

By Roger Green, Principal Reviewer, U K Defence Forum

Victor Sebestyen is a Hungarian by birth who left Hungary when he was an infant with his parents as refugees. He is a journalist who has worked on many British newspapers and was Foreign Editor and chief leader writer at the London Evening Standard. He covered the war in the former Yugoslavia and his first book 'Twelve Days' on the 1956 Hungarian Uprising was widely acclaimed. During 1989 he reported widely from Eastern Europe on the collapse of Communism and this experience forms the basis of this book.

It is not a deep analytical work into the underlying reasons for the collapse of Communism. It is more a commentary on the events throughout 1989 as each of the USSR satellite nations foundered. It provides a view of the Russian leadership and the intrigue surrounding how Gorbachev came to power after Andropov, although he was not Andropov's chosen successor. There is a clear insight into the development of Gorbachev's policy to these satellite countries and his recognition of the fundamental problems with the Russian economy that he recognised could not continue to financially support the economies of Eastern Europe. However, Sebestyen observes how he was faced with many senior colleagues who did not see the future in the same way and obstructed his reforms whenever and wherever they could.

It is of interest that as events unfolded to read how Gorbachev used them to strengthen his position and to influence the far wider economic reforms that he wanted to implement. The development of his relations with the major Western democracies was always on Gorbachev's mind during this period, as he desperately wanted to end the arms race that was distorting the Russian economy and preventing the reforms. Of particular interest given the eventual outcome in November 1989, is the relationship between Gorbachev and each of the leaders of the satellite states. Sebestyen demonstrates how Gorbachev decided to distance himself from the Presidents and Party Leaders of these countries in order to force them to resolve their own domestic and economic problems as well as the political frictions that arose between them and their neighbouring Communist allies. However, Gorbachev was a staunch believer in communism and although he wanted to see major economic and domestic reforms in these countries he expected them to be carried out within the communist party system.

The book is not an easy one to read as Sebestyen has chosen to address the problems of each of the satellite countries in turn but in the order that key events occurred across the countries. This technique makes it difficult to follow the roles of the key politicians and leaders in each of these countries as the reader is brought back to the next key event. It is well researched and has a formidable reference list and bibliography that underpins the wealth of facts that support the commentary. The written references by key party and opposition figures are supplemented by the personal accounts recorded at the time and interviews given by those involved. However, the amount of detail that presumably Sebestyen judged would add veracity to his account often results in an overkill of information. For example, it was unnecessary to mention

the names of the three members of the Pope's Curio who were instrumental in the passage of funds from the US to Solidarity; it is enough to know that the Vatican was involved.

The Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and how to disengage without undermining the Afghan Communist leadership was a major headache for Gorbachev. It took him many years before he acted despite repeatedly debating the issue in Moscow. He was concerned about the domestic reaction to a withdrawal from a country where so many Russian soldiers had died. And in a further parallel to current events, he reflected on the fact that his predecessors in going into Afghanistan had ignored the lessons of history from the British that Afghanistan is a country that cannot be conquered. An interesting counterpoint to Gorbachev's objective of withdrawal is that the CIA totally misread the situation over time and was lamentably ill informed of Soviet intentions there.

Although from the outset Gorbachev had made clear his intentions to keep the satellite countries at arms length and not to use Soviet troops in support of the local regimes, it is amazing that the leaders and party chiefs of these countries took so long to recognise that they had to take charge of their own destinies. This was especially so in terms of their economies, the majority of which were perilously close to bankruptcy and which Gorbachev had no intention or the means of bailing out. What is clear from Sebastyen's commentary is that these leaders were blind to events and the inevitable conclusion is that they were arrogant and complacent whilst their state and party organisations were incompetent and inefficient.

The Romanian leadership was an extreme case in point where Ceauşescu refused to believe what was happening despite the ill organised opposition, until he was arrested and 3 days later he and his wife were shot. In East Germany the key to events was the illness of Honecker that virtually paralysed the leadership. There was no organised response to the opposition who saw an opportunity having been well aware of what had happened in neighbouring states. The 'breach' in the Berlin Wall occurred because of an error by a party official in not fully reading a briefing document prior to a radio interview when he said that the people could travel freely with immediate effect. Although it was planned to lift travel restrictions the following day the regime had meant to monitor closely the travel of their citizens.

The downfall of the Soviet Empire took different forms in each of the countries. Some states had reasonably well-organised opposition parties that struggled over many years and through a succession of compromises managed to unseat their communist leaders, whilst others were opportunists that were almost surprised by their own success and subsequently had difficulty in capitalising on their emergence into positions of power.

For the people who lived through this period in the West and recall the headlines over that decade, this book will add substance and reveal the facts that generated many of the myths and much conjecture that emerged at that time. For younger readers for whom these events are only history, it will provide a detailed insight of what conditions were like in the Soviet satellite countries and the harsh rule that the people endured under Communism and how the people themselves threw off the communist yoke

This book is a compelling account and detailed record of those momentous historical events

that resulted in the demise of the Soviet Union, but readers who are looking for a rigorous and in-depth analysis of the East-West politics of the decade leading to this downfall will be disappointed.

Revolution 1989 - The Fall of the Soviet Empire.

By Victor Sebestyen

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