



Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire

By Victor Sebestyen

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Revolution 1989 is the first in-depth, authoritative account of a few months that changed the world.

At the start of 1989, six European nations were Soviet vassal states. By year's end, they had all declared national independence and embarked on the road to democracy. How did it happen so quickly? Victor Sebestyen, who was on the scene as a reporter, draws on his firsthand knowledge of the events, on scores of interviews with witnesses and participants, and on newly uncovered archival material. He tells the story through the eyes of ordinary men and women as well as through the strategic moves of world leaders. He shows how the KGB helped bring down former allies; how the United States tried to slow the process; and why the collapse of the Iron Curtain was the catalyst for the fall of the entire Soviet empire.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Victor Sebestyen on *Revolution 1989*



- The principal reasons the Soviet empire fell was the USSR's disastrous decade-long war in Afghanistan, which is eerily reminiscent of the conflict the West is involved in now. Soviet generals of 20 or 25 years ago were saying almost identical things about their war against the Mujahideen (The Army of God) as NATO soldiers are saying now fighting the Taleban. Just substitute the names and it would be hard to spot the difference. Even more topically, many of the places where battles are being fought now are the same as then.
- Almost nobody predicted the sudden and speedy collapse of Communism--and its defeat was the last war that the West won. Almost nobody in politics, diplomacy, the military, the media or academia saw it coming. Least of all was it predicted by the intelligence agencies.
- Despite trillions of dollars and rubles spent on spying in forty years of Cold War--as well as a vast industry in espionage books and movies--the spooks in the East and West were hopelessly ill informed. The CIA consistently over-emphasized the strength of the Soviet bloc. Even in the Spring of 1989 the then Director of the CIA, Robert Gates, said the Soviets would use force to keep their hold on the East Europe states and, amongst other wrong calls, said the Kremlin would "never" let the Berlin Wall come down. Robert Gates is now US Secretary for Defense.
- Ronald Reagan was a great President, but he is admired for the wrong reasons. The classic explanation for the collapse of Communism is that Reagan's tough rhetoric against the "Evil Empire" and his arms build-up defeated the Soviets. Quite the opposite is true. We can now take a more nuanced view. When he took a hard line Reagan got nowhere. In fact, it nearly led to a nuclear war by accident. He was successful when he took a soft line and began negotiating with the Russians, in particular with Mikhail Gorbachev. His greatness was in seizing that opportunity--not by ideology. It is hard to see why Reagan is a hero amongst conservatives at all.
- Western bankers did more to bring down Communism than did Presidents or Prime Ministers. Foreign debt forced a crisis in countries like Poland and East Germany and Hungary, which were spending three quarters of their income on paying the interest on loans from the West. The debt crisis--another topical theme now--was a vital factor in the story of 1989.
- The book reveals new information about how the first President Bush tried to slow down the process of change in 1989. He was worried the revolutions were happening so quickly that "global security" was at risk and that some of the East European dissidents were not ready to take power. There is a dramatic scene in the book when George Bush goes to Poland in the summer of '89 to plead with the Communist general in charge of the country to cling on to office for a while longer. —Victor Sebestyen

Review

“A must-have accounting. . . . Sebestyen’s brilliantly written narrative unfolds in brief, gripping episodes.”
—*Newsweek*

“Numerous books have [attempted] to synthesize the compelling story of the fall of communism, but *Revolution 1989* comes closest to being the essential volume. Sebestyen’s elegant narrative lays out in crisp episodes what was happening . . . throughout the tumultuous 1980s.” —*The Daily Beast*

“Full of sharp snapshots and crisp narrative . . . vivid personal glimpses and striking details.” —*The New York Review of Books*

“Vivid, panoramic. . . . The writing is taut, the scene-setting dramatic, giving the book an almost cinematic feel.” —*The Sunday Times* (London)

“A digestible and colourful history of that miraculous year.” —*The Economist*

“It’s a complex story spanning many countries, but this exciting yet deeply researched work brings it impressively to life. . . . Compelling.” —*The Observer*

“Sebestyen’s strength is his sharp focus and racy prose. . . . Here is history written like a Greek tragedy.”
—*The Times* (London)

“A compelling and illuminating account of a great drama in the history of our times which showed once again that ordinary men and women really can change the world.” —*The Mail on Sunday*

“A rollicking mix of high drama and sordid reality . . . spiced with telling quotations.” —*The Independent*

“A thrilling read. . . . Sebestyen is good at sketching the leading players but he also succinctly conveys what life was like for ordinary citizens.” —*Daily Express*

“Sebestyen brilliantly pulls together the events that led to the fall of the Soviet empire.” —*The Spectator*

“Superbly written and impressively documented.” —*Times Literary Supplement*

About the Author

Victor Sebestyen is the author of *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*. He has worked for many British newspapers, including the *Evening Standard*. Born in Budapest, he lives in England.

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Bradley Loy:

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