. G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) examines the great postwar order building moments—1815, 1919, 1945, and after the Cold War. See also the accounts by Kalevi J. Holsti, *Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Andreas Osiander, *The States System of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Regarding American policy in building the postwar liberal international order, see Ikenberry, *After Victory*, Elizabeth Goldberg’s *A New Deal for the World* (Cambridge,