

Year of Miracles or Year of Trials

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Abstract

The article tackles 1989 as a „Year of Trials“ for the so-called Second World with an example from Eastern Europe. In the first part, it argues that the loss of support and rule coming from Moscow essentially lowered the threshold for the escalation of a systemic crisis. Drawing on the work of Peter Turchin and Jack Goldstone it explains the following system-changes by such lower threshold for a crisis with the same economic and social (in)stability. The second part tackles the global aspect of 1989 by exploring the shift of the global political and economic spectrum to the right and the juxtaposition of the contemporary retreat of the liberal narrative and the resurface of different alternatives.

As the Czech Republic commemorated the 30th anniversary of 1989, I have felt that the general debate has predominantly been very similar to the enthusiastic interpretation by the majority of the country during the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium. And this view is only changing slowly. In other former communist countries in the region, a new perspective is emerging much faster, in connection with a major shift in these countries' political landscapes and climates. Nevertheless, 1989 remains an important symbol everywhere, with it being reimagined only to suit the narrative of the current political victors since even they are afraid to turn away from this founding moment. More recently, 1989 begins to be seen as symbolizing the betrayal of the people by the elites. Also, as seen in the recent contribution by Timothy Garton Ash to the debate,¹ even the most ardent supporters of the liberal interpretation are now stressing caution. Such warnings were already issued in the 1990s, but they not only went unheeded but also were seldom stressed by the authors – partly because they did not

¹<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/time-for-new-liberation/> [cit. 29.05.2020]

have much incentive to speak about their concerns in an environment with a predominant narrative of success.

As more and more fractures appear that allow such a shift in interpreting 1989, we should use this opportunity to discuss this caesura and enrich the public discussion with material from the past years of research. It shows a lot of continuities as well as the roots of many of the problems we are facing today, which did not exist in the Year of Miracles per se. The findings of this research weaken the position of 1989 as the „golden calf“ as much as possible, thereby thwarting its unwise usage as a siege point in a contemporary cultural war. Reinhart Koselleck said, „History is neither a tribunal nor an alibi.“² So how can we view 1989 in this manner?

I would argue that 1989 was a Second World event that had a degree of worldwide influence. It was essentially a *Year of Trials* for the countries of the Second World. I will primarily concentrate on Eastern Europe as the development of this Year of Trials. Somalia, Southern Yemen, China, or Mongolia during the turn from 1989 to 1990 are beyond the scope of my expertise, but the coincidence of the changes in these countries supports my argument.³

The countries of the Eastern bloc experienced different degrees of difficulties according to their levels of economic and social (in)stability. The changes, which Gorbachev and his policies symbolized, opened up more space for individual action while also further destabilizing the certainty that came from the guiding anchor provided by the directions, support, and interventions from Moscow.⁴ This loss of certainty intensified these difficulties as the Eastern bloc countries essentially lost the protector of the status quo.

If we account for the factors that undermined the stability of the systems in the countries of the Eastern bloc, then this was a major

²Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories*, Stanford 2018, p. 195.

³For global effect of 1989 see James Mark/ Bogdan C. Iacob / Tobias Rupprecht / Ljubica Spaskovska, 1989. *A Global History of Eastern Europe*, Cambridge 2019.

⁴Benedict Anderson already pointed out the stabilizing (i.e. maintaining status quo) effect of the Soviet Union on the Eastern bloc.

and, I would argue, the final blow. These structural problems lowered the threshold when a crisis could erupt, in a similar way as studied by Peter Turchin and his works with Jack Goldstone's political stress indicator. The stability of the system depended on how and when it would need to respond to a possible crisis. These individual tests occurred during a short time, and some of the governing groups failed or gave up in 1989. For others, the internal setting allowed them to survive longer.

What differed was if the situation was a revolutionary one or a reformist one – these two positions representing an ideal type. Both led to a transformation that was guided to some variety of capitalism. The more stable states, like Hungary, were leaning towards a more reformist transition, but states in crisis, like Romania, arrived at a revolutionary and in this case even violent solution. The trajectory of the exit from a crisis was heavily influenced by the previous development.

So, 1989 essentially functioned as a Year of Trials, when individual systems faced structural problems that surfaced as result of losing their guarantor, who needed and required them to be stable. This coincided with the problems of the guarantor and of the contradiction of the system that was imposed, ultimately leading to a relinquishing of this position.

The second part of my argument – which shows the worldwide influence of 1989 – is the shift to the right. The communist countries had already resigned themselves to capitalist logic, starting in the 1970s and becoming more prevalent in the 1980s, which coincided with the changes in the capitalist system itself.⁵ And anti-communist mythos – which was by then almost obligatory – was strongly reinforced and dealt a blow to any political left in Eastern Europe that opposed the trajectory of transformation. Anti-communists brushed off leftist ideas as communist and as just wanting to keep the „old order“ while extinguishing anything that had, in their imagination,

⁵Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism and What Comes next?* Princeton 1996, p. 35–37.

any connection to Marxism. This shift to the right was worldwide and had already been happening for some time, but 1989 acted as a boost to this shift with the sudden loss of an alternative – as pointed out in the famous essay by Francis Fukuyama.⁶ In this respect, it was truly a predominantly joint memory-shaping moment – a narrative of dissatisfaction or „failure“ was marginalized for a long time at least until the hopes associated with the transformation were depleted for an increasing part of the population.

And the Eastern bloc has also served as a laboratory for this shift to the right just after the wave of neoliberal reforms in Central and South America. The supporters and enforcers of neo-liberalism used this space to push and try out their entire agenda, which some of them did not dare to implement to this degree in their own home countries. The contemporary narratives of dissatisfaction are rooted in the effects of the neoliberal policies that were implemented to varying degrees during the transformation of these individual systems. This transformation was also a part of a worldwide development.

The left, which has not moved that much to the right, has been licking its wounds until recent years, as we see with the varying success of, for example, the surge of Green voters in Germany, Podemos in Spain, Nova Ljevica in Croatia, Levica in Slovenia, Corbyn in the UK, Melénchon in France, and Sanders in the USA. These last three are examples of the left that did not participate in this global shift, as can be seen from the age of these politicians. Only the slowly boiling dissatisfaction of a substantial part of the population has led to a more visible resurfacing of such left.⁷ Such parties and politicians have been able to work with the fact that the development over the previous several decades was not beneficial to all, being able to swing some of these dissatisfied voters who were up until now an easy prey

⁶At that point of time, it was an on-point observation. I would like to stress that Fukuyama later revised his stance, which is often forgotten, see: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2012-01-01/future-history>

⁷Currently some are also joining the wave of environmentalism, which the right-wing populist parties are mostly refusing to deal with.

for protest movements and mostly right-wing populist parties, which were the only ones who were working with a narrative of a distorted development. Left-leaning movements have been able to rehabilitate this kind of left for at least some.

On the other hand, we see once again a stronger and revamped anti-communism, this time mostly in connection with people rejecting neo-Marxism – even if they can define it, primarily, as things they do not like. This is especially used for attacking the mysterious globalist and European Union elites. As pointed out by Jacob, Rupprecht and Mark,⁸ there is, on the one hand, a rejection of the previous regimes, but, on the other, a rejection of the decadent West in a manner exactly like that used by these previous regimes while stylizing themselves as protectors of the civilized, white, and Christian Europe.

These arguments should be considered *cum grano salis*. They could always be contradicted with a counterexample, but as Adorno and Horkheimer have said, „But only exaggeration is true.“⁹ What counts with 1989 is what comes out of the interpretation of this year for the contemporary political situation. By pointing out the roots of the problems we face today, we can add to the search for solutions. And by stressing the long-term nature of the problematic development, we can help to choose between these solutions instead of pointlessly battling over 1989 – trying to use it as a tribunal or an alibi.

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⁸<https://www.eurozine.com/the-struggle-over-1989/?fbclid=IwAR2my9KXx7XIXdVDPg0W1IrsuNMmlifb1xnN1iLB4zgugSSXaatpWHH7Xpc> [cit. 29.05.2020]

⁹Theodor Adorno / Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, London 1997, p. 118.