

# Polgehroneon

## The End of the Cold War

David Reynolds

A quarter-century on from 1989-91, with a large amount of archive and media material available, these epic years are ripe for historical analysis. Yet their proximity to our time also throws up challenging questions about the practice of 'contemporary history', and the complexity of events raises larger issues about how we explain historical change, notably the old debate between structural pressures and individual agency. Here lie broader opportunities for education.

For simplicity's sake we might see the events of 1989-91 as a drama in three (overlapping) acts. In the second half of 1989 we have the collapse of communist governments across Eastern Europe. In 1990 the focus shifted to Germany which, against all historical expectations, was unified less than a year after the opening of the Berlin Wall. Then in December 1991 came the collapse of the Soviet Union itself, where Mikhail Gorbachev's rapid privatisation had eroded economic stability while his devolution of power to the republics aroused new political forces on the periphery and eventually created a rival power base in the form of Boris Yeltsin's Russia.<sup>1</sup>

How to explain these dramatic events? At one level one can see 1989-91 as the endgame of an outdated Soviet command economy based on heavy industry. This had helped the USSR to win the war against Nazi Germany and to modernise Eastern Europe's agrarian economies after 1945, but it could not compete with the service, IT, economy that mushroomed across the West in the 1980s. By 1989, to quote the succinct obituary penned by historian Charles Maier, East Germany – the showcase economy of the Soviet bloc – was 'in a race between computers and collapse.'<sup>2</sup>

Reinforcing this structuralist approach is the argument that Star Wars finished off the Soviets. President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) of 1983 was probably pie in the sky but it demonstrated the technological gap between the two superpowers and seriously alarmed the Kremlin, increasing its perceived need to modernise. For American triumphalists after 1991, SDI seemed to be sweet revenge for Nikita Khrushchev's 'We will bury you' rhetoric of the late 1950s. The Hammer and Sickle was first into space but Uncle Sam had the last laugh.

The upheavals of 1989-91 may also be seen as the product of profound social shifts. One was the political coming-of-age of a sixties generation of university-educated Soviet citizens who had become deeply sceptical of the old order. From this perspective Gorbachev was just the tip of a sociological iceberg. Similar pressures for change developed across the

bloc, in countries where gerontocrats had held power for decades – Erich Honecker in East Germany, for instance, since 1971, Todor Zhivkov in Bulgaria since 1954. And during 1989 – unlike Budapest in 1956 or Prague in 1968 – protest was spread across Eastern Europe by the multiplier effect of the media, especially transistor radios and television.

In these and other ways the events of 1989-91 may rightly be seen as the expression of deep economic and social forces. Yet human agency also matters. It is difficult to imagine the whole concatenation of events without the vision, impatience and naiveté of Mikhail Gorbachev. His determination to break the hold of the military-industrial complex over the Soviet economy drew him into increasingly radical arms control agreements with America. And his repudiation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, which had justified the use of force to maintain communist rule in 'friendly' states, gave an amber light to reformers. When reform spiralled into revolution across Eastern Europe during 1989, Gorbachev still refrained from endorsing force and sought to maintain his new relationship with Washington. The 'Gorbachev Factor' is integral to any explanation of the end of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup>

Diplomacy also played a part. Unlike other great historical ruptures – such as 1815, 1870, 1918 and 1945 – the politics and geopolitics of Europe were transformed without a major war. This was due in part to creative diplomacy by key leaders who dared to trust each other. In an unlikely synergy at the summit, Reagan and Gorbachev overcame enormous countervailing pressures at home to sign the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987: the first time the superpowers had actually reduced their nuclear arsenals. Similarly, in 1990 the summitry between Bush, Kohl and Gorbachev proved critical in effecting the peaceful unification of Germany, whose division had lain at the roots of the Cold War in the 1940s.

This is also history that still matters. To buy French support for German unification, Kohl agreed to fast-track monetary union. The Euro was the latest stage in a 'European answer' to the historic German question. And the rapid extension of both the EU and NATO eastward, to embrace countries of Eastern Europe that sought to escape the grip of Russia, has helped to create new problems with which we wrestle today: an unwieldy yet fragile EU whose pledges about free movement have come back to haunt it, and a creaky North Atlantic alliance that now confronts a revanchist Kremlin across the borderlands of Ukraine and the Baltic states.

Some are even asking whether the Cold War is really over.

## Designing enquiries to make your students think about the end of the Cold War

There are some rich veins of enquiry here, on a topic about which we now have 25 years of perspective. Your first decision seems simple, but is actually quite complex: how much context is there for your enquiry, and what is that context? You wouldn't, presumably, teach the end of the Cold War without looking at least at some aspects of the decades of conflict leading up to it. But is your focus (either set as a department or mandated by an examination specification) on the entire war, with this as its conclusion? Are you looking at the period from 1968 (the second half of the Vietnam War, détente, and the ramping up of the 1980s)? Or are you focused on the Soviet, German, or American context? The end of the Cold War is a (the?) major driver for the reunification of Germany, for the transformation of Soviet-Russian politics discussed by Professor Reynolds, and for the major changes in international relations which affect the world today. One way to address that might be to engage students in an open-ended enquiry (maybe at the end of Key Stage 3) by allowing them to form overviews of these multiple contexts and then to ask 'Why have historians viewed the end of the Cold War in so many different contexts?' You might also ask them to answer 'What was the most important reason why the Cold War ended?' from a variety of different interpretative perspectives.

You might investigate the structuralist perspective on the end of the Cold War. If you have been looking at Soviet history you might try to form a coherent structuralist analysis of the

whole post-war period. You might seek to facilitate some revision by asking 'At what point did the Soviets' defeat in the Cold War become inevitable?' A variation might be 'Was the American victory in the Cold War caused by anything other than the weakness of the Soviet system?' You might even wish to ask a general question about all the history your students have studied: 'How often have structures constrained the freedom of historical actors?'

The author's final comment – is the Cold War really over? – is, inevitably, something which you and your students might wish to discuss. To avoid this becoming an interesting but ahistorical diversion into modern geopolitics you might steer your students to an understanding of what labels such as 'Cold War' mean. 'How have historians defined the essential elements of the Cold War?' might help your students to think about issues involving how it began, how it ended, what it was like, and whether it continues. Their conclusion might be that 'Cold War' meant something different in 1946 and 1989 – in which case there are some interesting lessons to be teased out in terms of change and continuity. They might, equally, conclude that when in a few years' time it is they who are writing scholarly articles for *Teaching History* they will be referring to the 30-year pause in the Cold War, and to the impatience and naiveté of those who declared it over.

The Editors

### Further reading

Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds) (2011) *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (3 vols), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press – a mine of useful, succinct essays.

Reynolds, David (2000) *One World Divisible: a global history since 1945*, London: Penguin – the end of the Cold War within the explosion of globalisation.

Sarotte, Mary (2009) *1989: the struggle to create post-Cold War Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press – a close-grained account of 1989 and 1990.

Service, Robert (2015) *The End of the Cold War, 1985-1991*, London: Macmillan – a vast, rich history by a leading scholar of the USSR.

Kristina Spohr and David Reynolds (eds) (2016) *Transcending the Cold War: summits, statecraft, and the dissolution of bipolarity in Europe, 1970-1990*, Oxford: Oxford University Press – explores the creative diplomacy from a multinational perspective.

Zubok, Vladislav (2009) *A Failed Empire: the Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press – offers a long view.

Websites: for primary sources on the key Reagan-Gorbachev summits see the National Security Archive collection: [www.thereaganfiles.com/the-summits.html](http://www.thereaganfiles.com/the-summits.html). The Cold War International History Project offers a huge array of documents and working papers based on material from the former communist bloc: [www.wilsoncenter.org/program/cold-war-international-history-project](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/program/cold-war-international-history-project).

### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Kramer, Mark (2011) 'The demise of the Soviet bloc' in *Journal of Modern History*, 83, no.4, pp. 788-854 offers a detailed overview, based on Soviet material. A useful analysis of the historiography may be found in Zavisca, Jane (2011) 'Explaining and Interpreting the End of Soviet Rule' in *Kritika*, 12, no.4, pp. 925-40.

<sup>2</sup> Maier, Charles (1997) *Dissolution: the crisis of Communism and the end of East Germany*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Archie (1996) *The Gorbachev Factor*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by David Reynolds, Professor of International History at the University of Cambridge.

Polychronicon was a fourteenth-century chronicle that brought together much of the knowledge of its own age.

Our Polychronicon in *Teaching History* is a regular feature helping school history teachers to update their subject knowledge, with special emphasis on recent historiography and changing interpretation.

