

## UNCIVIL SOCIETY: 1989 AND THE IMPLOSION OF THE COMMUNIST ESTABLISHMENT

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How will our current regime fall? That's what we all want to know. For those who have eyes to see, it is obvious the American regime is extremely fragile. It awaits only the inevitable crisis for it to collapse. I am staking my reputation, such as it is, on this claim. But because we cannot see precisely how this will come to pass, many believe, against all evidence, that our regime can grind on for decades. Reading Stephen Kotkin's analysis of how Communist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed in 1989 offers us insights into our own immediate future. *Uncivil Society* does not offer total clarity about the future, for nothing can do that, but it confirms many of my own thoughts, and so it must be an excellent book.

Kotkin is known primarily for his recent two volumes (with a third to come) of Stalin biography. This book, published in 2009 for the twentieth anniversary of the fall of Communism, analyzes the collapse of three Communist regimes: East Germany, Rumania, and Poland. (Kotkin also wrote an earlier book, *Armageddon Averted*, that analyzes the dying years and collapse of the Soviet Union, a matter tied to, but not exactly the same as, the collapse of satellite Communist regimes.) The author wrote this book to answer a key question—how is that Communist regimes fell, not only unexpectedly and basically overnight, but, except in Poland, without the prior existence of any organized opposition whatsoever? His short answer to his question is a cascading failure of confidence, a “political bank run.”

Kotkin's thesis is that, contrary to what is often said by uninformed Westerners, it is completely false that Communism fell as the result of a parallel civil society, which opposed and ultimately displaced the regime when it stumbled. Rather, except in Poland, an alternate civil society was utterly and completely absent. Widespread formal, organized opposition simply did not exist under Communist regimes, and it could not and did not form the core of the new civil society which sprang to life in 1989. A few dozen writers circulating *samizdat* was not opposition or any type of parallel society; disgruntled intellectuals are in no way

autonomous or represent the masses. Instead, the only actual society, the only organized set of social structures, of Communist Eastern Europe was that of the ruling class, the establishment, the “uncivil society,” which dictated every aspect of life for its own benefit—until, one day, it didn’t.

This uncivil society was the operating society, containing millions of real people (Kotkin estimates five to seven percent of the population), who interacted with each other professionally and socially, and formed a coherent whole that had actual power and presence. They lived in a parallel world, even with special shops (which I remember, because as a foreigner, I visited them as a child and as a very young man). And if you were not in the uncivil society, you were not really in any society at all, because Communist repression ensured you could not coordinate openly and honestly with more than a handful of people, and not even that safely. Nor did you have access to state-level institutions such as the courts; in effect, outside the uncivil society, you existed as a type of social ghost. (Václav Havel’s *The Power of the Powerless*, not mentioned here, famously explicated how the uncivil society kept the rest of the populace in check.) It was the uncivil society that collapsed in 1989; without its collapse, nothing would have changed. Why and how that happened is what Kotkin explores.

None of this is to imply that any Communist uncivil society was in the least competent. Aside from the insane economics, baked into the cake at the beginning were numerous perverse incentives, to lie to one’s superiors, to take no corrective action, to become intellectually dull, to promote incompetents, and to engage in endless worthless and pointless surveillance of those outside the uncivil society. Certainly, in extremis Communist societies could sometimes assemble small teams of competent men and act ruthlessly—but by 1989 they mostly lacked the will, and as seen most dramatically in Nicolae Ceausescu’s downfall in Rumania, if they lacked the will to push back, they were easily overthrown by the snowball effect of mass protest action by normal citizens, combined with the failure of the military to support the regime in its hour of need.

Kotkin wrote this book at the very end of the golden post-Communist era, when it was still, barely, possible to pretend that what had replaced Communism in Eastern Europe was what the people in 1989 had wanted,

and that the new ruling class was in any way better than the old ruling class. That myth has, in the past fifteen years, been completely exposed as a lie, and we are now seeing the playing out in Europe (and in North America) of conflict between a new ruling class, a new uncivil society, and the oppressed masses. The new ruling class is not the only civil society, but it does its best to marginalize politically, and in fact destroy, any elements of society not completely under its thumb, aiming for the same type of control that the old Communist rulers maintained in Eastern Europe. (The Wuhan Plague, for example, has recently been used as a key part of this ongoing project.) But none of these concerns appear here; Kotkin assumes, without argument, that Communism was merely the “alternative to the market and a liberal order,” and that those are unalloyed goods, when it is now clear the market as it is instantiated in the West today operates primarily for the benefit of the few, and that the liberal order is a thing that does not exist—rather, we have the order of Left dominance. We can debate whether the liberal order of political theorists such as John Stuart Mill is a good thing, but it is something we most definitely do not have, in these days of widespread persecution by combined state and corporate power of anyone not toeing the Left line.

None of this changes that knowing what happened in 1989 is important. The crucial event for the overthrow of all Communist governments was street protests. All repressive governments fear street protests, because they know, either from history or from instinct, that protests are extremely dangerous for their rule. This, not any of their stated reasons, is why the current American regime foams at the mouth with rage, based in existential fear, against the heroes of the January 6th Electoral Justice Protest. In the past week we have seen the very mild protests of the Freedom Convoy send the Canadian regime into similar spasms of hysteria, and the Convoy appears to have gained some success in its anti-regime goals, which tends to prove Kotkin’s thesis.

But street protests had taken place before in these Communist countries. What was different this time was extreme regime fragility, and the two immediate drivers of that, other than simple incompetence and sclerosis, were the refusal of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev to backstop a violent crackdown, and the economic Ponzi scheme in which all these Communist regimes had engaged. As their economies fell farther and farther behind the West in the 1960s, leading to popular

dissatisfaction and, just as importantly perhaps, ideological humiliation, the solution the Communist rulers all hit on was borrowing hard currency from a West eager to prop up Communist countries. (Why they were eager is another story for another day. And for you kids out there, “hard currency” means a currency that is convertible into others on the free market, which no Communist currency was, making it worthless outside its own borders.) These loans had to be paid back with hard currency, which could only be obtained by selling goods to the West.

The theory was that the loans would improve productivity and the ability to make goods desirable in the West, making it possible to both pay back the loans and to use hard currency to import consumer goods to keep the people from grumbling. But I traveled in Eastern Europe in the 1980s, and I can assure you nothing made there was in any way desirable in the West. This failure of the experiment, combined with oil price increases, another essential commodity that had to be bought with hard currency or begged from the Soviet Union, meant that all these countries fell into an inescapable financial hole. They could not pay back the money without extreme austerity. That’s the route the Rumanians took, as we’ll see; the Poles and East Germans just kept borrowing, ending up spending most of their new borrowing on paying interest. To this economic failure Kotkin attributes the generalized lack of confidence that overcame Communist societies—the economic crisis disproved Communist dogma and further humiliated the regime. (Kotkin notes in passing that archives show that all the Communist rulers in Eastern Europe were definitively Communist believers, not just using Communism as a front to control the masses.)

The West saw none of this. It is strange to us, but as Kotkin points out, in the 1970s, and even into the 1980s, not only did all Western analysts, including intelligence agencies, grossly overestimate the economic and political strength of Communist regimes, but common wisdom among the Western elite was that the West was facing more of a crisis than Communism. Many influential observers saw Communism as creating a successful technocratic elite, which was of course wish fulfillment, not analysis. Thus, the events of 1989 utterly astonished the entire West.

Kotkin begins with East Germany. He narrates how on October 9, 1989, 100,000 protestors marched around Leipzig, an East German showcase town with a long history of leftism and worker activism,

beginning and ending at the St. Nicholas Catholic church. This was a sudden expansion of small weekly candlelight “peace” vigils that had gone on for several years. (They were called “peace” vigils because the regime constantly trumpeted its desire for peace, and using the word was a symbol of non-defiance towards the regime.) By June, 1989, the vigils were attracting a thousand people, probably pulled by seeming change fermenting in the Soviet Union. Open calls began to be made during the vigils for permission to emigrate, though not for the end of Communism as such—that would have been far too dangerous.

East Germany had experienced unrest before, notably in 1953, when Soviet troops killed hundreds of workers protesting food shortages, wage cuts, and Communism in general. These events made the East German regime keenly aware of the need for consumer goods to keep the people from crossing the red line of unhappiness. At the same time, the regime operated a huge secret police organization, the Stasi, whose full-time employees, relative to population, were nearly a hundred times more numerous than Hitler’s Gestapo, and that’s not counting the innumerable paid informants also used. All this, even though the Stasi identified, in 1989, only 2,500 “opposition activists,” with 60 of those being “hard core.”

While the relatively small vigils continued, Hungary had opened its border with Austria (less on principle and more because of expense), and East Germans began to flee through Hungary. The vigils, which had morphed into marches, grew during September, attracting more Stasi attention, more arrests, and more water cannon and beatings. Marches began in Dresden as well. Erich Honecker, the East German communist dictator, authorized a collection of force more than adequate to, and designed for, a Tiananmen Square-type crackdown. Yet he did not order an assault, and nobody below him would take responsibility independently, so nothing was done. Abortive attempts were made to identify and neutralize ringleaders—but there were none. Thus, nobody could or would stop the bank run, and the state collapsed, quite literally overnight. Communists either got jobs in the new economy, or they retired and were pensioned off. (As Anna Funder points out in *Stasiland*, almost none of them were punished for actual crimes. And instead of all those who were not overt criminals, but simply part of the regime, being lustrated and rusticated, they were allowed to keep the privilege

of participation in a society they had actively and voluntarily terrorized for decades. This was a great error. I intend to make sure a similar error does not occur in future America.)

This spontaneous organization of an opposition in Leipzig was accomplished through what Kotkin labels “niches”—small circles of like-minded friends and associates, communicating in person. While a dissident organization formed in September, New Forum, received press attention in the West, it had no relevance whatsoever to what was happening on the ground. Many of the Leipzig niches revolved in some way around St. Nicholas, but some were not religious at all. Such nimble, informal groups were essentially immune to attack, infiltration, or any kind of counter-measure, and through these information about what was actually happening, as opposed to what could be heard in the regime media, could be found. The Communist regime, of course, just like our current American regime, spent a great deal of time and resources trying to make sure its opponents felt they were alone and isolated. Niches were, for the regime, a big problem, and are similarly a problem for the American regime—though the internet has so atomized society that forming them is more difficult and less likely, something also compensated for to some degree by the internet’s technological capabilities, even with the massive censorship campaigns constantly being conducted.

The niches needed information to convey among themselves, to know what was happening and what to do, which shows the existence of media outside of regime media is crucial to overthrowing any fragile regime. In Eastern Europe, this was radio and television from the West. In America today, it is the myriad alternative sources available on the internet, giving the lie to regime propaganda, which the regime cannot shut wholly down, so it merely hinders them as much as possible, chants “misinformation” as a magic incantation to dispel the evil spirits drifting in through the cracks, and hopes it all goes away. Spoiler alert—it won’t.

The feared Stasi did nothing. As Malcolm Kyeyune has pointed out, in all regimes, the secret police operate to inform the regime, not to actively prop it up when it is falling. If the regime will not listen to the secret police, or direct them to action, even a huge secret police force has no impact whatsoever, and will quickly dissolve. So it happened here.

The collapse of the Rumanian regime followed a similar path, although with more violence and with the Communists ultimately keeping much power, under a different branding. Ceausescu was among the most brutal Communist tyrants, and his solution to having to repay huge loans of hard currency was to save money by literally turning off the power for much of the time, including in winter. (Kotkin, throughout the book, quotes various of the jokes told by the people under Communism. One Rumanian joke went, “What’s small, dark, and knocking at the door?” Answer: “The future.”) As in East Germany, no organized opposition whatsoever existed in Rumania; the regime collapsed as the result of a Hungarian pastor in Temesvár, László Tőkés, protesting his eviction from his church. (Rumania has a large Hungarian minority, all in Transylvania, the result of having being given Transylvania, which had been part of Hungary for more than a thousand years, after World War I, because, as they also did in World War II, the Rumanians switched sides when they saw who was going to win.)

The bank run in Rumania was even faster, and had a greater fall for the dictator, than in East Germany. Protests over the eviction of Tőkés took place on December 15; by December 25, Ceausescu (and his equally evil wife) had been executed after a brief trial, with soldiers clamoring to be permitted to be part of the firing squad. In an prequel of 2022 America (and Canada), the regime labeled all opposition “fascism” and the result of “fringe elements” opposed to real Rumanians, whom the regime informed the nation all supported the regime without reservation. (We laugh at this when done in Rumania, but strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, many Americans, and Canadians, actually take our regime’s exactly parallel statements on the Electoral Justice Protest and the Freedom Convoy—self-contradictory obvious falsehoods—as anything but total lying propaganda. No doubt many Rumanians thought the same, however, until reality hit them over the head, and bullets soon after tore through Ceausescu.) Kotkin discusses, and if you have not seen it you should find and watch it, the famous moment when Ceausescu, giving a speech along these lines to workers bussed in, becomes the target of abuse and realizes that his reign is over. (It would be nice to see Justin Trudeau have a similar moment.) As in East Germany, the regime had prepared for a violent crackdown, but will

was lacking, and so no crackdown occurred. The bank run accelerated as people lost their fear.

In Rumania, existing niches were less common, but workplace meetings called by the authorities during the crisis in order to instruct the workers on what was really happening quickly served the same function. This shows that people oppressed by a regime will adopt nearly any situation to set up mechanisms to communicate the truth and discuss action. Most important of all, the military turned on Ceausescu, while again the secret police did nothing (although mysterious men with weapons, apparently from hidden caches, did fight battles in the streets, famously with the Olympic shooting team, a set of events that Kotkin says will never be fully unraveled). Kotkin says that ultimately “the Securitate [the Rumanian secret police] was a state of mind.”

As Kotkin points out, two years before there had been similar unrest in Brassó (also in Transylvania), which was successfully put down by violence and largely concealed from the populace at large, but that was before Gorbachev had undermined the resolve of key members of the regime. It was not that Gorbachev relaxed controls, so much as it was that Gorbachev revealed, and acknowledged, the inherent fatal contradictions of the regime. Kotkin also notes that Ceausescu had been for decades not only propped up by Western loans, as were the other Warsaw Pact countries, but by overt support from the West due to his supposed “maverick” tendencies. Ceausescu co-opted the existing intellectual class, and the Rumanian Orthodox Church, even more so than other Communist countries, yet this did not help him in the end. (It is worth reading Czesław Miłosz’s *The Captive Mind* to understand how intellectuals approached Communism. In the end, the opinions and actions of intellectuals were far less relevant to the fall of Communism than those intellectuals would have it, at the time and now. Havel, for example, opposed street demonstrations. But it is still an instructive exercise.)

Ultimately, the Rumanian regime simply recreated itself, under a new name and with less ideology and overt repression. When workers complained that the new boss was the same as the old boss, they were beaten by hired thugs. Kotkin complains that Rumania has therefore been unable to create a liberal order, by which he means something approximating Western Europe. I don’t know enough about Rumania



to say, but I suspect that the problem is that, perhaps less obviously and dramatically than Poland, the populace doesn't want liberal democracy; they want traditional values and ways of life (though religion has fallen away in Rumania as well). They got a good deal of corruption and dubious government too, it sounds like.

Kotkin treats Poland, to some degree the exception, last. Poland had a decade-old well-organized opposition, centered on the Solidarity trade union. Poland also had an existing, if repressed, civil society, though it certainly had its own uncivil society. Most farmland was not collectivized; the Church had survived a period of extreme persecution (inevitable in all Communist countries) and thrived since, though it was not overly oppositional to the regime; and regime opponents communicated more or less freely, even if they could not widely broadcast their views. The regime had the same problem with borrowing; but unlike in Rumania, any attempt to raise prices or significantly reduce living conditions triggered workers' protests, reducing regime freedom of action. This is not to say the regime was any less vicious than, say, East Germany's. Most famously (although, oddly, Kotkin does not mention it), in 1984 the secret police murdered a Catholic priest for raising his voice, Jerzy Popiełuszko. Still, the Solidarity attitude (one those opposed to the American Left should adopt) was "We know that we will win, because the lie cannot last eternally."

Protests had happened off and on for years, and had led to martial law in 1981. It was not these, but gradual wearing down, along with the debt crisis and softening Soviet support, that led to the regime negotiating with the opposition. This was unique, since no other country had an opposition. (Kotkin cites Andras Sajó (who taught me European Union "law" in law school, but that's another story), that in Hungary the regime actually created a formal opposition from nothing in order to have something to be seen negotiating with, as things fell apart.) In Poland, the regime agreed to elections, which they assumed they would win. But they were wrong, and they were doubly wrong, because they screwed up the process so it highlighted their total lack of support. The final nail in the coffin was allowing a televised debate, watched by three-quarters of the population, between Solidarity leader Lech Walesa and one of the regime's leaders, assuming that the ignorant tradesman

would be shown up by the slick Communist. Walesa wiped the floor with his opponent.

Of course, the Poles, even more than the Germans and the Rumanians, were not risking their lives to get the supposed blessings of liberal democracy, or so they could freely buy blue jeans, as quite a few ignorant Westerners now claim with total certainty. They wanted God, the nation, and traditional ways of life, in that order. They didn't get it. And Kotkin touches on what Ryszard Legutko has expertly analyzed—that the actual members of the uncivil society were never punished and most of them prospered greatly under the new regimes, successfully bending them to their will, in large part because the ruling classes of the West found much more in common with Communism and ex-Communists than they did with the far more powerful, and far more important in the fall of formal Communism, forces of religion and nationalism. Again, let's not make that mistake here after we sweep away our own regime.

The analogy of 2022 America to these events is by no means exact. America is a (diminished) hegemon; our regime does not depend on an external, more powerful regime's support (though, by the same token, it cannot obtain help from outside). It stands or falls on its own. Still, many parallels exist, including some even eerie in their resonance, such as our recent defeat in Afghanistan. Our regime also has its back against the wall—its members cannot, in practice, emigrate except as beggars, and they correctly fear that if they relinquish power, unlike the Communists in Eastern Europe, they will be lucky if loss of power and property is the worst that happens to them. They have no hope of dominating or profiting from a future regime. Thus, a few street protests may not be enough; the bigger the obstacle, the harder the push needed.

One other crucial lesson emerges from these pages. It is not enough, to obtain a fully remade society, simply to have the current regime fold its cards and go home. It probably requires a Man of Destiny to seize the reins and ensure follow-through, both on eliminating all vestiges of the past regime and creating a new society. In Eastern Europe, the masses wanted to return to the civil society they had within living memory, for after all Communism had ruled for "only" forty years. That chance was stolen from them, as their elites, both Communist and non-Communist, sold them out to men such as George Soros, philo-Communists eager to profit from the opening of borders while imposing their filthy left-wing,

if not precisely Communist, ideology, what is now often referred to as globohomo, on people who just wanted their country and their churches back. They succeeded wildly, corrupting the youth of all these countries such that religious beliefs and birthrates plunged, the most talented sought work in the West, and the principles of the nation were sold for thirty pieces of NGO silver. That is, they succeeded everywhere, until Poland and Hungary rose up and threw out the former Communists and their allies, sparking an existential struggle, the outcome of which is yet to be determined, but will probably be subsumed within larger events in the near future. Russia, on the other hand, escaped this trap, and it was probably because, after ten years of chaos imposed by the West, Vladimir Putin imposed order on internal looters and cut out external looters. Perhaps, as Poland and Hungary show, over time you can move in the right direction without a strongman, but it's a thin reed. The Man of Destiny is a proven solution.

The main takeaway for this instant, however, is that just because our regime appears in control today, does not mean it will remain in control tomorrow. Thus, be of good cheer, for tomorrow is a fresh day, full of promise.