

Engel, Ulf/Hadler, Frank/Middell, Matthias (eds.): 1989 in a Global Perspective.

Leipziger Universitätsverlag, Leipzig 2015, 462 S. (Global History and International Studies 11), ISBN 978-3-86583-437-9.

This is an immensely important contribution to our understanding of events in the world in 1989. What makes this book so attractive to specialists and generalists alike is that above and beyond chapters on 1989 in Europe, the book includes much welcome analysis of Australia, China, Columbia, the former USSR, El Salvador, India, the Korean Peninsula and South Africa. The authors are right to pursue the global aspects especially since, as they note, in 1989 the “superpowers of the Cold War lost control over world affairs”. 1989 gave us upheaval, regime change, success and failure. The authors in this volume assess the individual cases but also explore the aspect of simultaneity. In short, what is the link between events in Beijing and in Leipzig?

Global impact aside, given recent events in Poland in 2015 and in Hungary starting in 2010, where 1989 is contested and even rejected as a revolutionary moment, this book provides extraordinary overview with a welcome amount of original approaches to 1989 in the then Eastern Europe. This collection is critical as the 1989 “moment” tells us what lay ahead for countries in transition. Just look to Bulgaria, Romania or Yugoslavia for confirmation.

The book is divided into 20 chapters. Matthias Middell’s “1989 as a Global Moment” provides the context for understanding just what a global moment is. At the book’s end, Bruce Mazlish neatly summarizes the year as “either a ‘global’ happening with local manifestations, or as a concatenation of local events with global importance”. The remaining chapters offer a variety of regional and global assessments. To me what can be a somewhat forced global thread, the chapters that matter most are those on the places where 1989 mattered most – the region we now call

Central Europe. This is not to say the other chapters do not add value, only that most readers will be drawn to the entries dealing with Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the vile and violent end to the ultimate mediocrities – Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, Poland's Solidarity and the Hungarians heroically cutting the border fence with Austria.

Iván Berend starts the Central Europe discussion by reminding us that there was an extraordinary economic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. To paraphrase Daniel Chirot, the rust belt economies of the Soviet bloc could not adjust. As Berend notes, "the Soviet bloc was unable to adjust to the new technological requirements". The West was leaving them behind as it shifted to high-tech sectors. Hoping to achieve some social peace through consumerism, the bloc simply became indebted and ruined by inflation.

While the Berlin Wall and the Velvet Revolution may stand out in popular memory, Frank Hadler's essay on Poland reminds us that it all started there. The chapter needs to be read by the current Polish leadership in order to better understand the stages in the collapse of Polish communism. Yes, it was a negotiated end but bloodshed was avoided.

Laszlo Borhi gives Central Europeans' agency in 1989, likely the first time in the 20th century. It was not just Bush and Gorbachev – the Bloc was often acting on its own and running ahead of the script the US and others had written for them. For Borhi, the very disintegration of the Bloc posed a real challenge to Western security, especially NATO. It was not a time for jubilation but fear. Hungarians, and other Central Europeans, became shapers of history.

Oldřich Tůma's piece on Czechoslovakia is equally compelling and links well with Borhi's suggestion that Central Europeans were in the driver's seat. In Czechoslovakia, events in far away China and in the neighboring countries generated a response because the Czechoslovak political atmosphere was changing which also ensured that regional communist party solidarity collapsed leaving communist parties "deserted and alone". An apt description especially when one looks at the GDR.

Konrad H. Jarausch puts the GDR in a regional and global context. He too speaks of a concatenation of events (a word I do not like that is rarely used in normal conversation) that were primarily regional. He agrees with Borhi that cutting the fence, letting the East Germans go and the East Germans in Western embassies embarrassed the regime. Bloc solidarity was lost and the GDR had no reason to exist. Where Jarausch really hits the nail on the head is when he writes that the "democratic awakening in Eastern Europe shows that it is possible to overthrow a well-organized dictatorship with peaceful means such as mass protests". True but only in Europe.

FIDESZ and the Law and Justice Party shenanigans aside, 1989 brought extraordinary benefits to Central Europeans. This is really undeniable. However, 1989 was not an immediate success in other parts of Europe. Albania did not have a 1989, Yugoslav elites chose the nationalist pattern of political change while Bulgaria and Romania simply postponed change with huge costs for the populations. While this book does have some great case studies that ask us to think beyond Europe in 1989,

the absence of chapters on Albania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia is a major shortcoming.

Regardless, the chapter on Romania by Mihai Manea is excellent given that the Romanian “1989” is the most contested in a real way – not the pseudo-way that we hear from Budapest and Warsaw. As Manea tells us, we may never know what really happened in Bucharest. What we do know is that Romanians did get cheated and were forced to endure a fake transition, a government of thieves and a permanent transition that is still half complete. The Romanians are still waiting for 1989 but you could just as easily say that for Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

Sadly there is not enough space to evaluate all the chapters in this wonderful book. It is terrific read and something that really belongs in the classroom. It is hard now to teach just what 1989 means to students now born in a totally different era. This book is a very accessible entry point to understanding a year that changed everything and sometimes nothing.