The Logic of 1989: The Soviet Peaceful Withdrawal from Eastern Europe

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The Cold War came to an end in the exact geographical region where it began. In 1989, Eastern Europe became the epicenter of breathtaking changes that went beyond all Western expectations, Soviet fears, and the hopes of the East Europeans themselves. The non-violent and even harmonious nature of the change was naturally welcome but it was also puzzling to contemporaries, just as it still is to students of international politics today, who see it as a kind of beautiful aberration from the realpolitik perspective. Indeed, the most unexpected and seemingly illogical aspect of the East European transformations was the peaceful Soviet reaction to them. Moscow’s permissive and even encouraging stance toward these developments in the summer and fall of 1989, embodying Mikhail Gorbachev’s ultimate rejection of the use of force, is difficult to explain in terms of traditional power politics.

This puzzling outcome, or in Jacques Levesque’s words, “the enigma of 1989,” raises further specific questions. When did the change in Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe actually take place? What were the main factors determining Moscow’s response to the unfolding crisis in the region in 1989? Why did the Gorbachev leadership act seemingly contrary to the long-standing Soviet interest of keeping a security belt along its Western border? How did the assessment of the strategic value versus cost of the alliance change in the late 1980s? Was the use of force ever seriously considered? What other possible scenarios did Soviet decision-makers imagine?

In response to Levesque’s intellectual challenge, I would argue that the peaceful Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe was not at all an enigma. In fact, looking at all the available evidence, it probably was the most rational and reasonable policy to pursue at the time, following logically from Gorbachev’s own thinking, his domestic and foreign policy priorities, the advice he received, and the course of events unfolding in Eastern Europe in 1989, in which the main role was played not by the superpowers but by the politicians and citizens of those countries. Using force in Eastern Europe in 1989 would have been senseless, ineffective and probably political suicide for Gorbachev, because it would have meant sacrificing everything he had fought for and achieved with perestroika, both domestically and internationally. In fact, a careful reading of Levesque’s Enigma reveals that the author himself, the title notwithstanding, draws the conclusion that by 1989 the resort to force by the USSR would have been both

1 Levesque, Enigma.
highly unlikely and counterproductive. Most of the recent document-based studies of the end of the Cold War share that view to some extent.\(^2\)

The Soviet reluctance to use force or even pressure can only be puzzling if seen from within two common analytical frameworks. The first, which often serves as an implicit point of reference when the Soviet peaceful withdrawal is described as surprising, is the traditional realist perspective—in which one derives expectations from an abstract notion of the balance of power and assumed security interests without analyzing the actual dynamics of events or the personalities of the actors. The second framework is a narrowly focused examination of the history of the Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe which incorporates heavily deterministic tragic historical precedents and metaphors, such as the Soviet interventions in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the image of soil sanctified by the blood of Soviet soldiers who died in World War Two (often invoked by Soviet hardliners). This framework presumes that Eastern Europe must always have been of the highest priority for Soviet decision-makers.

Since the East European countries were the USSR’s most important allies, and (in view of a possible military conflict on the European continent) a strategically vital sphere of influence, one would expect that the Kremlin leadership would have used all means at its disposal—beginning with diplomatic and political measures, but including military if all others failed—to preserve the unity of the socialist commonwealth. However, the documents and witness accounts suggest that the new Soviet rulers made decisions on the basis of norms and beliefs that often contradicted such narrowly defined security considerations. In fact, Gorbachev and his close advisers redefined traditional security concepts on the basis of a new liberal internationalist vision and normative concerns that were highly original in the Soviet context. Strictly speaking, if one does not take account of these changes, then Soviet behavior in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s indeed makes no sense from a realpolitik point of view.\(^3\)

However, new evidence obtained by the National Security Archive in the last ten years allows one to take another look at the end of the Cold War in Europe and provide more detailed answers to the questions posed above. These materials have surfaced as the result of a fruitful collaboration with the Gorbachev Foundation, our partners in Eastern Europe, as well as from oral history conferences and U.S. Freedom of Information Act requests. Over the last twenty years, numerous

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\(^2\) See especially Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*; Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*; Grachev, *Gorbachev’s Gamble*, and Zubok, *A Failed Empire*. For an excellent analysis based on documents from East European as well as Russian archives see Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism.” This view was also shared by the analysts of the CIA Soviet desk (SOVA) as early as 1989: see MacEachin, Musgrove transcript, 171–173.

eyewitnesses published their accounts of the events of 1989, which illuminate our view of those events.  

The new documents, including the extraordinary collection presented in this volume, along with numerous eyewitness accounts, show that real change in Soviet policy toward the region began much earlier than is usually perceived, practically within the first few months of perestroika; that economic factors played a very important role in the redefinition of the value to Moscow of its smaller partners; and that the use of force was never seriously considered as a way to keep the alliance together. Interaction with Western leaders, especially U.S. presidents played a major role in providing a context of trust and success in arms control in which later Soviet decisions on Eastern Europe were made.  

When looking at the record, one can see the overriding importance to Gorbachev and his allies of the idea of the common European home, which for them meant the USSR’s economic and political integration into Europe, and how that priority structured many of the other choices the new leadership made, including the peaceful withdrawal from Eastern Europe. The explanation of the Soviet withdrawal would be incomplete without mentioning the evolution of Gorbachev’s own thinking over the first four years of perestroika. Gorbachev of 1985 was not Gorbachev of 1989.

**FAREWELL TO THE BREZHNEV DOCTRINE**

From his very first days in power, Mikhail Gorbachev generated hopes for reform and liberalization in the countries of Eastern Europe. At the same time, both domestic and international observers in the mid-1980s had every reason to be skeptical about his stated intentions, which were perceived in the context of post-WWII Soviet behavior in the region—behavior that included the imposition of Soviet-style regimes by force and armed interventions when those regimes were seriously challenged by domestic opposition. Under those conditions, repudiation of the Brezhnev Doctrine was a necessary first step before Gorbachev’s new thinking could become credible internationally. Reform communists and dissidents in the East European countries waited for Gorbachev to make a public statement to that effect, and journalists dogged him repeatedly on the subject during foreign trips. Primary sources show that the new leader expressed his intention to reverse Moscow’s traditional behavior within the circle of his advisers and to allied leaders early in his tenure, even though visible changes in policy

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4 The most valuable memoirs of the end of the Cold War used in this essay are Gorbachev, Zhizni reformy, Chernyaev, Shest’ let, Medvedev, Raspad, Shakhnazarov, Tsena svobody, and memoirs of the British and the U.S. ambassadors to the Soviet Union, Braithwaite, Across the Moscow River, and Matlock, Autopsy on an Empire.

5 On the importance of interactions with U.S. presidents to Gorbachev and his reassessment of external threat, see Thomas Blanton’s essay in this volume.

6 Musgrove transcript, 131, 138.
appeared more tentative for the outside world. The early years, before 1989, in fact, showed signs of both continuity and change in Soviet policy toward the region although the style of the dialog within the Warsaw Pact changed noticeably already in 1985.

It is not clear whether these changes were immediately obvious to the socialist leaders, because Gorbachev often used terminology in meetings with them that was similar to his predecessors’. Even while he made bold new policy pronouncements about freedom of choice and independence of each state, he managed for a long time to preserve a degree of ambiguity, especially in his private conversations with East European leaders, as to the limits of Soviet tolerance of threats to the “preservation of socialism.” It was expected that the new general secretary would begin his term with broad initiatives to reinvigorate the socialist bloc, where disgruntled feelings had been building under the surface during the early 1980s. What made his initial policy declarations on Eastern Europe less conspicuous was the order of his priorities upon assuming the leadership. They were domestic economic reform, arms control and withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Even though Eastern Europe as such was not quite as high on Gorbachev’s list of concerns, he understood that change there was overdue and he believed that as a good communist he could not afford to appear to be neglecting his socialist allies. At the same time, as Gorbachev’s adviser and spokesman Andrei Grachev pointed out, the “apparent tranquility” of Eastern Europe in 1985 did not call for an urgent action and allowed the Soviet leader to postpone decisive steps and confronting difficult issues that came to haunt them later in 1989–1990.

In his most recent book, Gorbachev emphasized that the intention to transform relations within the socialist bloc was indeed one of the earliest and most important concerns of perestroika: “[F]rom the very beginning we made it our rule that each of the members of the CMEA and the Warsaw Treaty would be independent in their decisions and that what happened with the ‘Prague Spring’ in Czechoslovakia should never be repeated—when the people wanted to build socialism ‘with a human face’ independently and we responded to that with tanks.” New evidence corroborates this statement: Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe began to change soon after his election as general secretary.

Gorbachev took the first step in this direction during conversations with the leaders of the fraternal countries while they were in Moscow for Konstantin Chernenko’s funeral from March 12–15, 1985. Gorbachev notes that it was at the first of these meetings that the idea of “rejecting the Brezhnev Doctrine” was broached. Although we do not know all the details of this meeting—the transcript is still unavailable and only Gorbachev’s report to the Central Committee

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7 Document No. 50, Mikhail Gorbachev and Miklós Németh Conversation, March 3, 1989.
8 Grachev, Gorbachev’s Gamble, 55.
9 Ibid., 114.
10 Gorbachev, Ponyat’ perestroiku, 33.
11 Gorbachev, Zhizni i reformy, vol. 2, 312.
secretaries has been declassified\textsuperscript{12}—all key Soviet observers point to its exceptional importance. Gorbachev spoke informally, listening to his counterparts’ concerns and emphasizing the need for a new level of coordination among the leaders on economic and political issues. According to Chernyaev, Gorbachev told his colleagues that they were responsible for their policies only to their own people and to their parties. That conversation occurred immediately after Chernenko’s funeral. “Literally, on the next day,” Chernyaev recounted at the Musgrove conference, “he gathered all of them in his office in the Kremlin, and told them that from then on there was no more Brezhnev Doctrine, that kindergarten was over.” “Where you go, how you get there—that is your business, I will not interfere. I will not interfere even when you ask me for it.”\textsuperscript{13} Already at that meeting, as Gorbachev reported to the secretaries, the splits within the community were obvious: the Soviet participants spoke very highly about Wojciech Jaruzelski and János Kádár’s speeches, but negatively and even condescendingly about Nicolae Ceaușescu’s objections to renewing the Warsaw Treaty for the next 20 years. Gorbachev took Jaruzelski’s ideas about the need for more informal contacts among socialist leaders very seriously and suggested that the CPSU Central Committee follow up on this issue.

The April Plenum of the Central Committee was another important event for Gorbachev and his policy of new thinking. Although it was mainly used as the occasion to officially launch perestroika, the expressed need for change left no sphere of economic or social life—or policy area—untouched. The Plenum also made significant personnel shifts, elevating Gorbachev’s supporters to higher levels of political power, and sent signals throughout the system that a real transformation was forthcoming. The discourse stayed well within the framework of the socialist idea, but the fresh style and decisiveness of the new leader were unmistakable. In the Soviet system, the power and authority of the general secretary remained such that no opposition to his innovations was anticipated, but at the same time no deviation from the socialist mainstream on his part was expected either. As was the practice, the proceedings of the Plenum were widely read and interpreted by Moscow’s allies. Therefore, even though the Plenum did not deal with Eastern Europe specifically, the winds of change were felt throughout the region.

The next indication of change in the Soviet position toward Eastern Europe came at the end of June 1985, when Gorbachev took strong action in response to an article in \textit{Pravda} signed by “Vladimirov” that attacked the new policies unfolding in the socialist commonwealth.\textsuperscript{14} The author of the piece was the conservative first deputy head of the Central Committee’s Department for Liaison with Ruling Communist Parties, better known as simply “the Department” [\textit{Otdel}], Oleg Rakhmanin. The article argued against “national models” of socialism in

\textsuperscript{12} Document No. 1, Gorbachev’s Conference with CC CPSU Secretaries, March 15, 1985.
\textsuperscript{13} Musgrove transcript, 121.
fraternal countries, blamed them for promoting harmful tendencies toward nationalism and even Russophobia, and called for strengthening discipline within the socialist camp. It was especially critical of the Hungarian reforms and Budapest’s economic ties with Western Europe. According to Georgy Shakhnazarov, who was at the time a deputy head in the same CC section, the article was seen in Eastern Europe as a “reinstatement of the Brezhnev Doctrine.” The Department immediately started receiving calls from the allies asking if the piece truly represented Moscow’s position.

Gorbachev, meanwhile, correctly saw the article as seriously undermining his new approach to the region, and even his image, making him look like a “monster who had come to power.” Deciding that he needed to “extricate” himself, he contacted certain allied leaders on a “pretext” to make sure they knew the article was not a reflection of Kremlin opinion. At a Politburo session on June 29, he made his displeasure and embarrassment known, subjecting Konstantin Rusakov, the head of the Department and Rakhmanin’s superior, to particularly scathing criticism. He later replaced Rusakov with a like-minded reformer, Vadim Medvedev, and Rakhmanin with one of the Kremlin’s most radical thinkers, Shakhnazarov. This incident and subsequent personnel changes were widely discussed in the Central Committee apparatus and viewed as unambiguous evidence of a new approach to Eastern Europe on the part of the general secretary.

If the signals were not yet clear outside the Kremlin, on October 21, 1985, at a meeting of the PCC, Gorbachev provided a lengthy analysis of the state of the international communist movement, suggesting that it was going through difficult times, and that each communist country now had to interpret the situation independently. Gorbachev also announced a new approach to the allies: the development of relations based on equality and respect for national sovereignty and independence, as well as mutually advantageous cooperation in all spheres. He stressed that these new principles also meant that the ruling parties bore full responsibility for conditions in their respective countries.

Thus, Gorbachev’s first year already served notice that the new general secretary was serious about changing the state of relations among the partners in order to make them more equal and mutually beneficial. Of course, for a group accustomed to taking orders from Moscow and aware of the ever-present possibility of armed “fraternal assistance,” those signals were not immediately seen as carte blanche to strive for genuine independence or reforms. But the difference in style was noticed both within the USSR and abroad, and the apparent new Soviet flexibility became a source of hope and—for hardliners—concern throughout Eastern Europe.

15 Musgrove transcript, 123.
16 Ibid., 124
Gorbachev’s new approach did not escape resistance at home, notably from a cohort of apparatchiks who were used to treating the East European countries essentially as vassals. In order to alter relations within the bloc, Gorbachev first had to break the inertia of old-style thinking within his own diplomatic corps and the Central Committee apparatus. He attempted to do just that at a meeting with Foreign Ministry officials and ambassadors in May 1986. In a forceful statement, he announced a new era of dealings with the socialist community: “[T]he time when we helped them to form their economy, their parties, and their political institutions is past [...] we cannot lead them by the hand to kindergarten as we would little children.” He declared that he was willing to trust “their search for national approaches, even though some steps that our friends take might be detrimental to the common cause.” He also called for greater policy coordination and mutual respect within the alliance, and specifically promoted the creation of an institution of multilateral working meetings at the leadership level.19

Ironically, these changes were mostly felt internally, while for outside observers it appeared that Eastern Europe was treated with a benign neglect, or what Levesque called “immobilism” almost until the end of 1988.20 The reasons for this cautious behavior could be that on the one hand Gorbachev did not see an acute crisis in his own backyard, and that on the other he felt quite uncomfortable making any decisions that would amount to interference in the domestic affairs of the allies. The fact that Gorbachev’s closest supporter in the top leadership, Alexander Yakovlev, and his foreign policy adviser, Anatoly Chernyaev, were more interested respectively in domestic liberalization and relations with capitalist countries must have contributed to his relative lack of attention to Eastern Europe, among other factors. Chernyaev remarks on Gorbachev’s seeming unwillingness to deal with his socialist counterparts in his memoir: “As far as the ‘socialist commonwealth’ was concerned, I did not notice any special interest to it on Gorbachev’s part. [...] I felt that he interacted with the leaders of socialist countries without enthusiasm, only with difficulty agreed to visits, and obviously was not inclined to demonstrate ‘his leadership role’.”21 The most important issue for Gorbachev, as far as the socialist bloc was concerned, was the absence of real integration in CMEA, which at the time seemed to be repairable.

Returning from a PCC meeting in Budapest in June 1986, Gorbachev presented to the Politburo a summary of the speeches made by the socialist leaders and his own impressions about the problems confronting the member-states. He spoke with optimism and approval about the growing independence of the allies because “they are still drawn to us,” and about the interest in a dialogue with the West, which did not seem problematic to him. He then talked at some length about the economic problems in CMEA. This topic had taken up one-third of the

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20 Levesque, Enigma, 52.
21 Chernyaev, Shest’ let, 81.
time at the PCC and produced a genuine discussion, which in itself was a change from the formal speech-making of previous PCC meetings.

The main problem facing CMEA, according to Gorbachev, was the lack of integration between socialist countries and their resulting reliance on bilateral agreements, a function of the general inclination to “avoid questions of integration.” A major issue was the creation of mechanisms for coordinating decision-making on foreign policy, especially on economic matters. Gorbachev stressed the independence of the allies and the need to restructure economic relations “exclusively on mutually beneficial grounds.” Another issue that came up repeatedly was the economic relationship between the socialist countries and the West, especially West Germany. (“Everyone wants to get closer to the FRG,” he noted.) Gorbachev spoke warily about such ties without prohibiting them outright, suggesting that Kádár should “lean on our shoulder, it will make it easier with the West as well.” The Soviet leader believed in improving integration in CMEA first, and then dealing with the EEC collectively, bloc-to-bloc, arguing that the long-term view of integration between those two organizations was the best way out of the existing economic predicament. Importantly, even though economic problems received detailed treatment, Gorbachev did not see the situation as a general crisis, nor did he perceive the East European allies as a liability or a burden. At the Politburo, he expressed his strong belief that with the Soviet Union providing the model and leading the way, the East Europeans would follow and remain valuable partners in a reformed socialist alliance.22

Probably the key document that gives one an insight into Gorbachev’s own early thinking on Eastern Europe is the long memorandum that he sent to Politburo members on June 26, 1986, for discussion at the Politburo session on July 3.23 As a personal memorandum of the general secretary (drafted by Shakhnazarov and Medvedev), it is quite a unique document. In it, Gorbachev reaffirmed that CMEA was lacking genuine integration, and observed that a significant change of leadership was taking place in most countries of the Eastern bloc. He underscored the USSR’s special responsibility for the fate of world socialism and the need to lead by example, not by imposing its will. The memo described economic integration as the main task, including real coordination in foreign policy and the sharing of experience and information about internal policies, among other priorities. Gorbachev concluded with a suggestion that there should be a discussion of Eastern Europe at the Politburo followed by instructions to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the KGB and the relevant departments of the Central Committee to develop a strategy of relations with the socialist countries.

Ironically, this document ended with a call to make relations with the allies a top priority of the Soviet Union, which at the time they obviously were not. One may guess that Gorbachev felt that he was obligated to regard them as an

23 Document No. 6, Memorandum from Mikhail Gorbachev to the Politburo, June 26, 1986.
uppermost concern for both ideological and strategic reasons, and yet his heart was elsewhere. The June 26 memorandum was the first of his numerous calls to the leadership for a new coordinated strategy toward Eastern Europe. Yet no concrete steps in that direction were made until early 1989, when by all measures it was already too late—events were overtaking even the most ambitious strategies. It was one thing to have a bold new vision but another thing to develop a government policy that would implement it.

In order to strengthen communist reformers in the East European countries, the Soviet leader had to address the issue of past Soviet interventions in the region, such as the suppression of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968. He was presented with an ideal opportunity to do so when he traveled to Prague in April 1987, where euphoric crowds cheered Gorbachev but acted as if his Czechoslovak counterpart, Gustáv Husák, was not even there. There was widespread hope in the country that Gorbachev would change the official interpretation of the Prague Spring as a counterrevolution instigated by outside elements. And yet he chose not to do so, holding fast instead to the standard formulas. From the documents, we now know that there was strong pressure from the Czechoslovak leadership on Gorbachev not to amend the interpretation, because as Vasil Bil’ak stressed, “it could become a catastrophe for Czechoslovak society.” According to Vadim Medvedev, who accompanied Gorbachev to Prague, the Soviet delegation was acutely aware that they were stepping into the midst of an intense internal political debate about change in the leadership, which had been “dictated by the 1968 syndrome.” In fact, while Gorbachev was meeting with Husák, Bil’ak and Miloš Jakeš were talking to Medvedev in a separate room about the importance of keeping the official version of 1968 unchanged.

The decision was made not to offer a public statement on the issue so as not to interfere in the domestic political struggle. In his private meetings with Czechoslovak officials, Gorbachev only carefully stated that it was up to them to allow political rehabilitation of individuals expelled from the party for their participation in the events of the Dubček era. Zdeněk Mlynář, the émigré Czech intellectual who had been Gorbachev’s classmate and close friend at Moscow State University, analyzed the matter and concluded that Gorbachev himself had become a hostage of the Brezhnev Doctrine—of “Brezhnev’s strangling embrace,” as Mlynář put it. “But he cannot do anything about it—inheritance always carries with it negative issues as well.” Thus, the Soviet leader could not publicly abandon the Husák regime whose political identity was tied to the old reading of events—“the dead body of the Prague Spring lying in the mausoleum.”

25 Conversation between Alexander Yakovlev, Miloš Jakeš and Vasil Bil’ak, November 14, 1989, GARP, Fond 10063, Opis 1, delo 257.
26 Medvedev, Raspad, 148–150.
That assessment rings true in retrospect. The duality of aspirations for change and feelings of responsibility for the Soviet-installed regimes comes through in both documents and memoirs. While Gorbachev was ready to renounce the policy of intervention early on, he was ambivalent about doing so publicly because, among other reasons, he was concerned about possible efforts by the West to capitalize on his flexibility and to try to encourage overly rapid change in the region. This was an issue that came up repeatedly in Soviet leadership discussions during the period.

At the same time, gradually, Gorbachev began to rely on West European and U.S. leaders as his peer group. In certain later conversations with Western heads of state, he openly pleaded for support, asking them to use their political weight to warn others (usually meaning the U.S. president) against interfering in Eastern Europe. This pattern had the effect of strengthening Gorbachev’s identification with Western Europe. Margaret Thatcher and François Mitterrand became especially trusted partners on the German issue and on the evolution of Eastern Europe. Gorbachev repeatedly indicated in his conversations with the French president that the USSR accepted evolutionary processes of change, and was not considering the use of forceful methods in dealing with its allies.

During the period 1985–1988, the Soviet leadership tried to encourage reform in Eastern Europe while keeping it within limits so that it would develop within the framework of gradual change on the continent—as Gorbachev would say, “in the European process.” For this, reaching a good understanding with West European leaders was essential. Meanwhile, however, the Warsaw Pact partners often felt confused and unsure of Gorbachev’s true intentions. As was the usual practice, they studied every development and innovation in the USSR, especially the speeches and publications of the general secretary. The local populations also watched Gorbachev and associated their hopes for domestic liberalization with him, thus putting pressure on their own conservative leaderships. The ideas of the new Soviet party leader also captured the imagination of those who were still hoping to build socialism with a human face—the reform communists within the ruling parties. However, a very different reaction came from conservative bastions, such as the GDR, where Erich Honecker decided not to publish the proceedings of the January 1987 CPSU Plenum for fear that the Soviets were going “too far.”

While domestic pronouncements of the new policy were quite daring, and there are no grounds to doubt the sincerity of Gorbachev’s desire to reform the socialist bloc, his approach lacked a unified strategy and proceeded mostly on an ad hoc basis. The Gorbachev leadership rejected the Brezhnev Doctrine in dealing with its allies, but as Mlynář pointed out, to a certain extent they remained captive to their own past, unable to withdraw support decisively even from the most

28 Some of the most pronounced examples are in the following conversations: with Margaret Thatcher on September 23, 1989 (Document No. 85); Helmut Kohl on November 11, 1989 (Document No. 103); and François Mitterrand on November 14, 1989 (Document No. 104).
29 See Gorbachev–Mitterrand conversations in Document Nos. 71, 72, 74.
30 Gorbachev, Zhizni i reformy, vol. 2, 408.
notoriously repressive leaders, Ceaușescu and Honecker. This ambivalence and lack of consistent focus contributed to an uneven pattern of progress in the region.

GORBACHEV’S VISION AND HIS TEAM OF VISIONARIES

Although Gorbachev’s East European policy lacked a detailed strategy, it was guided by a coherent vision that was articulated at an early stage and was consistent with his overall philosophy of international relations. That vision comprised a number of basic principles, most vividly articulated in his address to the United Nations in December 1988 but also in a number of speeches even before that, notably at the 19th party conference in June 1988. The most important of those principles were:

- an absolute rejection of the use or threat of force as instruments of foreign policy;
- freedom of choice as a universal principle, with no exceptions;
- the supremacy of common human values;
- reasonable sufficiency rather than strict parity in strategic armaments;
- the full integration of Eastern Europe and the USSR into the common European home.

These values were quite obvious to those in Gorbachev’s immediate circle from the early years of perestroika, though not to most Politburo members. And the link between those values and concrete changes in Soviet behavior was noticed in Eastern Europe and by Western observers as well. Chernyaev noted in his diary after Gorbachev’s meeting with Helmut Kohl on October 28, 1988, that his boss behaved as if they were already entering a new world in which they shared basic values that comprised “his ideas—‘freedom of choice,’ ‘mutual respect for each other’s values,’ ‘renunciation of force in politics,’ ‘a common European home,’ ‘liquidation of nuclear weapons,’ etc., etc.”

At home, this vision, in its practically complete form, was dramatically presented by Gorbachev in his main report to the 19th Party Conference at the end of June 1988. The theses for the conference were published in May, and struck like a lightning bolt for the Soviet public and attentive observers abroad. To hold that conference meant that Gorbachev would move ahead with a new momentum focusing this time directly on democratization of the Soviet regime. That this was a conscious decision on the part of the general secretary is clear from the long and detailed discussions of numerous drafts of the report by the Politburo, which preceded the conference. Gorbachev rejected several versions prepared by his speechwriters and insisted on including the language that he wanted himself. The conference was

31 Musgrove transcript, 113, 122.
intended to be a powerful signal both domestically and internationally that perestroika was entering a new stage, featuring a serious opening up of the Soviet political system and even more radical changes in foreign policy, especially toward the socialist bloc. U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock described the experience of first reading the theses and briefing Reagan on them in Helsinki on the way to the Moscow Summit in May 1988, realizing then that new thinking was “for real,” and that “now we were in a completely new ballgame.” As a result of that conference key characteristics of the Soviet state would be changed and with the advent of free, competitive elections it would cease to be a communist regime.\textsuperscript{34}

The vision that the general secretary brought with him, and that was expanded and radicalized over time as a result of learning from his advisers and his international peers, had to be implemented by people who shared those ideas completely in order to be effective. In the tightly hierarchical Soviet system, where reform could only originate from the above, it made a great difference who was in charge of applying it. When Gorbachev started replacing the old guard with reformers, it sent a strong message to the allies and, as Archie Brown has pointed out, created a link between the new thinking and the new political actors, between the power of appointment and the power of ideas—a development that led to significant policy outcomes.\textsuperscript{35}

The key appointments in the sphere of relations with socialist countries and in foreign policy in general were Eduard Shevardnadze as foreign minister, Vadim Medvedev as head of the Socialist Countries Department of the Central Committee (replacing Konstantin Rusakov) and then as ideology secretary and full member of the Politburo, Anatoly Chernyaev and later Georgy Shakhnazarov as foreign policy advisers, Alexander Yakovlev as a member of the Politburo and head of the International Commission, and Anatoly Dobrynin as foreign policy adviser, Anatoly Dobrynin as head of the International Department (replacing Boris Ponomarev), who was later replaced by Valentin Falin in 1988. The political partnership for reform that Gorbachev gradually built (he liked to call it a “democratic coalition”) was the crucial medium between the ideas and beliefs of the new thinkers and actual policy.

Gorbachev and the people he placed in charge of relations with Eastern Europe shared the view that it was unacceptable for the Soviet Union to interfere in the socialist countries’ affairs, either by dictating policies or imposing judgments.\textsuperscript{36} Medvedev emphasized this in his memoirs: “Gorbachev and all of us always stated in our meetings with leaders of the fraternal countries that the determination of a political course and the choice of direction and model of development were the exclusive right of the people and the party of every country. Any interference in this process from outside was impermissible.”\textsuperscript{37} Underlying this principle was a sense of great responsibility, not to say guilt, stemming from

\textsuperscript{34} Musgrove transcript, 109-110.
\textsuperscript{35} Brown, \textit{The Gorbachev Factor}, 212.
\textsuperscript{36} Musgrove transcript, 123, 147-149.
\textsuperscript{37} Medvedev, \textit{Raspad}, 34.
Moscow’s crude domination of the region over the previous 40 years. The Gorbachev circle believed that they now had an obligation to find ways to help the socialist community escape the current crisis and democratize their systems following the new Soviet example.  

These two beliefs taken together provide an interesting dichotomy. Whereas the first prohibits any interference in the affairs of others, the second implies that the USSR still had an important role to play in the domestic developments of those countries. Gorbachev and his colleagues acknowledged this duality by exercising great care in their dealings with East European leaders, hoping to be able to support the reformers, and being reluctant to deal with conservative leaders. However, at the same time, they understood that the old leaders were the ones who could guarantee the stability needed to prevent anarchy and a rapid collapse of the system. This conundrum produced considerable ambiguity and indecisiveness in Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe, as noted by many scholars.

Another common element among Kremlin reformers was the fact that none of them, at least in the first five years of perestroika, had questioned the choice of socialism as the desired system for the Soviet bloc. Their goal was to open up the system, to get rid of old and inefficient elements, and to build a democratic and even market-oriented brand of socialism, enriching their interpretation to include the earlier Eurocommunist thinking. But the term “socialism” would remain in use, even though the content would evolve over time to embrace a social-democratic platform. This fact helps partially to answer the question why the Soviet leaders were not able to anticipate the avalanche-like developments that led to the collapse of the socialist commonwealth. Because socialist democracy had such powerful appeal in their eyes, it was hard for them to see that other socialist states might not want to emulate their reform. Leading the socialist alliance by purifying it and implementing true socialist ideals had been Gorbachev’s aspiration for a long time, as he explained to Castro in April 1988.

And last but not the least, Gorbachev’s personal aversion to bloodshed and violence, also noted by many observers, played an important role in determining the choice of policies toward Eastern Europe.

Looking at the available evidence, one can say that even if Gorbachev did not have a well-defined strategy for dealing with the socialist bloc, all of the components of his thinking amounted to a clear vision, which he tried to apply while reacting to events in the region, and in fact did so rather consistently, relying on his reform coalition within the Central Committee.

38 Author’s interview with Vadim Medvedev, June 17, 1996. Moscow.
39 Musgrove transcript, 141, 143.
40 Musgrove transcript, 103-104.
41 Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Fidel Castro, April 5, 1988, Gorbachev Foundation Archive, Fond 1, Opis 1.
In 1985–1986, Gorbachev embarked on a thorough reform of intra-bloc socialist economic relations. He was enthusiastic and optimistic about the prospects of economic cooperation and genuine integration within CMEA. The patronizing was over; now the socialist countries could trade with each other on a mutually beneficial basis. The need to change the relationship was felt acutely, and even falling fuel prices had not yet had the effect of undermining the chances for CMEA integration in the minds of the Soviet reformers. By early 1989, however, the Kremlin had undertaken a comprehensive reassessment of CMEA and the prospects of close cooperation, leading Gorbachev to abandon the issue and instead to encourage East European leaders to pursue independent economic contacts with the European Economic Union (EEU). The focus thus shifted from intra-bloc engagement to all-European integration, in which the USSR would become an important partner. Along with that change, assessments of the strategic value of Eastern Europe had also been adjusted in the wake of progress on arms control and the development of greater trust in U.S.–Soviet relations.

The question of whether the Soviet leadership viewed the socialist commonwealth as a burden and how that perception contributed to the reformulation of Moscow’s East European policy is often raised in the literature on the end of the Cold War. In *Enigma*, Jacques Levesque writes that the “cost” of Eastern Europe was not a significant factor in Gorbachev’s thinking at the time, and he compares the region to nuclear weapons in terms of its value to the Soviet Union, noting that the fraternal allies were expensive but “essential attributes of Soviet power.” According to Levesque, the economic motivation is not the key to understanding Kremlin policies. In other words, the Soviet reformers did not really see Eastern Europe as so great a burden in 1985–1989 that it would push them to abandon their partners. However, new evidence suggests that the answer to this question is a bit more nuanced.

In 1985 and 1986 Gorbachev was sanguine about revamping CMEA even while being aware of its economic deficiencies and lack of mutual engagement. After his first PCC session in Sofia on October 22–23, 1985, and a post-Geneva meeting with socialist leaders in Prague in November, the Soviet leader raised the issue of CMEA reform and integration at the Politburo. He spoke confidently and without alarm about progress in the “strengthening of the socialist commonwealth,” stressed the scientific and technological revolution as the key to successful economic reform and emphasized that “responsibility in this issue rests with our country.” He specifically mentioned the importance of intra-bloc integration as a way to prevent the allies from turning to the West in their search to satisfy their economic needs.

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43 Politburo session November 26, 1985, Gorbachev Foundation Archive, Fond 2, Opis 1.
In June 1986, coming back from the PCC in Budapest, Gorbachev emphasized to his Politburo colleagues how important economic issues had been at the meeting and showed a deep understanding of the pressing problems the commonwealth faced. However, there still was an implicit consensus that CMEA was a net plus. Interestingly, especially in comparison with his later deliberations over Soviet–East European relations, energy and the Soviet role as a supplier of oil and gas at prices significantly below world market levels did not figure into the discussions. The issue of Soviet subsidies to socialist countries was not a new one; it was repeatedly discussed by the Soviet leadership as early as the 1970s and later during the Solidarity crisis in Poland. The socialist countries’ debt to the West was growing, reaching $163.9 billion in 1986. Gorbachev was aware of the decline in oil prices but at the time apparently did not specifically connect that trend to the economic problems of Eastern Europe. The first discussion of the four-fold drop in oil prices took place at the Politburo on July 11, 1986.

Taking into account the general secretary’s growing awareness of his country’s economic plight, his evaluation of the prospects for CMEA and of the progress being made toward genuine integration throughout 1986 was surprisingly optimistic, especially as seen in his report to the Politburo immediately after the PCC meeting in Bucharest in mid-November 1986. Gorbachev at that gathering had encouraged Kádár not to listen to people “who are longing for a U.S. embrace” but to rely on the bloc partners, and he concluded his report by speaking about the “new stage in our collaboration with the socialist countries.”

However, the economic data from Eastern Europe combined with the oil price decline eventually began to generate apprehension. As early as January 1987, returning from a Warsaw meeting of the CMEA, Gorbachev spoke to his colleagues about the socialist countries’ ties to the West as being a result of “our economic difficulties,” and for the first time raised the notion of the Soviet oil and gas “spigot” as an instrument of foreign policy. The realization that the USSR could not provide the technologies the bloc needed, and that the partners could not pay for energy in hard currency, led the Soviet leader to emphasize the need for mutually beneficial trade and for a certain distancing from accountability for the allies: “It is in our interest not to be loaded with responsibility for what is happening, or could happen, there.”

That discussion probably led to a report that is known to have been prepared by the CC CPSU socialist countries department on world oil prices. The document, usually a type that would be requested by the general secretary or other Politburo members, is not available, but there is a note about it in the Politburo records. That note mentions that world oil prices were discussed “outside the agenda” on February 26, 1987, on the basis of

44 See Document Nos. 5, 6, 7.
45 Gaidar, Gibel’ imperii, 223–224.
the report, and that its “quality of analysis was found lacking.” The Politburo discussion of this issue is not available either, but since the document was prepared by the socialist countries department, we may assume it must have dealt with the impact of the declining price of oil on the economies of the bloc and possible Soviet actions to redress the crisis. Eventually, along with the drastic drop in oil prices that began in 1986 came the slow realization that not only were the partners in fact a burden, but that the CMEA itself was unsustainable, in part because the Soviet Union was losing the economic leverage needed to keep the community tied together and to the USSR.

Thus, the new impetus to reform relations among the socialist countries in 1988 came from the realization by Gorbachev and those who were involved in policy-making toward the region that the socialist bloc had in fact become an economic drain rather than an advantage to the Soviet Union itself. Over the several years preceding the reform, the USSR continually faced an unfavorable trade balance with its partners, which it supplied with raw materials, including oil and gas, and from which it received in return manufactured goods that were generally of low quality. Besides this structure of trade, the Soviets gave substantial subsidies to the allies, especially when they perceived a threat of internal political instability. The last example of this practice was in Poland in 1980–1981.

The real turnaround in Moscow’s assessment of the cost of empire came in the first half of 1988. At a Politburo session on March 10, after describing the economic crisis in the Eastern bloc as based on “Western credits and our cheap raw materials,” Gorbachev set out the Kremlin’s main priority: “In our relations with the CMEA, we have to take care of our own [Soviet] people first.” Prime Minister Nikolay Ryzhkov gave the real reason behind the trade problems: “The world price of oil has fallen from 180 to 54 rubles per ton.” The USSR simply could not sustain the existing supply relationship any longer. Now the empire truly felt like a burden because “our foreign assistance alone takes 41 billion rubles annually from our budget,” according to Gorbachev. The discussion was very frank and unyielding. No more glossing over the real problems would be accepted, trade issues would be discussed, and broad contacts with the West would be accepted as a fact of life. The general secretary drew the stark conclusion that “in the economic sense, socialism has not passed the test of practice.”

It is surprising in retrospect to realize how well Gorbachev’s advisers understood the economic crisis facing the socialist system. In October 1988, Shakhnazarov drafted a very candid memo for his boss to use at a Politburo discussion, raising the realistic possibility that several East European countries could “go bankrupt at the same time,” naming Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and the GDR specifically. The memo posed a question about the existence of a Soviet general

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49 Musgrove transcript, 156.
strategy toward reform in Eastern Europe and whether the presence of Soviet troops in the allied countries was still warranted. The main recommendation was that “in the future, the possibility of extinguishing crisis situations with force should be completely excluded.” The note on the document on file at the Gorbachev Foundation shows that the Soviet leader actually spoke from the text prepared by Shakhnazarov at the Politburo session of October 6, 1988.

Thus, as far as Eastern Europe was concerned, the Soviets starting in early 1987 gradually perceived the economic costs of “empire” as exceeding the region’s value, and came to accept this fully as a fact in 1989. There were several distinct factors accounting for the reassessment.

The first and decisive factor had to do with threat perceptions. Strategically, the territory of Eastern Europe had become less valuable with the arrival of long-range nuclear weapons. In the late 1980s, when the probability of a military conflict in Europe was seen as infinitesimal, its strategic worth diminished even more. The understanding reached between Gorbachev and Reagan in Geneva and especially Reykjavik played the main role in persuading the Soviet leader that an attack from the West was highly improbable. After Reykjavik and throughout 1987, U.S.–Soviet relations in general, but especially in the sphere of arms control, progressed in leaps and bounds, making a small but influential part of the Soviet leadership feel, in Chernyaev’s words, that “no one will attack us even if we disarm totally.” The most striking evidence of the reassessment of the strategic value of the socialist camp came from a memorandum Chernyaev prepared in May 1990 on the unification of Germany. As he wrote to Gorbachev: “[Regarding] the discussions about the fact that, as a result of German unification and the possible entry of Poland into NATO, the borders of the bloc would move to the Soviet frontier—this [argument] is from yesterday; this is a strategy from World War II and the Cold War when our own security was measured not only in the military sphere, but also in the social and political spheres through the [socialist] commonwealth. […] Our real security is being determined now at the Soviet–American [arms control] negotiations.”

The second factor was the declining price of oil and its effect on the balance of trade with the socialist countries and on the entire Soviet economic system, as discussed above. The Soviet leadership understood that they could not continue to support CMEA under conditions in which the USSR experienced trade deficits with such key members as Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania. “The objective reason” for the imbalance, according to a Central Committee International Commission session of March 28, 1989, was the drop in oil

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51 Shakhnazarov, Tsena svobody, 368.
53 Anatoly Chernyaev memorandum to Gorbachev, May 4, 1990, Gorbachev Foundation Archive, Fond 2, Opis 2.
prices from $175 to $45–50 per ton, on the basis of which “we have lost about 40 billion convertible rubles in this five-year period alone.”

The third factor in Moscow’s reassessment was the development of Gorbachev’s concept of the common European home and the need for economic integration with the West. Gradually, the Soviet leadership understood that if they did not allow the East European countries to reform their economies there would be no possibility for the USSR to “enter” the world economy—to integrate with the West. Research on integration and economic experimentation with market elements was gaining ground in Soviet academic circles, and Eastern Europe was often seen as a testing ground as well as a gateway to European integration. In 1989, Academician Andranik Migranyan wrote about the Soviet desire for a new type of international economic interaction: “No longer regarding ourselves as an alternative model of development for the whole world community, and having realized the fundamental weak points of our own economic and political system, we are deliberately trying not to hinder Western-style international economic contacts. On the contrary, we would like to integrate with that system and adapt ourselves to its existing structures. Significant in this respect is the change in our attitude toward the integration processes occurring in Europe and in the West as a whole. Recent Soviet foreign policy gives us grounds to outline a general path toward a single, transcontinental community.”

Notwithstanding Gorbachev’s early calls for the development of a strategy toward the socialist commonwealth, policy recommendations were slow to come, and only in 1989 do we see a more or less coherent effort to deal conceptually with the changes in Eastern Europe. Two very important documents show the depth of analysis and recommendations that were on Gorbachev’s desk by early 1989: a memorandum from the CC International Department, and another from the Institute of the Economy of the World Socialist System (the Bogomolov institute) of the Academy of Sciences.

Both documents depicted the deep crisis underway in the socialist alliance, and emphasized the limited nature of Soviet leverage.

RETURN TO EUROPE: A COMMON EUROPEAN HOME

In the early years of perestroika, the new leadership waged an ongoing battle for the hearts and minds of West Europeans, both politicians and populations, with the goal of pulling them away from the more intransigent United States of the Reagan administration. The effort to split NATO was always at the heart of

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54 Gaidar, Gibel’ imperii, 264.
55 Migranyan at the time was based at the Institute of the Economy of the World Socialist System of the USSR Academy of Sciences. See his article, “For Discussion: An Epitaph to the Brezhnev Doctrine: The USSR and Other Socialist Countries in the Context of East–West Relations,” Moscow News, no. 34, 6, cited in Chafetz, Gorbachev, 108.
56 Document Nos. 41 and 42.
Soviet strategy during the Cold War years, and early Gorbachev-era Politburo discussions show that the reformers did not shy away from the same thinking. It was only later that the concept of a common European home developed into a more comprehensive vision and became not just an instrument but the ultimate goal of Gorbachev’s foreign policy.

What did this new concept mean for Gorbachev? A common European home would be based on universal human values, collective security and economic integration. It incorporated a vision of a continent without borders, where people and ideas would move freely without fear of war or hunger. In this new Europe, both blocs would gradually dissolve their military organizations, and security functions would be taken over by the newly strengthened CSCE framework and the United Nations.

In 1985 and 1986, however, before the concept was fully developed, Soviet efforts aimed at Europe were more tactical in nature—designed to induce the United States to negotiate on arms reductions and to a lesser degree to satisfy Soviet economic aims. Gorbachev stressed this aspect of leveraging the United States with respect to Soviet European policy at the Politburo session following his return from the PCC meeting in Budapest in June 1986: “[T]he policy aimed at Europe is yielding great reserves. Everybody thinks so. Our work here is having an influence on the United States and on all world developments.”

As perestroika progressed, and especially as Gorbachev’s contacts with West European leaders led him to see them as his primary peer group, his appreciation and understanding of Europe became richer and his approach less tactical. The reassessment of the socialist bloc as a burden rather than a strategic asset prompted Gorbachev to recognize the inevitability of becoming economically reliant on the West, and thus to see deep economic integration with Western Europe as a key imperative. Gorbachev himself was a convinced Westernizer whose views were influenced significantly by his travels in Europe when he was Central Committee secretary for agriculture. He was particularly impressed by the Italian communists and their Eurocommunist ideas. Therefore, his inclinations always lay in the European direction, even though it took some time for him to figure out exactly how Eastern Europe fit into Soviet designs.

The vision of Europe and especially the idea of a common European home over time became central to Gorbachev’s thinking about the future of the socialist community. He was concerned that in the eyes of West Europeans the image of the USSR was linked with invasions. Correcting this image was seen as a necessary condition for being accepted as one of the civilized nations of Europe. During Politburo discussions of the Warsaw Pact’s new military doctrine, on May 8, 1987, Gorbachev brought up his conversation with Margaret Thatcher, which

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58 For the origins of the concept, see Marie-Pierre Rey, “Europe is Our Common Home: A Study of Gorbachev’s Diplomatic Concept,” Cold War History, Vol. 4, issue 2, January 2004, 33-65.
had left a lasting impression on him: “She said they were afraid of us; that we invaded Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Afghanistan. This perception is widespread among the public there.” Stating that the Soviet Union should stop lying about its conventional forces in the European theater, Gorbachev advocated troop reductions and directly tied this argument to the need to think “about Europe: from the Atlantic to the Urals.”

Europe, including the “return to Europe,” was one of the earliest ideas of perestroika, always invoking Russia’s identity as a European state and the implicit hope of pulling Europe away from the United States. The idea of a common European home was based to a large extent on Gorbachev’s desire to turn the CSCE framework into the main structure of European security, which would mean a gradual dissolution of both the WTO and NATO. Seen mainly as an irritant by his predecessors because of its focus on human rights, the CSCE received renewed attention and support from the reformist leader almost as soon as he came to power. In fact, Shevardnadze’s first trip abroad as foreign minister was to participate in the CSCE Vienna conference, at which the Soviet side made an unprecedented proposal to host a future CSCE meeting in Moscow on the humanitarian dimension of security. To make this possible, the Kremlin undertook significant changes in Soviet human rights practices, including releasing political prisoners and putting an end to the persecution of prominent dissidents.

In early 1988, in an effort to invest the concept of the common European home with substance, according to its future Director Nikolay Shmelev, and to shift the intellectual center of gravity in Moscow toward the study of Europe, the Institute of Europe was created within the USSR Academy of Sciences under Vitalii Zhurkin. The institute was involved heavily in preparations for the CSCE’s Paris summit in November 1990, and provided detailed analyses to the Central Committee on the prospects for European integration and German unification.

Europe and “Europeanness” figured prominently in the Soviet attitude toward the socialist commonwealth in 1989. After the December 1988 U.N. speech, Gorbachev, encouraged by the enthusiastic European response and discouraged by the “reassessment pause” in Washington, decided to attempt a breakthrough on the continent. He asked his advisers to prepare a powerful speech for delivery in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe. The address was supposed to be drafted in secret, kept even from other members of the leadership. It was envisioned as “similar to the U.N. speech, only with a specifically European angle.” Gorbachev wanted to spell out his vision of Europe and of the common European home with all its constituent elements, as well as the process by which Europe could achieve that goal.

60 Kashlev, Helsinskii protsess, 154–157, 172–175.
61 Author’s interview with Nikolay Shmelev, July 12, 2006, Moscow.
The Strasbourg address, delivered on July 6, 1989, was Gorbachev’s passionate appeal to the West Europeans for Soviet entry into their community. Including such weighty terms as “European unification,” he even quoted the great French writer Victor Hugo, who in the 19th century predicted that all European nations “without losing [their] distinguishing features and splendid distinctiveness [will] merge inseparably into a high-level society and form a European brotherhood.” The common European home, Gorbachev explained, would combine four elements: collective security based on the doctrine of restraint rather than deterrence, full economic integration, environmental protection, and the humanitarian dimension—specifically, respect for human rights in every country. The entire edifice would be based on the new European identity rooted in universal human values and the rule of law: “what we have in mind is a restructuring of the international order in Europe that would put European common values in the forefront and make it possible to replace the traditional balance of forces with a balance of interests.”

Ambassador Yurii Kashlev, who was head of the Soviet delegation in Vienna, later explicitly tied Gorbachev’s proposal to hold a summit of signatories of the original 1975 Helsinki Final Act in Paris in 1990 to the “stormy” events in Eastern Europe in 1989. The summit, with its Charter on Europe from Vancouver to Vladivostok, would also be the culmination of Gorbachev’s hope for integration on the model of the common European home. As events in the socialist camp were reaching their climax two weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Gorbachev spoke approvingly about the changes with President of Finland Mauno Koivisto, emphasizing non-interference and proposing that representatives of the 35 states “get together and see what horizons of the European security and cooperation process are opening up now and what the possibilities of building the common European home are.”

In a conversation with Zbigniew Brzezinski later that month, Yakovlev projected that “European countries will have a common parliament, common affairs and trade relations; the borders will be open,” and he listed these as “components of the policies directed at building a Common European Home.”

Those policies were Gorbachev’s priority for Europe, subsuming the revolutions in the USSR’s “backyard” that were more evident at the time. In his conversation with Mitterrand in Kiev in December 1989, he outlined his main concerns in the following way: “First and foremost” among the priorities “should be European integration, the evolution of Eastern Europe and the all-European

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63 Document No. 73, Address by Mikhail Gorbachev to the Council of Europe, July 6, 1989.
64 Kashlev, Helsinskii protsess, 182.
65 Document No. 95, Mikhail Gorbachev and Mauno Koivisto Conversation, October 25, 1989.
[security] process, and the establishment of a peaceful order in Europe.” Virtually all discussions of the socialist community in the Politburo placed the issue within the framework of the pan-European process. The emphasis on Europe also diminished the priority of the Warsaw Pact partners as such, which later came to be seen as no more than a vehicle for achieving the main goal. Sharing Gorbachev’s thinking on Eastern Europe completely, Chernyaev believed that political integration of the Soviet Union into the family of civilized European nations was Gorbachev’s dream and intention at the time, thus Eastern Europe was a sideshow, to which he had to turn again and again reluctantly.

The idea that a common European home could be built on the basis of a mutual, gradual dissolution of both military-political blocs was quite persistent within the circle of Gorbachev’s advisers and supporters, although it was not universally accepted within the Soviet establishment. Geogy Shakhnazarov was the strongest proponent of the idea of disbanding the alliances. He mentioned it repeatedly in his communications with Gorbachev, and prepared a long and detailed memorandum on the issue on October 14, 1989. The memo showed how Moscow’s acceptance of the revolutions in Eastern Europe and the withdrawal of Soviet troops would logically lead to the ultimate goal of dissolving the blocs and strengthening the CSCE structures as the main framework of European security. The memo proposed to “put the process of relaxation of the military confrontation, which has already begun, onto a planned basis, and thus to envision the liquidation of the WTO and NATO by the end of the 20th century. Within the framework of this process, we should define a number of interim stages, the most important of which should be the elimination of the military organizations of the two blocs by 1995.”

In this context, any use of force in Eastern Europe was seen as counterproductive. Rather than mourning the “loss” of a security zone, Soviet reformers closest to Gorbachev actually welcomed the transformation, as did Chernyaev in October 1989: “the total dismantling of socialism as a world phenomenon has been taking place […] Perhaps it is inevitable and good. For this is a reunification of mankind on the basis of common sense.”

1989: EASTERN EUROPE AND THE SOVIET DOMESTIC CONTEXT

By early 1989, Eastern Europe was becoming international issue number one. The turmoil underway there was already being felt throughout Europe and in the United States. While the incoming George Bush administration was reassessing U.S.–Soviet policy in January 1989, Henry Kissinger, who was in Moscow

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67 Document No. 114, Mikhail Gorbachev and François Mitterrand Conversation, December 6, 1989.
68 Author’s interview with Anatoly Chernyaev, July 6, 2007.
69 Document No. 93, Memorandum from Georgy Shakhnazarov to Mikhail Gorbachev, October 14, 1989.
70 Document No. 87, Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, October 5, 1989.
for a meeting of the Trilateral Commission, tried to reprise his role as statesman and negotiate an understanding with Gorbachev on Eastern Europe, somewhat along the lines of the Yalta accords of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. Kissinger met with Yakovlev first and then with Gorbachev, to whom he brought a letter of introduction from the president-elect. It is apparent from both conversations that the former secretary of state was primarily concerned about the unfolding processes in the socialist camp: “the countries of Eastern Europe are now entering a [stage of] special evolution. As a result, after a period of time Europe could become explosive once again.” Kissing was trying to carve a niche for himself in the new administration as an architect of post-Cold War Europe reminiscent of his role under President Richard Nixon, when he, Dobrynin and Brezhnev achieved a remarkable understanding on major issues of international politics within the secretive setting of the “back channel.” His vision of postwar Europe—a gradual evolution overseen from above by a U.S.–Soviet condominium—must have appealed to Gorbachev. He was also concerned about the potential of rising German power and chauvinism outside NATO, and tried to impress the Soviet leader with that specter: the growth of nationalism in Germany, he warned, “will hurt us Americans in the next five years, but in 50 years it will hurt you.” Gorbachev mentioned Kissinger’s proposal to the Politburo on January 21: “Kisa hinted at the idea of a USSR–USA condominium over Europe. He was hinting that Japan, Germany, Spain and South Korea were on the rise, and so, let us make an agreement so that the ‘Europeans do not misbehave.’” However, the idea did not find support within the incoming U.S. administration and was never raised officially again.

For the next several months, the Bush administration continued to review its Soviet policy. Three of the president’s most senior aides—National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, career CIA official Robert Gates who was deputy national security adviser at the time, and Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney—shared a hard-line view of the USSR. In their judgment, the Cold War was not over, Gorbachev had not passed all the tests required to prove that his reforms were serious, and even the U.N. speech was just a propaganda exercise. For this group, U.S. policy in Europe was seen through the prism of competition with Gorbachev, and aimed at preventing him from upstaging the new president.73

Because the Soviet leadership perceived the need to move very fast on arms control—specifically, to conclude the START treaty, which would require a 50 percent reduction in strategic offensive armaments—Bush’s pause and seeming indecisiveness in the first months of 1989 were a source of huge frustration for Gorbachev and even rising suspicion that the United States was trying to undermine perestroika.74 However, one result of this lack of progress in U.S.–Soviet

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73 Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 41–44.
74 Grachev, Gorbachev’s Gamble, 205–207.
relations was that it made the European process even more central to Gorbachev’s project.

Nineteen-eighty-nine was supposed to be the year Gorbachev achieved a breakthrough in arms control, but it was also projected to be the year of Europe. After the U.N. speech, according to Chernyaev, Gorbachev’s next priority was to “sort out what to do with our socialist friends.” In the fall of 1988, the Soviet leader held a series of meetings with his East European counterparts, culminating in a Politburo session devoted to the discussion of developments in the socialist camp. During a meeting with Józef Czyrek, secretary of the Polish Central Committee, former foreign minister and an especially trusted envoy of Jaruzelski, Gorbachev not only gave a green light but actually encouraged the process of Roundtable negotiations in Poland. Academic institutes, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Department of the Central Committee were instructed to present reports with recommendations for a Soviet strategy for Eastern Europe, which they prepared by February 1989, and Vadim Zagladin, a top West European expert in the International Department was tasked to prepare a groundbreaking speech on Europe, modeled on the U.N. address, for Gorbachev to deliver that summer in Strasbourg.

Gorbachev and his allies in the Soviet leadership knew well that the use of force in Eastern Europe was not an option, but they also understood that some ambiguity in this respect remained among East Europeans. To preserve such ambiguity was in fact one of the recommendations of the Bogomolov Institute memo. At the Politburo session on January 21 Gorbachev himself remarked on East European doubts about the extent of a possible Soviet response to unrest in the bloc. “The peoples of those countries will ask: what about the CPSU, what kind of leash will it use to hold our countries back? They simply do not know that if they pull this leash harder, it will break.” In March, just two days before the fateful Congress of People’s Deputies elections, Gorbachev hinted at the boundaries of change to Hungarian party leader Károly Grósz: “the limit, however, is the safekeeping of socialism and assurance of stability.” And yet, earlier in the same month he tacitly allowed the Hungarians to open their borders when Prime Minister Miklós Németh informed him of the decision to “completely remove the electronic and technological defenses from the Western and Southern borders of Hungary.” The Soviet leader did not disagree with Németh’s characterization that the barrier had “outlived” its value.

Reading Soviet Politburo discussions from most of 1989, one might be struck by a seeming paradox: it is almost as if Eastern Europe simply did not exist for

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75 Chernyaev, Shest let, 267.
76 Document No. 28, Mikhail Gorbachev and Józef Czyrek Conversation, September 23, 1988.
most of the year. Events taking place there occupy only a very small part of the dialogue. The issues that dominated the leadership’s agenda included the first democratic elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies, ethnic conflicts such as in Nagorno-Karabakh, the April 1989 events in Tbilisi, economic reforms (especially in the agricultural sector), the miners’ strikes, Baltic independence, troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Yeltsin’s growing challenge to Gorbachev.

THE ECONOMY

Clearly, the overriding reason for the virtual “disappearance” of foreign policy issues from the Politburo discussions was that 1989 was the year when domestic economic problems came to the fore of both the leadership’s agenda and society’s concerns. Falling oil prices and the sharp drop in the “drunken” share of state revenues (as a result of the anti-alcohol campaign) undermined an already stagnated Soviet economy. This, combined with the expansion of glasnost, exacerbated the sensation of impending crisis. According to Vadim Medvedev: “The program of economic reforms of 1987 was in effect buried; people recalled it less and less. The main issue was that control over the money supply, over the monetary income of the population, was lost, and that gave a major push to the unwinding of an inflationary spiral, which became more difficult to stop day by day.”

The year began with intense preparations for the agricultural Plenum of the Central Committee, which took place in mid-March. Agricultural reform was another complex aspect of the economic challenge. Indeed, in some ways it was the hardest part of Gorbachev’s agenda to press because of the prevalence of deeply traditional, conservative attitudes going back to the years of Stalin’s collectivization. Aggravating the purely economic dimension of the problem was the fact that the CC Secretary for Agriculture was Yegor Ligachev—a powerful opponent of Gorbachev in the Politburo, who was intent on consolidating conservative opposition to the reforms. On March 2, 1989, Gorbachev spent his birthday, from morning to late evening, in discussions of “the most acute problems of the agrarian sector.” Taking up agricultural reform meant confronting the truth about collectivization and early Stalinism, but the general secretary was willing to do that. According to Shakhnazarov, Gorbachev presented a “passionate speech” in favor of radical reform in agriculture, including allowing private rentals of plots of land, family teams, individual agricultural production—all of which Gorbachev still termed “returning to Lenin’s respectful approach to the peasants.”

As mentioned above, energy also contributed directly to the crisis. According to Yegor Gaidar, at the time a radical economist and later prime minister in the

81 Nationalist demonstrations in the capital demanding independence for Georgia and the annulment of Abkhazian autonomy took place early in the month, culminating in their harsh suppression by the authorities on April 9.
82 Medvedev, V Komande Gorbacheva, 103.
83 Politburo session March 2, 1989, Gorbachev Foundation Archive, Fond 2, Opis 1.
first Yeltsin government, the economy began to deteriorate very quickly starting at the end of 1988, and the critical factor was the drop in oil production due to crumbling infrastructure. Oil is an often overlooked chapter in the story of the end of the Cold War. Petroleum prices had already started to decline in 1986, but neither Soviet economists nor policy-makers were prepared for the effect it would have on the economy. Because central planning gave the illusion that the government could always control the economy by “emission” (printing as many rubles as it needed), the effect on real people was delayed, but then the cumulative blow turned out to be all the harder and more confusing when it came. From Politburo records it seems as though very few senior officials actually understood the depth of the economic crisis in the country. One person who sounded the alarm early and often, but was rarely heard, was Prime Minister Ryzhkov.

A critical Politburo session that finally shook the party leadership into reality and prompted them to find ways to deal with the crisis took place on February 16, 1989. Ryzhkov opened the meeting with a report on the state of the economy: “In three years of perestroika, government spending has exceeded budget revenues by 133 billion rubles. Losses due to the decline in oil prices constitute 40 billion rubles, and losses due to cuts in sales of vodka have reached 34 billion rubles. [...] In three years of perestroika, the industrial surplus has increased by 10 billion rubles. But in agriculture, we have lost 15 billion rubles. Chernobyl took away 8 billion rubles. In three years, the emission has amounted to 21 billion rubles. In 1988 alone the emission reached 11 billion, more that in any year since the war.”

As a result, over 40 billion rubles in currency not covered by consumer goods accumulated in the country producing an acute sense of deficits and shortages among the population. Only 11 percent of consumer goods (out of 989 items on the list at the time) were available in the Soviet Union without shortages by the end of 1989. Popular discontent was brewing and assuming new, more assertive forms of expression. During Gorbachev’s meetings with workers, he was subjected to open criticism. March 1989 erupted with the first miners’ strikes on the eve of the elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies. Throughout the year, the Central Committee received angry letters from workers complaining about acute shortages of food and basic consumer goods.

For Gorbachev and his circle, the answer more and more was seen in urgently expanding cooperation with industrial enterprises in the West, establishing and deepening direct relations between enterprises in the USSR and Eastern Europe, and especially in attracting Western investment and obtaining credits, which could be used to purchase consumer goods to redress shortages and to drain the excessive mass of money accumulated by the population.

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84 Politburo session February 16, 1989, Gorbachev Foundation Archive, Fond 2, Opis 1.
85 Gaidar, Gibel’ imperii, 248.
Nineteen-eighty-nine was also the year of the first democratic elections to the new Soviet legislature, the Congress of People’s Deputies. The long-debated decision to hold a contested ballot was made at the 19th Party Conference in the summer of 1988. By the agreed-upon procedure, two-thirds of the deputies were to be elected from territorial constituencies, and one-third from public organizations; 100 of the latter seats were to be allocated to the Communist Party (Gorbachev personally selected many of the candidates for the party list from his supporters). The coming vote and the process of selecting and nominating deputies were at the center of Politburo discussions through the end of March. Gorbachev’s expectation was that with the new elections he would be able to get rid of the conservative majority in the Supreme Soviet and attract new reformers to his coalition, which would allow him to play off the more progressive parliament against the party bureaucracy, which by 1989 was becoming more and more intransigent.

Although Gorbachev and his supporters anticipated losses among the communists, the results came as a shock. Ironically, 85 percent of elected deputies were members of the CPSU, but not those who occupied positions of power and who expected to win. The Moscow and Leningrad party organizations suffered the heaviest losses—all top leaders and party bureaucrats were voted out even where they ran unopposed. The same was true for the nomenklatura throughout the country: 20 percent of party secretaries were defeated. On March 28, the Politburo held a long session devoted to the election results, which generated some extensive soul-searching by the Soviet leadership. Anatoly Lukyanov blamed the defeats on the economic crisis and the destructive influence of “informal” organizations like the human rights society Memorial. Yegor Ligachev pointed to the mass media and the way they had begun to cover the negative aspects of party history. He called on his colleagues to be cautious and pointed out that “in Czechoslovakia and in Hungary (1956 and 1968) everything began with the mass media.”

The results were not easy for Gorbachev to swallow. Even though the elections did clear out many conservatives from the Supreme Soviet, they gave an overwhelming victory to his main rival, Boris Yeltsin, who ran for the Moscow at-large seat, and brought many radicals to the legislature, such as prominent human rights activist and nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov. Gorbachev now had a glimpse of the future. Concluding the session, he said “The Congress begins on May 25. Yeltsin says that he is already looking at which deputies he can include in his group.” Indeed, the Congress began its work with an investigation of Gorbachev’s involvement in the tragic events in Tbilisi on April 9.

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86 Shakhnazarov, Tsena svobody, 74.
Another burning issue for the Soviet leadership in 1989 which carried direct implications for policy toward Eastern Europe was the growing discontent in the union republics and the movements for independence, which started in the Baltics and by the summer had also hit Georgia and Ukraine. The year began with Politburo discussions of the nationalist rallies in the Baltics and their demands for economic self-sufficiency. On January 30, the Politburo adopted a resolution on “extremist and anti-Soviet groups and organizations in the Baltics,” and after rallies took place on February 15 and 16 in Lithuania demanding independence, the Politburo Commission on the Baltics held a special session on February 18. Gorbachev believed in persuasion and leverage. He was willing to allow the Baltics economic self-sufficiency as of January 1, 1990, but was convinced that even local nationalist leaders would realize that the region would not be able to survive economically without being integrated into the USSR.

The issue of nationalism, especially with respect to the Baltic republics, was a blind spot for Gorbachev and most members of the Politburo, having themselves grown up believing Soviet propaganda about the harmonious relations among nationalities in the USSR. In a poignant passage in his diary in December 1988, Chernyaev describes a conversation with his boss: “Gorbachev asked me […] is it really true that the Baltic people really want to secede? I told him: I believe they do […] And he told me (does he mock me or seriously think so?): they will perish when they cut themselves off from the rest of the Union.” To this, Chernyaev could only respond by writing in his diary: “Self-delusion and naïveté.”88 Ironically, on November 9, as the Berlin Wall was about to fall, the Soviet Politburo was in the midst of deliberations over Baltic secession. In a comment at the session verging on panic, Ryzhkov prophetically warned of possible secessionist movements in Russia and Ukraine, concluding that “it smells of total collapse.”89

Practically every month in 1989 brought more fires to put out in the republics. After the violence in Sumgait in 1988, Nagorno-Karabakh was now ruled directly from Moscow through a special envoy. In May and June, the Fergana Valley erupted in pogroms against the Meskhetian Turks whom Stalin had deported there from the Crimea. But the most politically damaging event for Gorbachev and his leadership was the suppression of the rallies in Tbilisi. On the night of April 8/9, first secretary of Georgia Jumber Patiashvili ordered troops to forcefully disperse the demonstrators, resulting in 19 dead and hundreds wounded. Gorbachev did not condemn the use of force decisively, which led to accusations of his complicity and dealt a serious blow to his reputation. At the same time, it was a lesson in acceptable methods. On May 11, during a Politburo discussion of the situation in

By September 1989, the wave of nationalism had rocked Ukraine with the first Congress of the Ukrainian nationalist movement Rukh pronouncing independence as its ultimate goal and with mass rallies of Ukrainian Catholics. First Secretary Vladimir Shcherbitsky resigned, and the second most populous republic of the Soviet Union was now voicing its grievances against the central government. Suddenly, the issue of the preservation of the Soviet Union as a federal entity assumed overriding priority, compared to which the cohesion of the external empire took a back seat. Gorbachev was faced with a dilemma—he could not keep the internal empire together without using force, but the use of force would doom his entire project both domestically and internationally. His only hope in resolving the nationalities problems lay in integrating his country into Europe as rapidly as possible and attracting foreign credits and investments along the way.

As follows from the above discussion, domestic political concerns, especially the looming threat of the dissolution of the USSR, lowered the priority of Eastern Europe in the thinking of the Soviet leadership and affected their calculations about the expediency of the use of force in the region. Meanwhile, tremors within the socialist commonwealth continued to build and the East Europeans readily availed themselves of the unique window for action afforded by Moscow’s internal distractions and Washington’s prolonged pause.

THE POLISH ELECTIONS AND THE LOSS OF EMPIRE.

When in June, as a result of the first free elections in Poland since the advent of communist rule, Solidarity took 99 out of 100 seats in the Senate and all 161 contested seats in the Sejm, it plunged the Polish party into the same soul-searching as the CPSU had gone through in late March–April, and the shock reverberated through the socialist system. One would have expected a reaction from the Soviet Politburo, but almost nothing was heard from Moscow. In fact, as seen from the documents, Gorbachev expressed only support for the reforms and elections in Poland. Moreover, later in the summer the Soviet leader gave his support to the coalition government in a telephone call with Rakowski—even though that meant Poland might make the momentous decision to leave the Warsaw Pact. Such a move, which now became imaginable, according to Gorbachev’s press secretary, Andrei Grachev, would have had a major psychological as well as strategic effect on the socialist camp. As it was, Grachev wrote, “[t]he failure of the Polish communists represented a spectacular setback for the East European ‘Gorbachevists’ [and] a very tough first test for the principles of ‘the new political thinking.’”

91 Grachev, Gorbachev’s Gamble, 203.
And yet, coercion was not seen as an option, plus Gorbachev and his Polish allies, Jaruzelski and Mieczysław Rakowski, had been discussing similar possibilities since the fall of 1988, and especially during Jaruzelski’s visit to Moscow in April 1989. The question was not whether the Soviet Union should try to reverse the Polish progress, it was how to preserve the influence of the reform communists in the new government, and to keep Poland in the Warsaw Pact.

Even though the elections in Poland dealt a blow to Gorbachev’s hopes for reform communism throughout Eastern Europe, from his perspective, in the larger scheme of things, events were still under control. Coalition governments, even those led by non-communists, were acceptable as long as they were within the “all-European” framework and the overall trajectory was toward the common European home. This view is apparent in each of Gorbachev’s conversations with Western leaders, in which he appeals to them to avoid an “uncontrolled course of events” in Eastern Europe, and calls for stability and a gradual transformation. He raises these concerns with Thatcher in April, Secretary of State James Baker in May, Kohl and West German President Richard von Weizsäcker in June, Mitterand in July and Thatcher again in September. Every time the need for stability in Eastern Europe is discussed, it is tied to progress on the common European home.

A similar Soviet reaction followed the reburial of Imre Nagy and the start of the Hungarian Roundtable negotiations on June 13. Gorbachev was privately concerned but outwardly supportive and encouraging of reform as long as it remained peaceful. On the same day as the Roundtable began, Gorbachev was in Bonn discussing with Kohl the situation in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland and Hungary. In those conversations one sees two allies and friends discussing a plan of joint action. This is how Kohl described Gorbachev’s positions with respect to the East European countries, according to an American transcript of his telephone call to Bush immediately after Gorbachev departed West Germany: “The Chancellor emphasized Gorbachev’s very close personal relationship with General Jaruzelski and their common approach toward developments in Poland. No such personal relationship exists with any one Hungarian leader, the Chancellor added, but Gorbachev also supports Hungary’s reform efforts. By contrast, there is an enormous distance between Moscow and Bucharest, and also East Berlin.”

In another conversation during the same visit, on June 14, Kohl and Gorbachev discussed East Germany, and the level of communication and shared understanding is simply astonishing. Here is Kohl complaining to Gorbachev about Honecker and his wife: “Now a couple of words about our mutual friends. I will tell you directly that Erich Honecker concerns me a great deal. His wife has just made a statement, in which she called on the GDR youth to take up arms and, if necessary, defend the achievements of socialism from external enemies. It is clear that she implied that the socialist countries which implement reforms,

stimulate democratic processes, and follow their own original road are the enemies. Primarily, she had Poland and Hungary in mind.\(^93\)

The most symbolic event for the socialist bloc in 1989 took place in July. Right after his Strasbourg address, Gorbachev traveled to Bucharest for a PCC meeting. The speeches and conversations there have a surreal character as can be seen from available documents. The meeting was essentially a wake for the Warsaw Pact, taking place as two of its members negotiated the possibility of forming non-communist coalition governments, and after the paramount leader has just proclaimed the supremacy of common human and democratic values over class interests, and signaled to the allies that if their own populations vote them out or rise against them, Soviet “fraternal aid” would not be coming to the rescue. And yet, as Andrei Grachev confirms in his memoir, “behind the scene Ceaușescu and Honecker tried to raise the ‘Polish question,’ hoping to persuade their colleagues of the imperative need to render ‘fraternal aid’ to Poland.”\(^94\)

In this setting, the question arises—how did the East European leadership see developments in the region in the summer and fall of 1989, and how did they expect Gorbachev to react to them? From the evidence, it seems clear that the top ranks of the socialist states by the summer must have known that they could no longer count on Soviet protection against their own populations, that the solutions of 1956 and 1968 were no longer available to them. In remarks to the HSWP Central Committee as early as February 21, 1989, Foreign Minister Gyula Horn stated: “Today there is no question at all of an intervention within the Warsaw Pact—we have long surpassed the Brezhnev Doctrine.”\(^95\) This was even more obvious to Western leaders after Gorbachev’s U.N. address, the Strasbourg speech, and numerous conversations the Soviet leader had with them in 1989. So the threat of force was not on the agenda in 1989.

However, the question becomes even more interesting: if the socialist leadership knew there would be no use of force by the Kremlin, would it not have been in their interest to behave as if such a threat existed in hopes of restraining their own domestic opposition? This was a strategy the Soviet and Polish authorities used during the Solidarity crisis, and the communist regimes could replicate their approach in 1989. Certainly the opposition, and especially the dissidents on the streets who were not engaged in direct interactions with Soviet reformers, had only the experience of previous attempts at reform to rely on, and those ended tragically in most cases. Thus, inhibited by their historical memory in which two factors held prevalence—the assumed strategic value of Eastern Europe for the USSR and the history of brutal suppression of reform movements—the opposition behaved very cautiously, moving tentatively so as not to provoke Moscow, and pledging allegiance to the Warsaw Pact along the way—as

\(^93\) Document No. 67, Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl Conversation, June 14, 1989.

\(^94\) Grachev, *Gorbachev's Gamble*, 205.

\(^95\) Békés, “Back to Europe,” 255.
they did repeatedly during the Polish and the Hungarian Roundtable discussions. This self-restraint, induced in part by the “floating” of the Brezhnev doctrine, resulted probably in the best possible course of events for the East Europeans—a “velvet,” gradual and non-violent transformation that seemed to develop precisely along the lines envisioned by Gorbachev and his reformers. As long as there was no explicit, immediate threat of a dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and no major violence in the region, the Kremlin accepted very deep changes in the allied regimes that essentially transformed them into social democracies along the Scandinavian model.

THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL AND THE GERMAN UNIFICATION.

A key part of the end of the Cold War in Europe was the fast unification of Germany, which followed the fall of the Wall in Berlin on the night of November 9, 1989. The most vivid symbol of the division of Europe was taken apart by unarmed people without direction from either of the superpowers or even from their own leaders—becoming the symbol of the peaceful transformation of the European continent and international politics. The developments on the ground, the mood of the masses were far ahead of the imagination of the leaders, but to their credit, the Soviets stuck by the principles they proclaimed, the Americans kept engaged but cautious, and the West Germans moved ahead deliberately while reassuring the Soviets; thus by the fall of 1990 Germany was reunified in NATO.

For Gorbachev and the Soviet leadership, the German unification was an issue that would come up at some point in the future, when the process of European integration, the building of the common European home would be well under way. Germany was the most important trade partner for the Soviet Union in the capitalist world, and the relationship with Kohl was becoming especially important by 1989 in light of the Soviet economic troubles, yet Gorbachev kept to his vague line “history will decide” on the most crucial issue in that relationship. Gorbachev was not opposed to German unification per se, but envisioned it as the culmination of a gradual process, including demilitarization, dissolution of the blocs, Soviet integration into Europe, Soviet trade benefits, and a new, far-reaching environmental regime.

96 Ibid., 242.
97 The Gorbachev Foundation published a comprehensive collection of Russian documents on German unification, Aleksandr Galkin and Anatoly Chernyaev, Mikhail Gorbachev i germanskii vopros, (Moscow: Ves’ Mir, 2006).
99 Gorbachev repeated variations of this line practically every time the issue of German unification came up, starting with his meeting with West German President Weizsäcker in July 1987, during his visit to Bonn in June 1989, and during the Malta summit with President Bush (see Document No. 110).
The Soviet leader’s visit to Bonn in June 1989 brought a real breakthrough in Soviet–West German relations, and established Helmut Kohl as Gorbachev’s close partner, especially at the time when the Bush administration was still stuck in its “pause” undermining the trust that had been built in U.S.–Soviet relations under Reagan. This new closeness between Gorbachev and Kohl went so far as to include a critical discussion of East German leader Erich Honecker, whom at that time Gorbachev saw as a major obstacle to reform in his country. During the meetings, Kohl reassured Gorbachev that he would not do anything to destabilize the situation in the GDR and that economic cooperation between the two countries would expand. Nothing was said in the negotiations specifically about German unification, but the Bonn Declaration, which the leaders signed, laid out their shared vision of the all-European process which corresponded with Gorbachev’s goal of the common European home.

A major factor in Gorbachev’s thinking about the German issue was his belief, based on his numerous conversations with Western leaders, that nobody in Europe wanted a united Germany, and that the historical memory of a strong militaristic Germany was still very much alive on the continent. Margaret Thatcher was quite outspoken in her opposition to unification. When she stopped in Moscow on the way back from Tokyo, on September 23, 1989, she asked that notes not be taken during a confidential part of the conversation, where she said in the strongest terms that Western Europe was not interested in unification of Germany even if publicly the NATO communiqué stated a different position. Moreover, the British Prime Minister promised that Britain would “not interfere and spur the decommunization of Eastern Europe. I can tell you that this is also the position of the U.S. President. He sent a telegram to me in Tokyo in which he asked me to tell you that the United States would not undertake anything that could threaten the security interests of the Soviet Union, or that could be perceived by the Soviet society as a threat. I am fulfilling his request.” British notes of the conversation confirm that Thatcher’s intention was to make Western opposition to the unification clear to Gorbachev.

Because of Britain’s special relationship with the U.S., and because of the role Thatcher played in the relationship with the previous administration, Gorbachev was inclined to hear the above comment as evidence that the U.S. position on Germany was similar to the British. He had not met the U.S. President yet, but nothing in U.S.–Soviet communications at the time pointed to any substantive difference—Bush was emphasizing his prudence and intention not to destabilize Eastern Europe either. In fact, even in Malta, the U.S. president did not object to Gorbachev’s statements about the long period it would take for Germany to

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100 Document No. 67, Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl Conversation, June 14, 1989.
102 Document No. 85, Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher Conversation, September 23, 1989.
103 Salmon, Hamilton, and Twigge, German Unification, 79.
become united. In one more seeming confirmation of the U.S. position against rapid unification, Zbigniew Brzezinski during his visit to Moscow in late October 1989 expressed his preference for the continuation of the existence of the two blocs: “[b]oth blocs should not be disbanded right now. I do not know what will happen if the GDR ceases to exist. There will be one Germany, united and strong. This does not correspond to either your or our interests.”

Mitterrand’s position was probably closest to Gorbachev’s own. He saw German unification as part of the pan-European process, which would take many years and possibly include the French model—membership in the political but not military structures of NATO. What mattered was that the European process should come first, and then German unification; and that European countries, France especially, should be included in all discussions of the future of Germany. This position was discussed repeatedly between Gorbachev and Mitterrand throughout 1989.

Although the Western politicians were careful in their public statements on unification, the Soviet leadership believed that they only wanted to prevent German unification with Soviet hands. This conviction along with more pressing troubles at home, mainly the unrest in the Baltics, explain Gorbachev’s detached reaction to the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9.

Actually, the first cracks in the Berlin Wall appeared much earlier, as far back as March 3, 1989, when Hungarian reform communist Prime Minister Miklós Németh informed the Soviet leader of the Hungarian decision to “completely remove the electronic and technological defenses from the western and southern borders of Hungary,” and Gorbachev responded only that the Soviet Union was going to make its own borders more open—thus tacitly approving the Hungarian move. After the pan-European picnic on the Austria–Hungary border on August 19 and the final removal of the barbed wire and remaining electronic defenses on the Hungarian border on September 11, a flood of East Germans went through Hungary to Austria and to West Germany, essentially voting their socialist republic out of existence with their feet, as the popular saying went.

In that tense atmosphere, Gorbachev decided reluctantly to accept Honecker’s invitation to visit East Germany for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the GDR. His intention was to meet face-to-face with the entire East German leadership and to encourage them in effect to remove their boss. In conversations with the SED Politburo, Gorbachev dispensed with his usual caution over non-interference in domestic affairs and told the East Germans that “life pun-

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105 Document Nos. 71, 72, 74 and 104, Grachev, Gorbachev’s Gamble, 151.
106 Document No. 89, Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, October 9, 1989.
107 Document Nos. 79, 80, 81.
ishes those who come late,” hinting at the need to invigorate their reforms. Ten
days later, Erich Honecker was sent into retirement, and replaced by Egon Krenz.
Meanwhile, the demonstrations in Leipzig that started at the end of September
culminated in a massive peaceful rally of about 70,000 marching around the his-
toric center of the city. At that point the GDR leadership, knowing that Soviet
troops were going to be of no help to them, made a seminal decision not to use
the Tiananmen model of forcibly putting down the demonstrators. The process
leading to the fall of the Wall thus became unstoppable.

As significant as the collapse of the Berlin Wall appears in retrospect, it was
not seen as such by the Kremlin at the time. On the actual day the Wall was
breached, the Soviet Politburo did not even raise the issue of developments in
Germany: it was busy discussing the situation in the Baltics and the economic
crisis in the Soviet Union. When the news reached Moscow, the Foreign Min-
istry confirmed that the border regime was an internal German affair, and the
leadership did not even call a special session of the Politburo. Instead, Gorbachev
discussed the events in Berlin over the telephone with his most important part-
ners at the time—Chancellor Kohl and President Mitterrand. These conversa-
tions, especially the one with Kohl, reassured the Soviet leader that all their un-
derstandings regarding Eastern Europe were still in force and that West Germany
would act very carefully not to destabilize the situation in the GDR. What mat-
tered for Gorbachev was that his main priority—the European process—was still
on track, and within that process the fall of the Wall appeared as a natural devel-
opment. Chernyaev, however, sensed that the Wall’s dismantling was more than
just a symbol. He wrote in his diary, “[t]he Berlin Wall has fallen. An entire era
in the history of the “socialist system” has come to an end.”

However, the vision of German unification as part of an all-European pro-
cess, even as a development capable of speeding up European integration, was
not given enough time to materialize. Under the pressure of the German events,
Gorbachev at the end of November proposed that the CSCE summit be held ear-
lier—in November 1990 in Paris. This proposal gives one a glimpse into Gor-
bachev’s view of the timeline for possible German unification: a new European
treaty was to come first and then, within the new Europe, Germany would be
allowed to unify in a form that would not undermine the process of gradually
dissolving the military blocs envisioned by the Soviet reformers. Looking at the
situation in November 1989, there is enough evidence to argue that this view of
German unification (perhaps without the dissolution of the blocs) was shared in
all the main West European capitals, but not in Bonn.

108 Document No. 88, Mikhail Gorbachev Conversation with Members of the CC SED Polit-
buro, October 7, 1989.
110 Document Nos. 103, 104.
In November 1989, Kohl was probably the only politician in Europe who could feel the real pulse of events on the ground and the growing pressure for unification in East Germany. He decided to take the initiative and shape the process deliberately rather than wait for the European powers to define the conditions. However, in an ironic turn of events, his most decisive move was itself prompted by a remarkable and audacious independent overture by a senior Soviet official. Valentin Falin, the head of the CC International Department, who at the time was arguing for a German confederation, was sidelined and could not find a way to get through to Gorbachev with his ideas. As probably the most experienced Germanist among the Soviet leadership (he had served as ambassador to West Germany from 1971–1978), watching the events develop more and more rapidly, he decided that the best way to get Gorbachev’s attention to his ideas was through Chancellor Kohl. He drafted two position papers, an official one, cleared with Chernyaev, that mostly reaffirmed the pledges made by Kohl to Gorbachev and stated that if they were kept, then “everything becomes possible;” and an unofficial one, which declared that the idea of confederation was something the Soviets were already discussing and were prepared to accept in principle. Nikolay Portugalov, who worked for Falin on the International Department staff, met with Kohl’s national security adviser, Horst Teltschik, on November 21 and presented both positions to him. Teltschik’s reaction was that if the Soviets were already discussing German unification and confederation was acceptable to them, it was time for the West Germans themselves to seize the initiative and propose the idea. That was the essence of the report he presented to Kohl on the Portugalov mission, and it formed part of the basis for Teltschik’s draft of the 10-point speech. Thus an adventurous Soviet initiative became a major push toward German unification, culminating in Kohl’s presentation of his 10-point program to the Bundestag on November 28, which instantly made German unification the number one issue in Europe. However, Falin’s gambit ultimately backfired because Gorbachev himself was not aware of it, and because at that time, contrary to Portugalov’s assurances to Teltschik, he had not yet accepted the idea of confederation. To Gorbachev, then, the German initiative came across as an unexpected and unwarranted acceleration of the process.

It took the Soviet leadership some time to realize what the 10 points meant. In fact, their real meaning did not become clear until after the Malta summit and especially after the NATO summit in Brussels. Gorbachev, ironically, was particularly alarmed by the idea of confederation and by the fact that Bush gave the program his full support at Brussels. The Soviet leader’s reaction to Kohl’s speech was so emotional that it blinded him to the substance of the program, which

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112 Gorbachev, *Gorbachev’s Gamble*, 146–147. The story of the Portugalov mission is confirmed in Kusters and Hofmann, *Deutsche Einheit*, 616; author’s conversations with Teltschik and Gorbachev on October 2, 2009; Teltschik’s remarks at the conference “Revolutions of 1989” in Vienna, Austria, October 1, 2009, organized by the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of European and International Affairs.
essentially reflected real Soviet objectives at the time: it did not present a specific timetable for unification, mentioned the all-European process, and implicitly guaranteed the GDR’s existence as a state for at least several years, which meant that the issue of Soviet troops on its soil would not have to be raised immediately.

In one respect, the Soviet leader had more grounds to object. In his conversation on December 5 with West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Gorbachev accused Bonn of having “prepared a funeral for the European process” by rushing the idea of confederation and dictating conditions to East Germany. While the 10-point program objectively did not contain a timetable for unification, it did alter the priorities, placing German unification above the building of the common European home. This meaning of the 10 points did not go unnoticed in other corners of Western Europe. Mitterrand raised this issue with concern in his conversation with Gorbachev on December 6: “We should not change the order of the processes. First and foremost among them should be European integration, the evolution of Eastern Europe, and the all-European process, the creation of a peaceful order in Europe .... Kohl’s speech, his 10 points, has turned everything upside down.” From this time on, the idea of a common European home lost considerable ground in Europe.

After the Western allies accepted the 10-point program at the Brussels summit, the Soviet leadership finally focused on unification. At the end of January, Gorbachev accepted the idea of confederation but by that time even the Central Committee experts understood that in reality they could not rely on the SED any longer and that “all the state structures in the GDR have fallen apart.” The small group that Gorbachev convened to discuss the German issue agreed on the strategy of accepting confederation as a method simply to gain more time since, as Kryuchkov put it, “we need to start getting our people used to the idea of German unification.” Also, looming over Gorbachev was the huge domestic problem of withdrawing 300,000 troops, including 100,000 officers with families. Gorbachev was very aware of the significance of Soviet troops leaving Germany—both symbolically in the context of the public memory of World War II and practically in terms of the logistical difficulties and the possible backlash within the army and society as a whole. Still, he ended the meeting by instructing Marshal Akhромеев to “prepare the withdrawal of troops from the GDR.”

After settling on the strategy of buying more time and brooking no NATO membership for Germany, Gorbachev agreed to meet with Baker and then Kohl (the Germans had been asking for this meeting for almost two months). In the session with Baker on February 9, 1990, Gorbachev discussed various forms of German

113 Document No. 113, Mikhail Gorbachev and Hans Dietrich Genscher Conversation, December 5, 1989.
114 Document No. 114, Mikhail Gorbachev and Francois Mitterrand Conversation, December 6, 1989.
116 Ibid.
unification and association with NATO. Although he could not accept it publicly, he agreed with Baker’s argument that the presence of U.S. troops in Europe was a factor in overall European stability, which implicitly meant accepting the idea of Germany’s eventual membership in the Western alliance. It was during this conversation that Baker offered Gorbachev guarantees (that is the word used in the Russian memorandum of conversation—garantii) that NATO would not “spread an inch eastward,” and the Soviet leader accepted the statement as sufficient on the basis of the trust he felt had been built between him and the U.S. leadership—never asking for a written pledge. Gorbachev’s reasoning could partially be explained by the domestic dilemma he faced: how could he tell the Politburo that he had asked for written guarantees that NATO would not expand to the territories of the Warsaw Pact while the Pact was still in existence? That would have meant he had already accepted the idea that the socialist alliance was on its deathbed. In this conversation, Baker was not trying to mislead Gorbachev in any way; he was merely expressing the official position of the U.S. government at the time, which was fully shared by other Western leaders, talking specifically about the NATO presence on East German soil, but by implication also about any future expansion. However, the Bush administration would change that position very soon—without providing any notification to Gorbachev. Later, those assurances would be overtaken by events and ultimately overlooked by the Clinton administration, an unfortunate chain of circumstances that would lead to a persistent (and ongoing) debate in Russia on why Gorbachev failed to demand the guarantees in writing.

By the end of May 1990, Gorbachev accepted the right of the German people to choose alliances. This position was quite within his earlier pronouncements on freedom of choice, and was a strategically logical move for the Soviet Union because it was better to have a powerful and prosperous Germany as an ally and a friend. This calculation proved to be correct: Germany became the USSR’s most reliable creditor and trade partner and a source of direct aid in difficult moments; in fact, the FRG remains Russia’s main ally in Europe today.

German unification finally was realized before the November 1990 CSCE meeting, which became the epilogue of Gorbachev’s dream of the common European home. With Germany united in NATO, the Warsaw Pact soon lost the last reasons for its existence and was disbanded by its members in 1991. The Soviet Union followed suit soon thereafter. The European home was built but Yeltsin’s new Russia never acquired an apartment in it.

THE QUESTION OF USE OF FORCE AND SOVIET TROOP WITHDRAWAL

Documents and oral testimony collected in this volume show that a rejection of use or threat of force was indeed one of the original ideas of the Gorbachev leadership. However, this issue was a major concern for U.S. policymakers and East

117 Grachev, Gorbachev’s Gamble, 158.
European public through late 1989. One of the most debated questions in the literature on the end of the Cold War has been to what extent was violent suppression by the Soviet Union ever a serious threat in response to instability or rapid reforms in the socialist countries? Related to this: what were the limits of change that the USSR would allow? The answers fall into two categories: how and when the issue of force was settled internally by the Soviet leadership, and how and when the East Europeans learned about it. The latter, of course, is most important for explaining actual developments in the region in 1989. Once the perceived threat of force had disappeared, all constraints were removed and the transformations assumed a revolutionary character culminating in the introduction of new political systems and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact itself.

What we now know is that at no point, regardless of how unexpected or disturbing the news from Eastern Europe, was there any discussion at high levels of the Soviet party or government of using force against the opposition. Even with subsequently published memoirs of Soviet hardliners and Gorbachev’s detractors, no signs of such deliberations have surfaced. Gorbachev himself in his memoirs made it clear that there were no doubts in his mind about the impossibility of using force in Eastern Europe from the day he was elected general secretary (and probably as early as his 1969 visit to Czechoslovakia). According to his own accounts and those provided by Grachev and Chernyaev, as early as the first meetings with socialist heads of state, Gorbachev’s signal to them was “Do not count on our tanks to keep you and your regimes in power.” The earliest explicit documented statement to this effect by the Soviet leader to his own Politburo was made on July 3, 1986, for which he prepared a personal memorandum on June 26. At that meeting, the general secretary emphatically stated that “the methods that were used in Czechoslovakia and Hungary now are no good, they will not work!” The way in which Gorbachev addressed his colleagues suggests that he intended to make a programmatic statement about a new stage in relations with the allies. From then on, it must have been clear to the rest of the leadership that violence was not an option. In the Soviet system, such a strong declaration by the general secretary would not be challenged. A similar statement was made to the socialist leaders during a CMEA session in November 1986 in Moscow.

The emphasis on individual developments within each country and the renunciation of Soviet pressure became especially pronounced in Soviet internal discussions in 1989, as the Kremlin prepared itself for the coming changes in Eastern Europe. On January 21, 1989, after his meetings with the Trilateral Commission and later with Henry Kissinger, Gorbachev talked to the Politburo about the need to think about and prepare for attempts by the socialist countries to join

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118 Grachev, Gorbachev, 294.
120 Archie Brown, The Gorbachev Factor, 249.
the EC. He was surprisingly optimistic about such possibilities, admitting that the East Europeans were not fully aware of Moscow’s flexibility.

Internal analyses of Eastern Europe and policy suggestions from the International Department and the Bogomolov Institute in February 1989 strongly supported the idea that forceful repression would have “unacceptable consequences,” but also suggested that some “vagueness” be retained “as far as our concrete actions are concerned […] so that we do not stimulate anti-socialist forces to try to test the fundamentals of socialism in a given country.”\textsuperscript{121} In a crucial conclusion from the first memorandum, the authors point out that “it is very unlikely that we would be able to employ the methods of 1956 and 1968, both as a matter of principle and because of unacceptable consequences.”\textsuperscript{122} The Bogomolov Institute memorandum discussed above mentions those consequences more specifically and spells out the logic of why coercion would be the least rational decision for Gorbachev to take: “Direct interference with force by the USSR in the development of events on the side of conservative elements who are isolated from the people would absolutely clearly mean an end to \textit{perestroika}, and the loss of the world community’s trust toward us.” At the same time, “it would not be able to prevent the collapse of the socio-economic and socio-political system that exists in these countries.”\textsuperscript{123}

Gorbachev himself repeated the same line widely in internal forums to make sure that all important layers of the Soviet bureaucracy implemented the new policy. One such layer, populated predominantly by conservative party holdovers, consisted of ambassadors to the socialist countries. In a meeting on March 3, 1989, Gorbachev explained to them the policy of non-interference and encouragement for reform, warned them not to be tempted to “reach for the stick and punish someone because of ideological or economic issues,” and raised the issue of Soviet pressure in strong terms: “Do not impose anything on anybody! Every country is very specific. Considering this specificity, we are not playing with them. We reject force in everything, in all our policies.”\textsuperscript{124}

Another reason to remain vague about the limits of reforms might have been in order not to alarm domestic conservatives, the KGB, and especially the military, who felt strongly about “keeping” Eastern Europe, and who, even though they fell short of comprising an organized opposition, did make sure their preferences were known. There are some references to these concerns in the memoirs. According to Shevardnadze, in the fall of 1989 he and Gorbachev “were pressured to follow the scenarios of 1953, 1956 and 1968.” From the available sources it seems that those pressures were mainly indirect—implied in discussions of the possible disastrous outcomes if Eastern Europe were to be “lost”—because so

\textsuperscript{121} Document No. 41, Memorandum of the CC CPSU International Department, February 1989.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Document No. 42, Memorandum of the Bogomolov Institute, February 1989.
\textsuperscript{124} Document No. 51, Gorbachev’s Meeting with Soviet Ambassadors to Socialist Countries, March 3, 1989.
far no evidence has emerged suggesting that anyone in the leadership proposed to actually use force to keep Eastern Europe in the socialist camp. The price of doing so was certainly very clear to the foreign minister: it would mean sacrificing “freedom of choice, non-interference, and a common European home ... The very thought of it or of keeping a tight leash on the countries that some call ‘buffer states’ was insulting to us as well as to the people of those countries.”

What strikes one when reading Soviet documents from 1988–1989 on Eastern Europe is how many times Gorbachev was warned about the impending collapse of the socialist bloc, and how aware he must have been of the real state of affairs. And yet, during Politburo deliberations or in discussions with his closest personal assistants, on whom he relied more and more in 1989, the use or even threat of force was never proposed by anyone.

While it is safe to argue that within the Soviet hierarchy, at least after July 1986, the issue of use of force in Eastern Europe was settled, the more interesting question remains: when did the leaders and opposition in the socialist countries become aware of this fact and how did that awareness alter their behavior? Did it affect each group’s actions differently? One could argue that although the old guard did not sufficiently recognize the new signals at Gorbachev’s first meetings with them in March, April and October 1985, once an understanding of the policy of non-interference dawned on them, it would have been in their self-interest to sustain the impression that the Brezhnev Doctrine was still in effect—to “float” it before their populations in order to constrain the actions of dissidents and to keep themselves in power. For the general public, it took until after the December 1988 U.N. speech for the belief to sink in that the Doctrine was no longer valid.

Poland was an especially interesting case to consider in this respect because in a way it constituted Gorbachev’s preferred testing ground for what was to happen in the Soviet bloc and in the USSR itself. The Soviet leader had a close and respectful relationship with Jaruzelski, probably his only true friend among the fraternal leaders. During their dinner in July 1988, after the 19th Party Conference, and in his speech to the Polish Sejm on July 11, Gorbachev was already speaking explicitly about freedom of choice and non-interference, and how these

126 Musgrove transcript, 168.
127 Musgrove transcript, 203-205. Interestingly, concerns over Soviet intentions held longest in the United States. In February 1989 Ambassador Matlock mentioned the subject in his cables from Moscow; at the end of July Secretary of State Baker cautioned Shevardnadze not to resort to violence in Eastern Europe, (and Shevardnadze reassured him on the point); and even as late as September 22, NSDD-23 demanded that the USSR renounce the Brezhnev Doctrine and “refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.” See Document Nos. 43, 45, and 47; Oberdorfer, The Turn, 360; and Document No. 84.
fit into his grand design for the common European home—almost as if he were
rehearsing his forthcoming U.N. speech.\footnote{Speech at dinner with Jaruzelski, the Gorbachev Foundation Archive, Fond 1; Gorbachev speech at the Sejm, \emph{Pravda}, July 12, 1989, 2.}

The developments in Poland in August and September 1988 show that, in that
country at least, the leadership was not at all worried about the possible use of
force on the Soviets’ part. The first Politburo discussion of the idea of Round-
table negotiations, introduced by Józef Czyrek, took place on August 21, 1988.
The objective was to engage the opposition constructively up to the point of free
elections and participation in the government, and in doing so to co-opt Lech
Walęsa, Solidarity’s leader. In the entire discussion, a record of which is available
from the Polish archives, the Soviet factor was not raised once.\footnote{Protocol from the meeting for the Political Bureau held on 21 August 1988 under chair-
manship of the 1\sup{st} Secretary of KC PZPR, comrade Wojciech Jaruzelski, Warsaw, Archi-
wum Akt Nowych.} The exchange
was surprisingly non-ideological and focused on the economic crisis. If the Pol-
ish Politburo at that time could envisage any punitive measures emanating from
the USSR, one would expect that to have been a major issue in the conversation.
A month after the initial discussion, on September 22, the Polish Politburo ad-
opted a formal resolution on negotiations with the opposition, which was widely
circulated to Central Committee members, associate Politburo members and re-
gional secretaries. The Soviets were not consulted before those crucial decisions
were made. They were informed only later.

To fulfill that task and to feel out the Soviets’ reaction, the Poles sent an old
friend of Jaruzelski who, as a Foreign Minister, was very familiar to the Krem-
lin—Czyrek. The day after the PUWP’s decision on talks with the opposition,
Gorbachev and Czyrek had a discussion that would set the stage for the de-
velopments of 1989 in Poland. The available record of conversation provides
a glimpse of how willing the Soviet general secretary was to encourage internal
political processes in Eastern Europe—more so than is generally believed—and
how he genuinely tried to understand what was going on in Poland. After listen-
ing to the Polish envoy’s discussion of the internal situation and particularly
the strikes underway throughout the country, Gorbachev asked pointed questions
about the role of the party and the reasons for its failure to obtain support among
Polish workers. Here, he was not lecturing, but seeking information and listen-
ing to explanations. When Czyrek presented the Polish decisions to engage Soli-
darity and the Catholic Church, Gorbachev cautioned that the Polish authorities
should act slowly so as not to appear panicked, but he did not try to exert pres-
sure to change those decisions, let alone threaten punitive measures.\footnote{Document No. 28, Mikhail Gorbachev and Józef Czyrek Conversation, September 23, 1988.} The two
also discussed various candidates for the post of prime minister and agreed on
Rakowski—an unusual step for Gorbachev who was generally not inclined to
discuss allied personnel issues in such detail. He in effect gave the green light not
only to the legalization of Solidarity but to the Roundtable negotiations and free elections, even to the possibility of forming a coalition government. This conversation provides even more reason to argue that by September 1988 the Polish leadership already believed that there was no threat of Soviet intervention. When asked if he was concerned about a possibility of Soviet use of force in the summer of 1989, the Tadeusz Mazowiecki said, “nobody in the leadership thought already in August 1988 that Gorbachev would intervene, but there were other serious concerns: economic pressure [from the Soviet Union], what Honecker and other allies might do, and what if Gorbachev would not survive.”\textsuperscript{131}

It would be logical to expect the Poles to discuss both the plans for initiating the Roundtable and their understanding of the Soviet position with other allied leaders, and to share their conviction that there would be no Soviet military response. One such meeting took place on the eve of the Roundtable in Poland. On February 1, 1989, Jaruzelski met with his Czechoslovak counterpart, Miloš Jakeš, to inform him of the talks that were due to start on February 6. The Polish leader explained how the process would work and his hope to be able to co-opt the opposition while staying within the framework of the new concept of socialism internally and within the WTO alliance in foreign policy. In the conversation, the socialist leaders never raised the possibility of a negative Soviet response, but rather emphasized that “an important change in relations toward the USSR has occurred. The earlier crises were always accompanied by an increase in anti-socialism; now even the opposition says that it is trying to gain the friendship of the USSR.”\textsuperscript{132} It would be safe to conclude that by early 1989, at the latest, the top leadership of the socialist countries was no longer concerned about the threat of a Soviet intervention, and that the Kremlin was not only aware of that understanding but in fact promoted it actively for some time beginning in the summer of 1988.

A related issue of major importance that Gorbachev had to confront early on was the status of Soviet troops in Eastern Europe. If the Kremlin was serious about disarmament in Europe and about treating its allies as equals, what were Soviet forces doing on their territory? It is generally believed that the question of a pull-out was raised in the USSR in the fall of 1988, in preparation for the U.N. speech. However, at least one document from this collection shows that there was an attempt to initiate such withdrawals as early as spring 1987, in

\textsuperscript{131} Conversation with the author at the conference “Revolutions of 1989” in Vienna, Austria, October 1, 2009, organized by the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of European and International Affairs.

anticipation of Gorbachev’s April visit to Prague. In a memorandum prepared for his superior to discuss at the Politburo, Shakhnazarov proposed making an announcement that the Red Army would soon begin to pull out from Czechoslovakia. Shakhnazarov, who at that time was not even the general secretary’s official adviser but merely the deputy head of the CC socialist countries department, argued strongly that such a step would allow Moscow to seize the initiative in the reform process and take steps voluntarily, which later it would be forced to do under pressure from the socialist countries. This enlightened reformer had foreseen the future quite accurately.

It is fascinating to see that even the radical Shakhnazarov at the time did not advocate redeployments from all socialist countries, and did not envision pulling out of Poland and East Germany at any point in the future. However, reducing troop levels in Czechoslovakia, he argued, would be seen as encouragement for local reformers and would raise the prestige of Gorbachev’s perestroika among those populations. Implicitly, under Shakhnazarov’s proposal, the interpretation of the events of 1968 would have to be changed too. At least, as he points out with reference to the Soviet–Czechoslovak documents signed that year, the conditions that purportedly demanded the original introduction of the Red Army into Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist, and therefore its continued deployment was no longer justified either by existing agreements or by the current situation. However, as far as we know, the memorandum was never discussed at the Politburo, and the failure to follow through on the concept in Prague represented an important missed opportunity, one that was not openly mentioned at the time and has rarely been noted since in studies of the end of the Cold War in Europe.

The fact that Shakhnazarov wrote that memo means that either Gorbachev requested it, or at the very least that Shakhnazarov was confident that the general secretary shared his views on this issue. Before he became Gorbachev’s formal adviser in early 1988, he often served as an informal one, briefing him on Eastern Europe or drafting speeches and memoranda. Why would Gorbachev not follow up on this particular memorandum—at least with a Politburo discussion if not with the actual announcement? His failure to do so seems to confirm Mlynář’s point that at the time he was still a hostage of the Brezhnev Doctrine himself. Had he acted on the idea, it would arguably have made the reform communists more decisive while they still had the advantage—before the non-communist opposition and the dissidents overtook them in the summer of 1989, as Shakhnazarov anticipated, and it would have been more of a piece with Gorbachev’s own vision of “little perestroikas” taking root throughout the region.

As mentioned above, the question of troop withdrawals from Eastern Europe was repeatedly raised in discussions with advisers, and sometimes at the Politburo. Both the International Department and the Bogomolov institute memoranda suggested that a pull-out should be considered in the future. Fellow Warsaw Pact

representatives raised this in meetings with their Soviet counterparts, and Gorbachev was well aware of these suggestions. But he usually spoke in favor of very gradual reductions that fell short of complete withdrawal. Even on the eve of his December 1988 U.N. speech, he believed such a controlled turn of events was possible.\textsuperscript{134} No specific timetable was ever discussed, however, which begs the question whether this was out of reluctance to provoke domestic opposition, or a function of Gorbachev’s ambivalence toward the old guard in Eastern Europe. It seems most likely that his main focus was on the European process and that from his perspective progress on the core issue would then determine the timetable for withdrawal.

CONCLUSION

If any single event or series of events could be taken to signify the end of the Cold War, it probably was the wave of peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989.

After 1985, the Soviet Union gradually abandoned the old pattern of intervention and tight control over internal developments in the socialist camp. It is important to note that during the second half of the 1980s the USSR still had the capability to dominate its allies militarily; even in 1990 several hundred thousand Soviet troops remained in Eastern Europe.

However, military intervention was seen as abhorrent and unacceptable to Gorbachev and his reformist coalition, who were at the peak of their power in 1989 and early 1990. The concept of security that the reformers shared had been transformed considerably from the traditional Soviet one to include such important elements as reasonable sufficiency in strategic weapons, universal human rights and values, and the common European home. In their view, the Soviet Union would not become less secure if it was surrounded by independent, friendly countries facing similar problems and united by a common process of democratic reform. Moreover, the country’s security would, in fact, increase if democratization in the USSR and in Eastern Europe led them to participate “in the common European process and form together with Europe a unified economic, legal, humanitarian, cultural and ecological space.”\textsuperscript{135}

Although the reformers were aware of the possible repercussions of “losing Eastern Europe,” especially among the military and the generation of World War II veterans, they made the crucial choice to abstain from using force and instead to encourage reform in Eastern Europe. The documents presented in this book make clear that the new leadership took this stand early on and stood by it to the end. As Gorbachev’s interpreter-adviser Pavel Palazchenko stated in his memoir,

\textsuperscript{134} Document No. 31, Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Foreign Policy Advisers, October 31, 1988.

\textsuperscript{135} Shevardnadze, “No One Can Isolate Us,” 119.
the decision to “release Eastern Europe was made, and they did not go back on it when the full implications became clear ... I do not believe that the coming generation of leaders will ever have to make decisions of such magnitude or such agonizing difficulty.”

The transformation of Soviet policy toward the East European countries, therefore, can be explained by three main factors. Firstly, there was the influence of new norms and beliefs that determined the fundamental choices made by Gorbachev and his coalition. Secondly, the reassessment of the strategic and economic value of the socialist camp combined with internal political events in the Soviet Union in 1989 made Eastern Europe a lower priority for Moscow. Thirdly, Gorbachev’s idea of a common European home made the use of force in one part of that home seem unacceptable and counterproductive.

Europe was at the heart of Gorbachev’s vision for a new international order. Gradual mutual demilitarization and the eventual disbanding of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, along with economic integration between the CMEA and the EEC, were seen as the road to the common home. In that home, the use of force would be proscribed and all nations would have the freedom to choose their own socio-political system. Universal human values and not the balance of power would be the foundation of the new home. This new home would also require a new pan-European security structure free of Cold War associations and built, Gorbachev imagined, on the institutional basis of the CSCE, utilizing the remaining infrastructures from both NATO and the WTO.

Gorbachev’s East European policy was an integral part of his ambitious effort to reform the Soviet domestic system, put an end to the arms race that was exhausting the economy, and integrate the USSR into the European democratic community of nations. Starting from these priorities and taking into account unfolding events, the peaceful outcome that transpired becomes perfectly logical even if it might have seemed unlikely at the time. In fact, the logic of that ultimate result was understood even by Western observers who followed the Soviet reform process closely. The only imaginable scenario where force could have been used abroad was if a hard-line coup had been staged earlier than August 1991, when arguably the chances for its success were higher in the absence of a strong democratic movement in Russia. However, even the hawkish defense minister, Dmitri Yazov, believed force should not be used beyond Soviet borders as late as 1990, and neither the military nor the KGB ever actually proposed to use it in Eastern Europe (as opposed to domestically, in order to keep the Soviet Union together, as in Vilnius in 1991).

Before Gorbachev’s vision had a chance to be implemented, the Cold War ended in Eastern Europe, swept away by the rising tide of popular movements.

136 Palazchenko, My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, 146.
137 Musgrove transcript, 171-173.
138 Brown, Seven Years, 205.
His hopes for a measured process controlled from above did not materialize. Instead, East Europeans took the initiative and were able to use the Bush administration’s pause and the confusion on both sides of the Atlantic to their own advantage—holding free elections, tearing down the Wall, and eventually dissolving the Warsaw Pact. The Soviet leadership found itself behind the flow of events, reacting rather than directing them. Even though Gorbachev was shocked by Kohl’s 10-point speech of November 28, 1989, and by Bush’s apparent support for the German drive for quick reunification, he tried to salvage as much as possible of his vision of the common European home, hoping to achieve it at the Paris summit of the CSCE. According to his vision, Eastern Europe was part of the European process, the European scenario, which ruled out the use of force. All the evidence available today makes it clear that the Soviet reformers realized that a recourse to violence would mean the end of their entire experiment and the failure of Gorbachev’s vision.

The end of the Cold War in Europe was a historic achievement, a true masterpiece of history, but it also contained an element of missed opportunity. Almost twenty years after the events discussed in this book, Russia remains in many respects separate from Europe, obviously not fully integrated economically and even less so politically. The common European home exists only within the boundaries of the European Union, which serves as a desired destination for former Soviet republics and therefore makes it a very sensitive issue for Russia. NATO has expanded beyond the former USSR’s borders, incorporating the Baltic states, and Ukraine and Georgia have expressed interest in joining it. Tensions between Russia and the United States persist, with great power rhetoric gaining popularity among the Russian political elite and the population. Domestically, Russia is moving in a more authoritarian direction, successfully exploiting the notion of an external threat once again. What was clearly an opportunity used to the fullest by the East Europeans in 1989 could now be seen as an opportunity missed by both Washington and Moscow to integrate Russia into Europe both politically and economically, following Gorbachev’s vision. In his conversation with British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd after the putsch of August 1991, the Soviet leader articulated this hope against the background of irreversible tendencies that were pulling his country apart. Still speaking of the Soviet Union, he said, “there is a chance, which we should exploit: to make permanent the integration of this enormous country into the international community. I don’t know what the cost of achieving this goal will be, but I am confident that the price will not be comparable to what we all have paid for confrontation [during the Cold War].”

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