



Exiting the Cold War Entering a New World



DANIEL S. HAMILTON AND KRISTINA SPOHR, EDITORS

Exiting the Cold War, Entering a New World

Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr
Editors

Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
Johns Hopkins University

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Foreign Policy Institute and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
Johns Hopkins University
1717 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: (202) 663-5880
Email: transatlantic@jhu.edu
<http://transatlantic.sais-jhu.edu>
<https://www.fpi.sais-jhu.edu/>
<https://www.kissinger.sais-jhu.edu>

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Acknowledgments

This book explores how and why the dangerous yet seemingly durable and stable world order forged during the Cold War collapsed in 1989, and how a new order was improvised out of its ruins. It is an unusual blend of memoir and scholarship that takes us back to the years when the East-West conflict came to an end and a new world was born.

In this book, senior officials and opinion leaders from the United States, Soviet Russia, Western and Eastern Europe who were directly involved in the decisions of that time describe their considerations, concerns, and pressures. They are joined by scholars who have been able to draw on newly declassified archival sources to revisit this challenging period. All were able to exchange perspectives and offer comments at an authors' workshop at Johns Hopkins SAIS on May 8, 2019—the 54th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe.

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Daniel S. Hamilton

Kristina Spohr

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Introduction

Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr

An old world is collapsing and a new world arising; we have better eyes for the collapse than for the rise, for the old one is the world we know.

—John Updike

The late 1980s and early 1990s were not history's end, but they certainly were history's hinge. Over forty years of Cold War conflict a widespread view had to come to prevail that the competition between East and West would simply continue, that Germany and Berlin would remain split, and that the Soviet Union and its empire would continue to exist. Although many courageous souls sought to overcome these divisions and the injustices they represented—sometimes at the cost of their freedom or their lives—this mindset took root in capitals and societies across much of the world, and two generations of people planned their futures on the hard rock of the Berlin Wall itself—on the assumption that that Wall, and the world it represented, was here to stay.

Then surprisingly, without warning, the Iron Curtain opened, the Berlin Wall fell, and the crisp, clean lines of the Cold War turned into the abstract colors of a Jackson Pollock painting. Leaders and experts on both sides of that vanishing divide suddenly found themselves superbly trained to deal with a world that no longer existed.

Two chief catalysts for change took center stage. The first was a new Soviet leader with a new political vision. Mikhail Gorbachev, in charge of the Union since 1985, understood that the Soviet system was in deep crisis. His solution—economic *perestroika* and political *glasnost* at home, together with “new thinking” in Soviet approaches to world politics—mesmerized audiences at home and abroad. Gorbachev was intent on implementing his reforms to save socialism and the Soviet Union itself. In the end he proved to be less wizard than sorcerer's apprentice. After having unleashed changes of historic scope, he proved not only unable to contain them but was ultimately swept away by them.

Gorbachev shared the stage with a vast and diverse assemblage of people who began to lose their fear—the priests and the pastors, the dockworkers and the intellectuals, the many thousands of people who jumped into their Skodas, Ladas and Trabants and took to the streets of Gdansk, Budapest, Prague, Leipzig, Bucharest and other central and eastern European cities in the late 1980s with essentially one message: “We want to return to Europe”—to be part of a Europe to which they had always belonged, and yet had been prevented from joining after World War II because of where the Red Army had stopped in the summer of 1945.

Together, these center stage actors shook the continent and its institutions. Behind the scenes, however, deeper currents were accelerating pressures for change as well. The information revolution in particular was empowering and revitalizing open societies and economies even as it was bypassing and undermining the secretive and relatively closed Soviet system. As David Gompert recounts in this volume, by the time Mikhail Gorbachev appeared on the world’s stage, the Soviet Union was proving itself unable to either create or withstand information technology, falling badly behind its competitors, over-spending on its military, and increasingly illegitimate with its population.

The symbolic moment that captured the drama and power of these forces was the opening of the Berlin Wall on the night of November 9, 1989.

Here, in what had been the cockpit of the Cold War for four decades, the new freedom evoked the possibility that new forms of European unity could meet the coming century’s looming challenges. Yet even as the Iron Curtain finally rusted through, it became apparent that post-Cold War Europe would not be undivided. As the military-ideological division of the continent wound down, economic and social divisions between East and West ramped up. Within the East, long-suppressed ethnic and national conflicts reappeared. Even as old lines were being erased, new lines were being drawn, and even older lines were reemerging.

This symbiosis between new divisions and new allegiances changed the frames of reference through which societies had grown accustomed to viewing change and stability in Europe.

The division of Political Europe into free and totalitarian societies stopped running along the familiar East-West divide. The East bloc dissolved into a political archipelago of islands of openness and repression.

Nationalist Europe burst again on the scene as nationalities on the periphery of Western consciousness—Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Serbs, Armenians, Slovaks, Slovenes, Croats—stole the thunder and the headlines from more traditional concerns. The West's mental map of Europe could no longer end at the Elbe. Hungarian-Romanian hostilities, national-ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia, Baltic cries for independence, and bitter clashes bordering on civil war in Armenia and Azerbaijan sent a clear message: Marxism-Leninism did not overcome 19th century ethnic divisions among East Europeans; they were merely bottled up by the heavy hand of Soviet power. In such a situation, future Sarajevos appeared more likely than future Munichs, in the sense that conflicts erupting out of a string of unexpected events involved a variety of powers seemed more likely than conflict due to cold, premeditated calculation on the part of a single nation bent on conquest.

Economic Europe witnessed growing unity within the West and growing divisions between East and West, and particularly within the East. As the European Community continued to integrate, the Eastern economic bloc, COMECON, disintegrated. The challenges facing Eastern Europe were so daunting that reforms in the East seemed likely to further impoverish the same proletariat that had already suffered so greatly from the bankruptcy of socialist economics. At the same time, Western business, financial and technology leaders had long turned their gaze to a new front in global competition, not with the Soviet Union but with Japan, which at the time was touted as the coming hegemon of the "Pacific Century."

Throughout most of the 20th century the nature of European order was a linchpin of global order. The transformation of European order and of the geo-ideological East-West conflict thus also affected key allies on the continent's edge, as Cengiz Günay describes in his article on Turkey, and had significant impact on the nature of the "global Cold War," as John-Michael Arnold outlines in his essay on how the Bush administration sought to engineer democratic transition in Nicaragua and cope with chaos in Afghanistan. Moreover, the collapse of Soviet

power allowed former clients around the world to assert themselves as so-called ‘renegade’ states. Even after the Kuwait War of 1990–1, the problem of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq remained unresolved, and Kim Il-sung’s North Korea, with its secret nuclear weapons program, now became a particular headache.

In short, during this dramatic period tendencies toward integration and disintegration coexisted uneasily. The hope that humankind was entering a new age of freedom and sustained peace competed with the dawning recognition that the bipolar stability of the Cold War era was already giving way to something less binary and more dangerous.¹

The story our authors tell is of men and women struggling to understand and control the new forces at work in their world, and exploring a range of often-conflicting options in an effort to manage events, impose stability and avoid war.² Lacking road maps or shared blueprints for the future, they adopted an essentially cautious approach to the challenge of radical change—using and adapting principles and institutions that had proved successful in the West during the Cold War. This was undoubtedly a diplomatic revolution, but conducted—paradoxically perhaps—in a conservative manner.

The measures adopted to stabilize post-Wall Europe were essentially conservative in the sense that they made use of pre-existing, Western institutions and structures, rather than custom-designing new ones to meet the exigencies of a new era.

The most prominent example was Germany. The German Question posed a huge challenge because of the country’s problematic place in Europe, its centrality to the origins of two world wars and its subsequent position as the cockpit of the Cold War. Yet nowhere did domestic and international diplomacy interact to produce swifter and more impressive results than in the unification of Germany. Faced with the choice of joining two equal halves of Germany to form a new entity via Article 146 of the Federal Republic’s Basic Law, or simply acceding to the Federal Republic via Article 23 of the Basic Law, the East German people chose the latter course, preferring to take on the constitution, penal code, political system and currency of the FRG rather than to embark on yet another German venture into the unknown. Internationally, faced with a choice between a neutral united Germany obliged to none, or a united Germany anchored in Western structures, the

Soviet Union and Germany's Western partners agreed to the latter, a more predictable and conservative course.

German unification, therefore, was the catalyst to conserve and then modify two key alliances of the West during the Cold War—NATO and the European Community. Despite the efforts of some European statesmen—notably Mikhail Gorbachev, François Mitterrand and Hans-Dietrich Genscher—no new pan-European architecture was created to embrace the two halves of the continent and incorporate Russia into a shared security structure. The Helsinki 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) appeared to some to possess the potential to become such a structure, but it was never converted into an operative security organization. The attractions of a Europe re-united under the aegis of an ever-closer European Union and secured by a reinvented NATO were simply too strong.

The Cold War denouement was a largely peaceful process, out of which a new global order was created through international agreements negotiated in an unprecedented spirit of cooperation. It was a remarkable period. Yet the Cold War settlement also left challenges unattended and planted the seeds of later challenges to come.

The Bush administration was overwhelmingly focused on peacefully managing the Cold War's end and moving to design a "new Europe and a new Atlanticism," as U.S. Secretary of State James Baker put it. Much was achieved. Yet by the time the Bush administration came to an end in early 1993, two states—the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia—had dissolved into no less than twenty new countries in Eurasia. The future of violent conflict in Europe seemed likely to stem more from the explosive disintegration of states rather than from disagreements among them.³ The Bush Administration and its partners had begun the process of updating and reorienting Euro-Atlantic architecture to the challenges of a new era, but the relationship between the various institutions was left unclear, as was the process of potential membership.

The violent break-up of Yugoslavia, the the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent series of conflicts between and within some of the new states on the periphery of the former USSR presented an especially daunting challenge for peace and stability in the rest of Europe. Indeed, the splintering of Yugoslavia had raised fears of what Gorbachev himself called the 'Balkanization' of the Soviet Union in the fall of 1991.⁴

What if anarchy and mass migration spread? What if ethnic strife turned violent or even into warfare? Washington was particularly anxious about the fate of the Soviet nuclear arsenal—from 1992 scattered between Russia and three other newly independent post-Soviet republics.

It soon became apparent that the EU and the CSCE lacked the mechanisms and institutional capabilities to prevent, suppress or mediate the conflicts arising in this broad era. NATO alone had the structures and forces to engage in such tasks, but many of its members did not have the will to do so, and NATO had not acted “out of area” before. Watching the Yugoslav tragedy unfold, Secretary Baker famously declared “we ain’t got no dog in that fight.” With nations at odds as to what action to take and America initially leaving the ball in “Europe’s” court, by early 1993 NATO appeared to have turned into a bystander, more misalliance than alliance.⁵

The changing domestic context in the United States was also crucial. Despite President Bush’s masterful orchestration of the unification of Germany within NATO, the peaceful end of the Cold War, victory in the Persian Gulf war, and the establishment of constructive relations with Yeltsin’s post-Soviet Russia, enough voters believed he had taken his eye off the ball on problems at home to elect a new President committed to domestic renewal and “the economy, stupid.” The mood was decidedly inward-looking; there was talk of a peace dividend and retrenchment from global exertions. A new case would have to be made by a new American President for continued U.S. engagement in Europe.

In retrospect, the deficiencies of the international settlement that ended the Cold War are now obvious. China, which had not been involved, went its own way after Tiananmen, seeking in the long term to challenge the United States (and Russia) with its own brand of communist capitalism. Meanwhile, festering conflicts, the unravelling of arms-control agreements, the sclerosis of international institutions, the emergence of powerful authoritarian regimes and the proliferating threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were just some of the unforeseen consequences of design flaws in the new order improvised with such haste and ingenuity by the shapers of world affairs in 1989–92.⁶ That is why—now more than ever—we need to understand its origins and troubled birth.

Notes

1. For the mood at the time, see Daniel Hamilton, “As Europe Sheds Its Old Lines, Others Form,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 1989.

2. See Kristina Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square: Rebuilding the World after 1989* (London/New Haven: HarperCollins and Yale University Press, 2019/2020); cf. Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *To Build a Better World: Choices to End the Cold War and Create a Global Commonwealth* (New York: Twelve, 2019).

3. For considerations at the time, see William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions Since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 67ff.

4. Jason Burke, “Signs of “Balkanization” seen in Soviet Union,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 10, 1991.

5. Hill, op. cit., p. 68.

6. See Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (London: Penguin Books, 2015).

