

Meaning, Memory, and Movements: 1989 and the Collapse of Socialism

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The “meaning” of 1989 in retrospect pertains both to events and to modes of analysis. For many, 1989 is an icon of the terminal weakening of Soviet socialism and of unification in Europe. For others, it represents a series of events that scholars and regional specialists were neither able to anticipate nor to explain fully in causal terms. Rather than isolating 1989 itself I prefer to see the years between 1988 and 1992 as a temporal axis around which many circumstances of global significance turned to different degrees. Study of the Polish Round Table and of the conference, “Communism’s Negotiated Collapse: The Polish Round Table, Ten Years Later,” offers general insight into the significance of this period for scholarship in the social sciences.

Proceedings from the conference exemplify and give shape to important disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates about interpretation and analysis. First and foremost, participant accounts highlight tensions between inductive and deductive modes of analysis and between the relative value of explanations of events that are grounded in the particular and those that are generalizable and abstract. For example, Prime Minister Rakowski finds the roots of the Round Table in “unique traits” of Polish history: “All this put together caused...the fact that after 1956, since the beginning of 1957, Poland has been able to maintain its own uniqueness in comparison to all the remaining countries of the Soviet bloc, and this very uniqueness at a certain moment, in '76, results in the appearance of an organized opposition, that is the Committee for the Defense of Workers.”¹ Similarly, Ambassador Ciosek explains the ideas underlying the Round Table as being “created at a specific time and under specific conditions in

¹ *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse: The Polish Round Table, Ten Years Later. A Conference at the University of Michigan. April 7-10, 1999. English Transcript of the Conference Proceedings*, trans. by Kasia Kietlinska, ed. by Donna Parmelee (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Russian and East European Studies, 1999), 21-22. Page numbers in footnotes referring to the Round Table transcript correspond to the original printed version of the transcript, which was provided to the contributors to this guide for reference. These page numbers may not correspond to the transcript currently available on the web or to subsequent printed versions.

Poland.”² In contrast, others argue in terms of structural factors, such as Professor Chrzanowski, who says that the “Round Table did not cause decomposition in the imperial structure of the Soviet Union; it was rather the consequence of that decomposition.”³ Zbigniew Janas, likewise, attributes the cause of protest in the 1980’s in Poland to “the lack of balance between the material needs and expectations of the society and the life conditions that the system could provide.”⁴ The latter type of explanation views the collapse of communism in Poland as a function of systemic forces derived from outside rule. The conference proceedings do not resolve the tension between these divergent explanatory frameworks, but embody both logics, alternately providing insight into an explanation of 1989 that is grounded in a centuries’ long Polish historical narrative and an explanation that is grounded in synchronic social, economic, and political structures. Advocates of each paradigm can interrogate their own assumptions and theoretical dispositions with the reflective accounts of participants in the events.

For scholars of collective memory and historical memory in the humanities and social sciences, the conference proceedings challenge other assumptions. Whether reforms are credited to visionary actors or are used to discredit weak politicians has far-ranging implications for collective narratives of change and the relationship of the present to the past. In the words of Professor Kaczyński,

But whether for the generation of Polish politicians who played a key role in Solidarity but who remembered communism much better than my generation, the syndrome...? I mean older than forty-year olds at that time, the previous generation, those people who well remembered the ‘50’s and still remembered the World War II years, well, they had a certain syndrome, but it wasn’t gratitude for the tormentor so much as it was a syndrome of thinking with memory. It was a certain point of view, where communism acquired some features which made it seem extremely dangerous, even when it was no longer dangerous. And that syndrome of thinking with memory to some extent did effect the shape of Polish politics in the early period of the ‘90’s.⁵

“Collective memory” is commonly imbued with explanatory power, as in the view expressed by Adam Michnik, that our “patriotism is about opposition to any dictatorship. It is also about memory. We’re trying to remember that in the past it wasn’t only foreign power that caused Poland’s defeat, but it was also our own cantankerousness and preference for private gain, our lack of capability for internal compromise....”⁶ Memories that are considered to be collective may also be fluid,

² Ibid., 60.

³ Ibid., 28.

⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁵ Ibid., 186.

⁶ Ibid., 235.

changing, contested, generational and exploited circumstantially. Whereas past injustice is easily assumed to motivate collectivities into action, the conference proceedings remind readers that narratives of the past are selective and often applied metaphorically or metonymically to present circumstances. Participants in the Round Table themselves reflect differently upon the influence of the past upon their own actions. Therefore, while “collective memory” may be an apt label for a particular discourse or ideology, it should not be treated as a monolith for purposes of analysis.

The conference proceedings also prompt reflection on the definition of a single event. Over and over, actors, when challenged with the consequences of political and economic change, reconstruct their own self-consciousness in participation as having been processual. Whether the conditions that produced the Round Table began centuries or weeks before its first meeting, participants record differential awareness of themselves as “making history,” to the extent that some are even now reluctant to view it as finite, bounded, or finished. Conference transcripts re-animate debates about structure, process, and agency. While memoirs abound among historical sources, retrospective dialogues among interlocutors on the nature and significance of collective past actions are scarce, to say the least.

Solidarity can be compared to social movements and national movements everywhere from the standpoint of theories of social organization and change. However, in particular, it is illuminating to compare the Round Table with the dynamics of engagement between Soviet nationalities and the state in the late 1980's. Of these, I can speak best to a comparison with the Karabagh Movement, in three areas. The first is the sociology of the movement itself under socialism; the second is the process of accommodation or non-accommodation between the opposition and the state; and the third is the aftermath—the implications of agreements reached for national politics after 1991 and the reverberations of choices and decisions made by political actors at the time of the movement itself.

The Karabagh Movement emerged in February 1988 in response to a vote by the Supreme Soviet of Nagorno Karabagh in favor of a transfer of status from autonomous oblast within Azerbaijan to the same within Armenia. This vote reflected widespread perceptions by the majority Armenian population of Nagorno Karabagh (eighty percent) that their oblast was underdeveloped or mis-developed by Azerbaijani authorities. However, the vote by the Karabagh Supreme Soviet was not ratified by Azerbaijan (and the by now well known ethnoterritorial conflict escalated into war between Armenians and Azeris). A February 20 demonstration by 3,000 environmentalists outside of Yerevan added the status of Mountainous Karabagh to its agenda, and by word of mouth, attracted crowds of 150,000 within two days. A spirit of solidarity and equality grew among demonstrators, as crowds swelled to 300,000. Treating the status of Karabagh as a test-case for perestroika, Armenians appealed to the Central Committee in Moscow to unify Armenia and Karabagh through due process.

In Armenia, anti-Azerbaijani sentiments peaked after episodes of violence against Armenians, such as those in Sumgait (February) and Khojalu (September). When reactionary violence against Armenians in Azerbaijan went unrecognized by the Soviet press and unpunished by Soviet authorities, collective sentiment turned against the central government. Anti-Soviet feelings reached their apogee after troops clashed with demonstrators in July, killing one veterinary student near the airport. In May, popular opinion turned against the Soviet Armenian government, and, in particular, against First Secretary Karen Demirchyan, for pandering to Moscow in the interests of his own career and fortune rather than his nation. Seen as an impediment to transparent political process, criticism of Demirchyan became a touchstone for the introduction of democratization in movement discourse by activists. Soon thereafter, calls for Armenia's independence were introduced into demonstrations.

The Karabagh Movement was a movement based in Armenia itself, in support of Armenians in Nagorno Karabagh. In 1988 and 1989, Armenian public intellectuals from Karabagh and from Yerevan traveled to Moscow as a delegation to persuade Moscow to overturn the decision of the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan. Yet movement activists, largely members of Yerevan's intelligentsia, were not always a united front. When one member of the Karabagh Organizing Committee came out in support of cooperation with Demirchyan in May, belittling the notions that the movement might serve as a vehicle for democratization and that the movement's agenda should be extended beyond the status of Mountainous Karabagh, a new Karabagh Committee was formed. Though its members eventually became high officials in Armenia's independent government (including President Levon Ter Petrossian), their movement activism was not a vehicle to gain power, nor did they support an immediate transition to independence. They did share a commitment to collective decision-making and political transparency. At times, their views differed from popular positions, and their thought diverged on issues ranging from the foreign policy of an independent Armenia to the means of grassroots organization, meetings, and strikes.

In addition to mass meetings in a city square, a network of committees was formed largely through workplaces. These networks disseminated information about the situation and through them, strikes of different kinds were organized. Despite some boldly apparent structural similarities in the organization of Solidarity and the Karabagh Movement, Armenians almost never explicitly looked to the former as a model. Most, I think, would say that this was the result of lack of information about Solidarity. However, via *samizdat* literature and underground networks, Armenians were better informed about and made explicit reference to national movements in the Baltics. References to Poland that I observed in my study of political discourse in that period were limited to likenesses among victims of earlier crimes by states (one Armenian political poster lists Buchenwald, Auschwitz and Katyń along with sites of violence against Armenians). Certainly the contrast between a movement for national self-

determination by a Soviet national minority and a trade union movement in Poland entails profound substantive and structural differences. Nevertheless, I perceive parallels in the underground organization of a mass movement within a totalitarian regime, particularly as participants strove to organize themselves democratically within a hierarchical system of workplaces. The flow of information and the emergence of an ethic of participation within these movements merit comparative study.

Closer to the theme of the Round Table itself, it is important to note that independence for Armenia was not negotiated, and that one legacy of the way in which the Soviet Union dissolved is the stagnation of attempts to settle the Karabagh conflict. Armenians were largely unsuccessful in their negotiations with Moscow between 1988 and 1990—Moscow neither prosecuted perpetrators of anti-Armenian violence nor accommodated Armenian claims. Peaceful protests were forcefully disbanded by Soviet military troops, and Armenian accounts of events—conflict in Azerbaijan in particular—were censored and/or misrepresented by the Soviet press. The Karabagh Movement was institutionalized as the Armenian National Movement in September 1988, and Karabagh Committee member Levon Ter Petrossian was popularly elected President of the Armenian Supreme Soviet in 1990. Armenia passed a referendum on independence, but did not become independent until December of 1991. This situation recalls one theme of the conference proceedings, in the form of the claim that communism's collapse could never have been negotiated had not both sides (the government and the opposition) been equally weak. Relations between Armenia and Moscow were clearly never symmetrical. While the equivalence of weakness explanation of the efficacy of the Polish Round Table appears (to this outside observer) to be a popular one in contemporary Polish political discourse, it merits study by international relations theorists (power transition theorists et al.) and other structural analysts of systemic, political change. Poles and Armenians had a common enemy of sorts in Moscow. The role of a dominant outside power in national politics is equally fertile for structural analysis and a study of the coalition and fraction of political parties within Poland and Armenia relative to Moscow might illuminate nationality politics and identity more broadly. Such research would also contribute to the study of decolonization elsewhere in the world.

A third, ongoing topic for comparison is the political career trajectories of opposition and communist leaders after independence from Moscow. As I will discuss below, popular, teleological narratives in which opposition leaders were setting themselves up to be the next big criminal magnates and perpetrators of corruption in the new era abound in both contexts. Before independence, opposition activists' credibility and authority may have been enhanced by arrest or exile, and they may have been seen to embody characteristics of dedication to the nation. After independence, a conservative backlash can view such risk-taking as individualistic and self-interested. The "icing" or "frosting" that Solidarity activists are now accused of having pursued

resembles popular criticisms of officials in the first Armenian government, who were elected on the basis of their platform in the Armenian National Movement. I will not digress here into an essay on contemporary politics in Armenia, but revisionism, denouncement, and rehabilitation of former communist leaders are common themes. Neither Solidarity (as the conference proceedings make clear) nor the Karabagh Movement was as monolithic in its agenda as they have sometimes appeared. In the case of the Karabagh Committee, members disagreed subtly and not so subtly amongst themselves and with the public on matters such as the nature of relations with Armenia's neighbors (Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). A comparative study that disaggregated partisan politics and personality politics in the aftermath of Soviet rule would be useful in the theorization of political legitimacy more generally.

Finally, the Round Table offers a case for comparative study of overt and covert interventions by external states in domestic political change. Ambassador Davis mentions the important role that the Polish-American diaspora played in influencing US policy towards Poland at the time,⁷ and Helen Davis speaks of the role of her "salon" in introducing Polish opposition members to one another.⁸ The Armenian-American diaspora has played a similar role in influencing US policy towards Armenia and its neighbors, as María Torres reminds us the Cuban diaspora has in influencing US policy towards Cuba. These cases, among many others, offer insight into Cold War politics and the battles being waged between the US and the USSR in third party states. In these examples, political process cannot be viewed outside the context of the balance of power between Cold War adversaries.

The Polish Round Table and the proceedings from Communism's Negotiated Collapse are both useful for discussion in the college classroom. I teach a junior/senior history seminar entitled, "History, Memory, and Identity," as well as a freshman seminar entitled "Nationality and the Soviet Union," which explores the national composition of the Soviet Union, the development and significance of Soviet nationalities' policy, and the emergence of nationalisms in the late 1980's. The Round Table, and the conference proceedings, would fit well into each of these courses.

In the first of these two courses, I have, in past semesters, compared the Armenian pan-national movement (the Karabagh Movement) to Solidarity in connection with the use of historical consciousness (as described above). In the case of both movements, alternative narratives of the past were circulated and popularized, challenging official accounts sanctioned by a totalitarian state. Also, in both cases, the re-narrativization of national history emancipated "national" identity and fueled the mobilization of grass-roots support and its organization. In particular, I have used *We All Fought for Freedom: Women in Poland's Solidarity Movement* by Kristi Long (as well as her earlier article that appeared in *American Ethnologist*) in order to compare the

⁷ Ibid., 45-46.

⁸ Ibid., 50.

iconography of underground Solidarity stamps with the system of historical reference used in Armenian political posters exhibited during the Karabagh Movement between 1988 and 1990 (my analysis of which appears in my 1996 doctoral dissertation in anthropology at the University of Chicago). In these ways, which I have already described, both Solidarity and the Karabagh Movement nicely illustrate linkages between popular, national histories and the experience of national identity.

Beyond the comparison of national movements in socialist settings, I can imagine using the Round Table in several other ways – and more particularly, I can envision using the proceedings from “Communism’s Negotiated Collapse.” References to Polish identity appear throughout the conference proceedings in ways that legitimate imperatives to action. Ideologies of good and bad Poles underlie us-and-them distinctions between the opposition and the government, and political actors are retroactively judged by Polish society in terms of dedication to the nation on the basis of the consequences of their actions. The words of Prime Minister Rakowski illustrate this point well. He says of contemporary stereotypes regarding the Round Table, “[o]n the one side in short we had completely white angels and on the other side we had black angels who sold their souls to the devil. And the devil was in Moscow. So bringing it all to political categories I’m supposed to be a worse kind of a Pole and I cannot agree with that decidedly. I’m not any worse from the one who was yelling the day before yesterday that I shouldn’t be allowed to speak.”⁹ Similarly Bishop Dembowski says, “a good Pole is a Pole who loves Poland and is a good person, that is a person who in his choices takes into account moral values, who desires to serve the common good of his homeland.”¹⁰ On the same theme, Konstanty Gebert underscores the role of national identity underlying civic empowerment

If we are in it all together because we are all Poles then those of us who are not Poles are in it together less. It is difficult to discover this Poland being an almost entirely monoethnic country and the national minorities essentially identifying not only with the Polish state but with Polish society but in fact we have been to an extent deluding ourselves by believing that we have set up a civil society. What we have set up is a national society masquerading as a civil society. Successfully, because almost all members of the potential civil society are in fact members of the existing national society. I would not easily give up this national society for the sake of ideological purity, but I do remember what a friend’s uncle used to repeat: do not scare me with nations, I want to live in society.¹¹

Participants in the conference continuously resist binary stereotypes of us/them, good/bad, Pole/non-Pole with respect to popular characterization of the intentions and

⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

consequences of their actions. In so doing, they underscore the conceptual intertwining of a moral discourse regarding the nation and defining national membership, and post-hoc interpretations of political participation. In the study of contemporary history, we can explore the ways in which moral discourse and interpretation of the recent past contribute to ideologies of national identity

In the same course, I would also draw students' attention to the difference between history and (what we might call) "History" as they appear in participants' accounts. In this distinction, "history" refers to a plain account of the past, whereas "History" alludes to an overarching, meta-narrative that implicitly interprets facts for its readers. Round Table participants express discomfort with the latter vis à vis the conference, out of concern that the events of 1989 not be mythologized. For example, Stanisław Ciosek says,

history cannot be divided into pieces. That is against natural tendencies of historians who would like everything in order, would like the maximum number of facts gathered. The situation in Poland, on the other hand, and this topic that we are discussing, cannot be put into the brackets of the period of the two or three years we're focusing on here. Things stem one from the other, and their consequences are of utmost importance, so I am going to mess up our topic a little bit with my speech.¹²

This concern with the formation of a legacy also stems from concerns about moral judgements in the present. Ciosek later says, "presenting history in such black and white terms is not just and it seems to me that our seminar should lead us to some just and honest assessments."¹³ Likewise, Adam Michnik says, "we should not create legends. What we should tell our contemporaries and particularly our children is a true picture of reality. And here the Round Table may be perceived from a variety of perspectives."¹⁴ In contradistinction, President Kwaśniewski says that the fact of the conference being organized at the University of Michigan is "the final, major proof that the Round Table is part of history."¹⁵ Common to these comments is the notion that the past becomes "History" only with distance, be it temporal or geographical. Ambivalence about whether or not a series of events can be fully understood ten years later embodies theoretical and disciplinary debates about appropriate units of study and analysis. For students, this aspect of the conference proceedings could be used to explore the nature and limits of perspectives: how can we "do" contemporary history? How far must we be from a subject to subject it to scholarly analysis? And, are narrators of history ever free from interests or stakes in the stories they tell?

¹² Ibid., 40.

¹³ Ibid., 64.

¹⁴ Ibid., 126.

¹⁵ Ibid., 245.

I can also imagine using the conference proceedings from “Communism’s Negotiated Collapse” in the second of my two related courses (“Nationality and the Soviet Union”). In this course, I focus less on identity per se, and more on distinctions among the past, history, and historiography. I take Armenian national historiography as an example, and illustrate the ways in which historical sources undergird polemical scholarship as well as policy. For example, I use a collection of primary sources related to the status of Nagorno Karabagh (beginning in the nineteenth century and tracing its status as an autonomous oblast in Azerbaijan up to the late 1980’s from its status in the Russian Empire). Walking through the compilation, I elicit students’ comments about what is elided from the presentation of individual texts, what is lost in translation, which impressions emerge from the juxtaposition of texts that might not have flowed from the original context, and what kinds of other primary sources we can imagine having been selected out of the collection. Then, we read two articles on the Karabagh conflict—one authored by a pro-Armenian scholar and the other authored by a pro-Azeri scholar—and we walk through the sequence of events they describe, step by step, to see that they offer significantly different chronologies based upon the *very same single collection of primary sources* that we have just read. (Here I recall the words of Bishop Bronisław Dembowski regarding Biblical quotation: “let me bring your attention to the fact that while tempting Jesus, Satan was quoting the Bible.”!)

The conference proceedings would be useful in exercises like these. First, they show how popular memory of a series of events can differ from the way the nature of those events is recalled by actors who participated in them. Second, they show how the same sequence of events can be interpreted in numerous ways, depending on political and personal interests entailed. For example, Round Table participants have been accused of pursuing “frosting” in the negotiations—angling to modify a political field for personal and professional benefit. Such accusations emerge in participants’ accounts, as well as in comments from the audience. Yet participants themselves largely recall the degree of risk and uncertainty they were embracing in undertaking the negotiations and deny having been motivated by self-interest. Indeed, they powerfully argue that in the flood of events, outcomes were uncertain enough to make strategies of profit-maximization impossible to identify. A related issue is the divergence of views among members of the opposition, among communists, and between the two groups. No two individual actors offer an identical account of the Round Table. Grażyna Staniszevska, a Solidarity activist, disagrees with analyst Jane Curry that Round Table participants thought the system was being dismantled; she says, “I think that if anybody had thought that the system was being dismantled, the Round Table would not have happened at all.”¹⁶ She further states that her experiences differed from those of Solidarity leader Zbigniew Bujak because she was organizing Solidarity in the mountains. Thus, not only do individual experiences differ, but the experience of Solidarity by the center and the

¹⁶ *Communism’s Negotiated Collapse*, 144.

periphery differ structurally as well. Neither Poland nor the opposition was monolithic in the process. This example could be the basis for a classroom exercise in identifying multiple perspectives within and among sources as well as the multiple ways in which written sources can be used. Finally, the conference proceedings offer insight into the definition of or identification of an "event." Repeatedly, speakers emphasize the fact that they perceived themselves to be engaged in a "process," whereas commentators in retrospect attribute motives to actors on the basis of known outcomes. The temptation to read sources teleologically is strong among undergraduates as well as among pundits; the conference proceedings offer an opportunity for students to interrogate the bounded nature of events that is often implicit in analysis.

In both of these courses that I teach, the Polish Round Table is a very appropriate case study for comparison with nationalism in the Soviet Union in the late 1980's. The means of illegal grassroots organization under totalitarian rule, the conceptualization of national rights and human rights infringed upon by the state, the role of historical injustice in an emancipatory ideology, and the eventual dynamics of engagement with the state are features shared by such movements. Further, the conference proceedings themselves serve as a collection of primary documents that can be exploited fruitfully to illustrate methodological and epistemological problems of historical analysis.

In conclusion, I would like to add that reading the transcript of the conference proceedings was a bittersweet, nostalgic, and moving experience for me. It resuscitated the flavor of the mass movements and the promise of change that characterized those years for me in both my research and my personal life as I lived through them in the Soviet Union. The hesitancy with which participants themselves characterize those days now, the scrutiny and reevaluation they are subject to in popular politics, the press and in their own minds, the doubts and uncertainties that dominate comparisons of the independent present with the socialist past, and the consequent reduction of those events to circumstantial explanation all sadden me when I recall the euphoria and effervescence of empowerment that were experienced on such a mass scale. I feel this apart from my own opinions about better and worse systems of governance. Rather, it is a reaction to seeing confidence and optimism diluted to equivocation with the passage of time. Perhaps we should all be relativistic about our actions at all times, but the loss of solidarity, is, well, still a loss.

Supplemental Readings

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