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WHY DID THE COLD WAR END PEACEFULLY? THE IMPORTANCE OF EUROPE

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Hardly more than twenty years ago a major hot war in Europe seemed a very real possibility. Yet a few years later the Cold War was over. And soon the Soviet Union, an essential party to the conflict, was gone. How and why did this happen? It has been said the decline and fall of Soviet Union as an imperial power was inevitable. No empires last forever, and the Soviet one was deeply flawed. But if this was so, how come no historians or political scientists, not to mention politicians, were able to predict its end? Could it be that what happened was accidental rather than inevitable, and therefore impossible to predict?

Certainly the rise to power of so untypical a Soviet leader as Mikhail Gorbachev was accidental, as well as critical for changing the direction of the Cold War. The direction first started changing on the Soviet rather than the Western side. And this change could only have been effected, ironically, by someone equipped with the vast arbitrary powers that the top leader enjoyed under the authoritarian Soviet system. Did Gorbachev exercise them, as was the impression he gave to French President François Mitterrand, with a "great, quick, and supple mind" and a "true sense of realities?" Or was he, as his critics maintain, a bungler who did not know what he was doing—fortunately or unfortunately, depending on one's point of view? In any case, if Gorbachev deserved the Nobel Peace Prize he received, it was less for his actions than his inaction—for not resorting to violence when he could have done so with devastating results. But was it he or the "profound forces" of history that accounted for the outcome?

Those forces had certainly been at work: the economic decline of the Soviet state, the futility of the arms race, the diminishing faith in communist ideology, to name but a few. But none of them gave a clear indication of where it could lead. The Soviet economy, though sick, was nowhere near a collapse when, as one observer put it, "an unlikely doctor [started] employing untried medicine." Nor was the Soviet Union incapable of keeping up, had it wanted to, with the pace of U.S. military spending under President Reagan, as some of his uncritical admirers would have it. And the retreat from ideology, both cause and effect of Gorbachev's "new thinking," aimed at revitalizing rather than discarding the Soviet system. Were there any developments that would point in a more definite direction?

It is only fair to focus on the role of Europe. It

was there that the Cold War started, leading to the division of the Continent, and where it also ended, with Europe's unification. Moreover, as long as the conflict lasted, Europe was the most likely place to become the main battlefield. There was always



President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev signing the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Reduction Treaty, December 8, 1987. © Bettmann/CORBIS.

something surreal about the nuclear confrontation between the superpowers whereas in Europe memories of war fought on its soil were all too real. The arms control agreements between the superpowers, no matter how important for other reasons, were notably irrelevant in the lead up to the 1989 revolutionary upheaval in Eastern Europe, which shattered the balance of power they were designed to maintain.

That development is usually traced to 1985. At that time, however, there seemed to be more disarray in the West than in the East. The policies of the Reagan administration strained U.S. relations with Western Europe, weakening the cohesion of the Atlantic alliance. The communist part of Europe, to be sure, had its problems, too, but hardly anyone thought them to be unmanageable. Its apparent stability, rather than instability, was the reason why Gorbachev made it clear to its leaders early on that they were on their own in dealing with their problems. He cared little about the region, and preferred to let both its reformist and anti-reformist regimes do much as they pleased without Soviet interference. His priority was Western rather than Eastern Europe.

Originally the main reason was, as the Moscow commentator Aleksandr Bovin bluntly put it, "to utilize Western Europe's potential to make good, via the transatlantic channel, the obvious shortage of

common sense in the incumbent U.S. administration." The reference was to the American tendency to conceive of the Cold War in primarily military terms—a tendency that distinguished mainstream U.S. thinking from both Western European and Soviet thinking, which were more sensitive to the political and other nonmilitary attributes of power.

Driving wedges between the United States and Western Europe was an old Soviet tactic. But it had repeatedly backfired. Unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev wanted to improve relations with both. There were sound military reasons for that. The advantage the Soviet Union had traditionally derived from the numerical preponderance of its forces was eroding because of NATO's advances in high-technology conventional weaponry. Moreover, NATO enhanced its advantage with an imaginative strategy to interdict any enemy attack before it could develop. War in Europe consequently became less imaginable—the *first* of the European factors that prefigured the Cold War's eventual peaceful ending.

A cartoon appeared at the time in *De Volkskrant*, the Amsterdam newspaper, showing a NATO soldier hand-in-hand with a "peacenik" celebrating their joint accomplishment. Indeed, the novel ideas on security hatched by the Western European Left had an effect—though not so much on Western as on Soviet strategy. The novelty of these ideas was in maintaining that a state's security cannot be achieved at the expense of another's but must be common and cooperative. Security was to be pursued through such innovative concepts as "defensive defense" and "structural inability to attack." Soviet acceptance and implementation of these ideas provided a *second* reason why the Cold War would end without a resort to force.

Such innovations opposed both the traditional American concept of deterrence, with its reliance on nuclear weapons, and the Reagan alternative—the Strategic Defense Initiative that threatened to fuel the arms race. They appealed not only to Gorbachev and his team but also to a broad spectrum of Europeans in both parts of the continent. In the East, these ranged from Czech dissident Václav Havel to East Germany's reactionary leader Erich Honecker. In the latter's eyes, what helped was the propensity of some of the Western proponents of common security, notably among West Germany's Social Democrats, to give comfort to Eastern Europe's repressive regimes rather than to dissidents who threatened to

destabilize them.

But could—or should—the security of states come at the expense of the security of their citizens? This was a question posed by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and answered in 1975 in the historic Helsinki Final Act. The CSCE was originally a Soviet project, but had been hijacked by Western Europeans to become a forum where the communist regimes could be constantly harassed—mainly by the United States—for violating their commitments to respect human rights. The Helsinki accords signed by the Soviet Union embodied the revolutionary principle that the manner in which sovereign governments treat their own citizens is, because of its implications for international security, a matter of legitimate scrutiny by other states.

With regard to ending the Cold War, the CSCE mattered more than either NATO or the Western peace movement. This was because the “Helsinki process” broadened and redefined the meaning of security by giving added weight to its political, economic, ethical, and other dimensions. These new ideas reflected Europe’s sobering experience with aggressive nationalism, made more destructive by the development of mass citizen armies—two seductively pernicious legacies of the French Revolution that seemed to have finally run their course.

The CSCE was not about arms control, which was addressed at the rarefied disarmament talks between the superpowers. The only military items on its agenda were the so-called “confidence-building

measures.” These pertained to such matters as mutual notification of maneuvers and transparency of troop movements, and by reflecting intentions rather than capabilities were conducive to trust. At a conference in Stockholm in 1985 the Soviet Union accepted intrusive measures it had previously resisted. A landmark on the road toward the end of the military confrontation in Europe, this outcome portended Soviet reversal on the issue of human rights as well—a reversal that highlighted the CSCE’s role as the *third* determinant of the Cold War’s unexpected end.

Gorbachev hoped to reclaim the CSCE for the Soviet Union. Rectifying his country’s dismal human rights record seemed to him both affordable and right. He did not want to be seen as surrendering to “Western” values but as embracing universal human values, which he identified with Europe. In the perennial Russian debate about whether Russia was part of Europe or, in some mystical sense, a universe of its own presumably superior to any other, Gorbachev believed firmly in the former. He saw Europeanization as the way to civilize the Soviet state, thus making it a legitimate component of the “common European house” he wanted to help build.

In fact, the house was already under construction, and European integration was making strides as never before. In 1986 the Single European Act was signed and ratified. The timetable was set for the long delayed transition from economic to political integration, to be achieved by creating within five years a European Union that would be open to new

members. Steps were even being taken to institutionalize the proclaimed European security identity and express it in a common foreign and security policy.

Soviet leaders, inhibited by their Marxist blinkers, had long refused to believe that the movement toward European unity was real. They had disparaged the Common Market as an attempt to salvage the dying capitalist system. Now even Honecker, the East German leader, came to see it as a means of invigorating its anemic Eastern counterpart, the Comecon, and supported Gorbachev's call for closer relations with the European Community. But Gorbachev wanted to go farther. He saw partnership with the proposed European Union as essential to overcoming the division of Europe. And since European unification could not be reconciled with the continuation of the Cold War, here was the *fourth*, and most crucial factor that predetermined its peaceful dénouement.

How deep was Gorbachev's commitment to the common European house? It amounted to a vision rather than a policy. His image as a statesman pursuing purposefully a coherent policy rests overwhelmingly on his own self-serving memoirs and retrospective testimonies by his admirers. Inside sources reveal him as an improviser who tried to make a virtue of what he called his "unpredictability." In fact, unpredictable things started happening, the consequences of which he was unable to grasp.

The 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which sent a radioactive cloud across Europe, underscored its indivisibility in the face of common dangers. The accident served as the catalyst for a reassessment of the Soviet military doctrine, which was intended to reassure the West about Soviet intentions. In May 1987 the Warsaw Pact replaced its longstanding offensive strategy with a defensive one. Although the announcement did not immediately impress NATO, the attempted implementation of the new strategy critically impaired the Soviet army's ability to act in an external conflict.

Its ability to act in an internal conflict suffered a blow as well. When the Warsaw Pact was in session in Berlin debating the new doctrine, the landing in the heart of Moscow of a light plane piloted by German pacifist Matthias Rust made a mockery of the Soviet Union's elaborate air defenses. The incident rattled the highest ranks of its military, prompting Gorbachev to purge them of time-servers. Their removal made army opposition to his increasingly radical innovations less likely in the short run.

The innovations nevertheless proceeded from a position of perceived strength rather than weakness. Internal Soviet documents from his period exude confidence rather than apprehension. The enthusiastic response Gorbachev evoked in Western Europe encouraged him to believe that the Soviet Union was taking the lead. West Germany emerged as its most trusted European partner, not least because of German resistance to U.S. pressure to keep building up NATO's military might. Gorbachev regarded his agreement with Reagan to dismantle all medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe as a major Soviet success, even though it had been achieved at the price of unilateral Soviet concessions. But he was concerned about indications that the incoming administration of President George H.W. Bush was more wary than Reagan's of Soviet intentions and was preparing to review U.S. policy.

Gorbachev's sensational speech at the United Nations in November 1988 was designed to preempt the review. Directed primarily at Europeans, it announced drastic unilateral reductions of Soviet troops and armaments, whose presence had provided the military underpinning to the Continent's Cold War division. He rejected the use or threat of force in the conduct of international relations and renounced the Brezhnev doctrine that supposedly gave the Soviet Union the right to intervene in its sphere of influence at will.

At a secret special session of the Soviet party politburo, Gorbachev made it clear to his colleagues that he did not have a "longer-term plan of practical measures" that would follow the implementation of those he had enunciated in his speech. He was confident that, whatever would happen in the countries of Eastern Europe, "we will continue to be friends, because the socialist basis will be preserved in all of them." His closest aide came to the conclusion that Gorbachev "has no concept of where we are going."

As the developments in Eastern Europe began to spin out of control, Western statesmen were more concerned than the Soviet leadership about preserving its stability. They did not condone the status quo, but neither did they actively encourage the Soviet empire's peaceful dissolution, which was already in

the air. That role was played by the CSCE. Its "Helsinki effect" consisted not so much in empowering dissidents, whose influence still remained marginal, as in impressing upon the rulers the normative power of its new principles of both international and domestic behavior.

The concluding document of the CSCE's Vienna meeting in the spring of 1989 required intrusive, internationally supervised safeguards of human rights. Some communist countries were reluctant to comply, but the Soviet Union insisted on the acceptance of the safeguards "regardless of the internal effects," including changes in the "structure of the state's instruments of power." This was a turning point, heralding the end of communist power in Europe.

Nowhere was the Helsinki effect more evident than in Hungary. Invoking its commitments under the Helsinki agreements as taking precedence over those under the Warsaw Pact, the Hungarian government opened its borders to allow masses of East German tourists free passage through Austria into West Germany. This is what destabilized the East German regime beyond control. As a result, the subsequent breach of the Berlin Wall amid confusing signals from one of its panicked officials was an accident bound to happen.

Why did the communist regimes not resist their collapse with the abundant force at their disposal? Preventing their downfall was supposed to be their "vital interest" as well as that of the Soviet Union. Their acquiescence to their fate is easy to explain by their dependence on Moscow. There were no plans for using their armed forces internally without Soviet direction and no time to prepare them to act in its absence. The only country where an attempt was made by the local dictator to keep himself in power by force was, ironically, the one that had been most successful in emancipating itself from Soviet tutelage—Romania—and the attempt failed.

Soviet inaction has been attributed to loss of nerve. But there was no panic in the Kremlin, not even an emergency session of the politburo after the Berlin Wall went down. None of its members called for using force. Gorbachev's main concern was preventing its inadvertent use by Soviet troops in Germany. He came to see the end of the Soviet empire as not only inevitable but also desirable because of his vision of Europe, and there was no one in his entourage willing or able to resist him.

Forty years earlier, Stalin's insistence on controlling Eastern Europe for the sake of Soviet security, as he understood it, had led to the Cold War and Europe's division. Gorbachev's belief that Eastern Europe could best serve his country's security as its bridge to Western Europe in a newly integrated continent made the peaceful ending of the Cold War

possible. He expected that the new governments in the region would find it in their interest to work closely with a reformed Soviet Union.

The expectation presupposed common dedication to a "Third Way" between capitalism and Soviet-style socialism—an illusion widely shared by the Western European Left. But most Eastern Europeans preferred the reformed capitalism exemplified by the thriving European Community to any untried alternative. They became enthusiastic supporters of an eastward enlargement of the European Community just as its original Western proponents were beginning to have second thoughts.

Even after the fall of communism, many people in the East and the West believed that the Warsaw Pact was worth preserving, together with NATO, as a primarily political rather than military organization. At first, the CSCE seemed to be such a model. Not only Gorbachev but also some of the disgruntled Soviet generals favored it. They hoped that the CSCE could slow down and control German unification while ensuring the Soviet Union's position as a great power.

The CSCE performed the valuable function of serving as the framework within which radical reductions of conventional forces were successfully negotiated. The resulting treaties—one that set limits to the armed forces of all of its states and the other providing for transparency that made it all but impossible for any of them to attack—laid the foundation on which Europe's enviable security architecture has been resting ever since. But the architecture has been maintained not by the CSCE but by the European Union with NATO.

It is important even today to understand why the Cold War ended the way it did. What happened shows the importance of ideas, norms, institutions, and procedures, rather than merely power, in resolving seemingly intractable international issues. To be sure, power matters, including military power, as does the nature of the political systems within states, and the balance of all these factors needs to be taken into account. This is what the European Union is about—the paramount and most lasting result of the developments that led to the Cold War's peaceful resolution.

Of course, not all is well with the European project; it never was. But its accomplishments have been striking. The obligation of the countries wishing to be part of it to make their domestic laws and practices conform to its common standards has already proved more effective than anything else in bridging the historic gap between Europe's East and West. And the European model of cooperative security, with its emphasis on treaties, negotiations, and "soft power," has become more widely regarded as the wave of the future than any of its competitors.