

Commentary :

Karen Brutents : *Europe Between
the Superpowers:
A Soviet Perspective*

ROBERT HUTCHINGS WRITES that the end of the cold war resulted from “the *interaction* between superpower relations and developments in Europe” and “was not something bestowed on Europe by U.S. and Soviet leaders, but neither was it something that Europe could have achieved on its own.” Nevertheless, he suggests that the accurate term for these events is “self-liberation.”

Indeed, the emergence of the popular and opposition movements ultimately served as the major factor in the liberation of Eastern Europe. The materials at our disposal show that the effect of perestroika in the Soviet Union, along with Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy line and practical steps, played a decisive role in transforming latent discontent into a mass movement in the majority of Eastern European nations. Even in Poland and Hungary, where democratic demonstrations were more active, the Communist regimes still maintained a foothold. That foothold was particularly firm in Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. As for the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a key country in the Warsaw Treaty Organization, its citizens began to rise up only when it became clear that Gorbachev not only sympathized with them but would never allow the use of force against them. Before that, most of them remained silent, apparently out of guilt rooted in World War II and a related fear that disturbances in the GDR might cause the Russians and their troops stationed in Germany to seek revenge. It is also

possible that some of the intelligentsia were restrained by a sense of responsibility and an understanding that the use of force in the GDR could lead to a global military confrontation.

Yet these factors do not give an accurate picture of events. The decisive influence of perestroika and Gorbachev's policies, which helped discredit Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, evoked a massive response that later acquired the character and dynamism of a new movement that transformed the original intentions and goals of its founders. Perestroika and Gorbachev's attitude toward Eastern Europe could not, by themselves, guarantee either the rise or the success of the liberation movement.

Robert Hutchings correctly points out that Western Europe, often acting on its own, actively developed relations with Eastern European countries, and he might have added that this effort extended to the Soviet Union. He emphasizes Europe's intention to curb U.S. dominance. However, he writes, "By 1989 the bipolar world of the cold war already had broken down." Furthermore, he applies his assertion to an earlier period, stating that "Konstantin Chernenko was a dogmatic throwback to a bipolar world that no longer existed." His contention that "the nuclear relationship generated rigidities that artificially preserved the formal bipolar structure of East-West relations and obscured the political and economic realities beneath the surface" is, in my view, an exaggeration. I would have agreed, however, if he had said that the grip of those rigidities on East-West relations was no longer as firm as before.

In my opinion, the Soviet Union of the 1980s remained a superpower in terms of its territory, population, and resources; in its huge arsenals of weapons; in its global presence and interests; and in its messianic ambitions even though its obligations were becoming increasingly burdensome. It was well known that the Soviet Union had great military potential but lagged considerably behind the United States economically and was experiencing serious internal problems, so the opening of the Soviet archives revealed few surprises.

On the other side of this bipolar system was the United States,

the superpower leading the Western world and essentially defining its policies. Nevertheless, its influence over its allies had weakened, just as the Soviet Union's influence had diminished.

Robert Hutchings believes that long before the end of the 1980s, "this aspect of cold war confrontation—the prospect of nuclear war—had receded nearly to the vanishing point, taking with it superpower domination of East-West relations." In my opinion, the threat persisted, albeit to a lesser extent, until Gorbachev rose to power and consolidated his position. Moreover, had Reagan pursued his aggressive policy line with the USSR, led by Yuri Andropov, who was not inclined to retreat, the risk of such confrontation could have escalated to its highest level since the Cuban crisis. It was Gorbachev's policies and subsequent changes in Soviet-U.S. relations that removed the threat of nuclear confrontation.

Thanks to the U.S. nuclear umbrella, Western Europeans were able to engage in their own line of diplomacy separately from the United States, although that diplomacy was limited in scale and lacked far-reaching goals. For example, under Margaret Thatcher, Great Britain grew stronger after its recovery from economic crisis and attempted to reaffirm its position as a great power by developing relations with the USSR. At the same time, Mrs. Thatcher was trying to prod the Americans into organizing a coordinated Western response to Gorbachev and Eastern Europe so that the Western Europeans' activities would be conducted under a U.S. political umbrella. Hutchings quotes a statement by Horst Teltschik, Helmut Kohl's national security adviser, which is quite revealing in this respect.

Hutchings expresses a number of interesting and accurate ideas about Eastern European problems and developments and Gorbachev's approach to them. He correctly infers that "clearly, Gorbachev had no such plan [with regard to Eastern Europe], nor did he appreciate the consequences of his policies for the fragile regimes in Eastern Europe." Gorbachev's approach to Eastern Europe was affected by a variety of factors and motives that did not constitute a consistent strategy and were even, at times, contradictory. The

inevitable conclusion that arises is that there was neither a clear concept, as Hutchings points out, nor was there a purposeful and coherent policy in relation to the Warsaw Treaty Organization.

Hutchings refers to Georgi Shakhnazarov, Gorbachev's adviser, who admitted, "At that time [July 1988] our leadership did not give much thought to the fact that perestroika would lead to such a rapid disintegration of the military and political bloc used by the Soviet Union to control Eastern Europe."¹ The documents to which Hutchings refers confirm how inaccurate certain Soviet power structures and progressive scholars were in their assessment of development prospects in Eastern Europe. The authors of those memoranda took into account the mood of their superiors and tried to placate them. In fact, judging by the National Intelligence Estimate of May 1988 mentioned by Hutchings, as well as other well-known documents, the U.S. analysis was not much better.

Perhaps it was hard to imagine future developments in Eastern Europe because of the extraordinary nature of the process and the absence of close analogies in the past. In a conversation with Karoly Grosz, Gorbachev said, "The Americans are closely following the developments in Hungary and would like to take advantage of the moment to strengthen their influence. They believe the Soviet Union is itself changing and does not care about its allies. Here is an interesting dialectic: by changing and renewing, we do not weaken but enhance our role and our influence on the course of events in the world."² Apparently, Gorbachev hoped that the example of his reforms in the USSR would cause a "wave of imitation" in Eastern Europe because its elites had already become used to following the Soviet Union. In addition, he actively promoted those processes during his visits and through his efforts to replace the leadership in almost every Eastern European country. Hutchings mentions as examples the ouster of Gustav Husak and the fact

1. Georgi Kh. Shakhnazarov, *Tsena Svobody* [The Price of Freedom]. Record of a conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, March 23–24, 1989, 111.

2. Record of a conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Karoly Grosz.

that the day after the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) summit in November 1986, Janos Kadar was also advised “to go.”³ Moscow played a part in the removal of Todor Zhivkov and Erich Honecker as well. Contrary to the Soviet Union’s original intentions, this reshuffling led to weakening of the regimes rather than stimulating reforms from the top. The ousters impaired leadership in general, undermined confidence that had already been eroded by an unclear Soviet policy, and launched internal controversies. The new leaders lacked the seniority and stability of their predecessors, and with those old leaders gone, struggles for power broke out in high places. Thus, the ouster of the former leaders signaled a crisis and gave strong encouragement to the opposition.

Skepticism about Gorbachev, at least among some Eastern European leaders, was generated not only by conservatism and self-preservation (in this respect they proved to be more farsighted than he was) but also by Gorbachev’s lack of notable achievements. Aware of their doubts, Gorbachev often refrained from giving recommendations and advice to these leaders. In addition, Eastern European leaders were often confused because they had only a vague understanding of Gorbachev’s plans and goals. They were perplexed over the obscurities and vacillations of his policies, and his actions often startled them. The Warsaw Pact, unlike NATO, had no procedures or mechanisms to coordinate its members’ activities. Its summits usually boiled down to a formal exchange of information. In fact, the bloc leaders were kept on a starvation diet in terms of information. For example, after a meeting with Reagan, Gorbachev would give them no more than a general report.

Perhaps the most important point is that, hoping to transfer perestroika processes to Eastern Europe, the Soviet leadership and Gorbachev himself overlooked or underestimated the fact that the regimes in those countries were regarded by the majority of their citizens as having been imposed from outside. Therefore their po-

3. *Vneshniaia politika SSSR I Rossii 1985–1995: k desiatiletiiyu perestroiki* (Moscow: April-85, 1995), 60–61.

tential for stability and transformation, regardless of the leadership's sentiments, was limited, and their chances for success were smaller than those of the USSR. The Soviet leadership was mistaken in its expectation that liberalization in the Warsaw Pact countries would stop at an acceptable threshold and remain within the framework of democratization of the Socialist system.

Gorbachev's policies also revealed another tendency: to see the Warsaw Pact countries as a burden. His attitude intensified as the Eastern European leaders showed a reluctance to accept Soviet policy innovations. As the Soviet leadership lost interest in Eastern Europe, some leaders ventured mild reproaches. For instance, East German party leader Egon Krenz told Gorbachev, "We proceed from the idea that the GDR is a child of the Soviet Union. Yet decent people always recognize their children, at least they give them their inheritance."⁴

These developments influenced the Soviet Union's decision to switch to hard currency in trade relations with the CMEA, a move that dealt a serious blow to Eastern European, as well as Soviet Union, economies and forced them to increase their efforts to look for markets in the West. By this time, the Eastern European countries were alienated from Moscow, a fact that Gorbachev acknowledged when he said, on a flight from Kiev to Moscow in July 1990, "They are pretty sick of us, and we are of them too."

Hutchings presents an attractive scholarly and logical sequence for the unraveling of the Soviet enterprise "first in Central and Eastern Europe, next among the Baltic states, then in Ukraine and other republics, and finally in Russia itself." Yet if we examine the facts, we will realize the need to reorder some of the elements in this sequence. For example, Russia should come before Ukraine and some of the Central Asian republics. Russia led both politically and practically in initiating the "parade of sovereignties" as part of the struggle against the center. Yeltsin promoted the primitive nationalist idea, popular among some Russian leaders, that other

4. Record of a conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Egon Krenz.

republics were weights chained to Russia's legs, and that if a locomotive (Russia) were unhooked from its cars (the republics), Russia would live in abundance. The majority of the Ukrainian electorate voted to preserve the Union as late as March 1991, whereas sovereignty was declared in the summer of 1990.

Based on these goals, the Russian leadership roused secessionist sentiments in other republics. Kazimira Prunskene, head of the Lithuanian government in 1988 and 1989, told me that Yeltsin had a special agreement with Vytautas Landsbergis that the Lithuanian leader would reject any compromises with the Soviet president.⁵ One should not overestimate the effect of Eastern European developments on the Soviet Union "blowback," as other factors were also at work.

Hutchings describes the Western European attitude, and especially the German position, on divisible détente. The aim was to prevent the strengthening of bloc discipline, especially within the Warsaw Pact countries, which would impede the implementation of the general strategy directed at Eastern Europe.

But divisible détente had many contradictory aspects. It cannot be regarded as a mere counterbalance to superpower competition and confrontation; it was part of the superpowers' strategy. They wanted to use divisible détente to promote their own interests, primarily to soften their opponent's camp and, at the same time, to prevent allies from acquiring excessive freedom and independence. In other words, the allies were to take appropriate steps under the superpowers' general control. Thus the issue boiled down to the degree of control that would benefit a superpower rather than its adversary or even some of its allies. It was therefore no surprise that Moscow, which was itself oriented toward a comprehensive development of relations with Western Europe and encouraged its allies' controllable steps in that direction, was nonetheless suspicious of Honecker's contacts with his Western European partners.

5. Karen Brutents, *Tridtsat let na Staroi Ploshchadi* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1998).

However, the superpowers' allies pursued their own goals and interests, including economic benefits and improved relations among the opposition camp. As a deterioration of Soviet-U.S. relations would impede their freedom, these participants in divisible détente supported improved interaction between the superpowers. Horst Teltschik's statement, quoted by Hutchings, is entirely in keeping with this spirit.

Problems and differences did exist within the Warsaw Treaty Organization, as in any other bloc, but Hutchings's point about "an unprecedented and public breakdown of Warsaw Pact unity" dating back to the mid- or even early 1980s seems an exaggeration. For example, he cites Romania's refusal to participate in the Moscow Olympic Games, but Bucharest had often demonstrated its disagreement with the Soviet Union on more serious matters. Its refusal to join the military intervention in Czechoslovakia and its position on relations with China were merely aimed to get benefits from outside the Warsaw Pact. Nor do other examples support Hutchings's conclusion. For instance, certain so-called controversies over positions taken by Warsaw Pact countries were, in fact, preliminarily agreed upon with Moscow.

Hutchings's description of U.S. military strategy unquestionably reflects essential elements of the Bush administration's policy, but it lacks consideration of the Soviet element. His conclusion that this strategy was "put on hold while the first three steps were being carried out" is hardly well founded. Hutchings may have been inspired to some extent by Brent Scowcroft, who said, "There were two major areas of relations that justified far-reaching steps, helped us regain initiative, and promoted our interests. The first was Eastern Europe, where the emergent steps toward reforms could give us an opportunity to benefit from a new thinking in the Soviet Union to loosen Moscow's grip on its satellites. The second was nuclear and conventional arms control."⁶ This statement not

6. George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 15.

only contains a major disarmament aspect but also links the United States' Eastern European policy with the new thinking in the USSR, or, in other words, relations with Gorbachev.

In January 1989, Henry Kissinger met with Gorbachev in Moscow, where he offered a deal. He proposed that the United States develop extensive political contacts with the Soviet Union and help it by relieving its burden of arms spending and by other means in exchange for U.S. freedom of action in Eastern Europe. It remains unclear whether this suggestion was initiated by the new administration or by Kissinger himself, but Gorbachev was skeptical and declined the offer. The proposal met the same reaction at the subsequent Politburo meeting.

There was then a pause in Soviet-U.S. relations, attended by soothing statements addressed to Gorbachev. Finally, Secretary of State James Baker brought an extensive set of proposals to Moscow. Apparently, Washington had come to the conclusion that the situation in Eastern Europe could only be influenced by improving Soviet-U.S. relations and by working through Moscow. And, since the United States saw Gorbachev as "a man we can deal with," this was a realistic perspective. The administration understood that the alternative was that Moscow could close the door.

The United States and some other Western countries began to emphasize that they would not act to the detriment of the USSR's interests, a theme that President Bush discussed during his visit to Poland. Thatcher, in turn, told Gorbachev in London on September 23, 1989:

Neither are we interested in destabilization in Eastern Europe and breakup of the Warsaw Pact. Of course, domestic changes in all the East European countries have become imminent. But we want them to be exclusively domestic processes, and we shall not interfere in them or support decommunisation in Eastern Europe. I can say that the position of the U.S. President is the same. He sent me a message in which he asked me to tell you that the USA would not do any-

thing that would threaten the Soviet Union's security or would be taken as a threat in Soviet society.⁷

In short, the political logic adopted after Baker's visit was put into operation: changes in Eastern Europe took place in connection with changes in the USSR in conformity with its new interests. Baker points out in his book that in order to achieve its goals in Eastern Europe, the United States needed the best possible relations with Gorbachev and his minister of foreign affairs, Eduard Shevardnadze.⁸

I would like to make a final comment about one of Hutchings's assertions. He writes that the Nixon administration "largely supported West German *Ostpolitik* under Chancellor Willy Brandt." This assertion lacks foundation. On the contrary, the administration responded to Brandt's initiatives cautiously and even with suspicion, especially in the beginning. Washington's attitude toward Brandt himself was reserved. However, some elements of Chancellor Brandt's policy, such as preparation of a quadrilateral agreement on Berlin, were supported by the United States.

7. Record of a conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher (translated from Russian).

8. James A. Baker III, *Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: Putnam, 1995), 7:158.

