

The Year that Changed the World: The Untold Story Behind the Fall of the Berlin Wall

By Michael Meyer

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A riveting, eyewitness account of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War from the Newsweek Bureau Chief in that region at the time. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many still believe it was the words of President Ronald Regan, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!,” that brought the Cold War to an end. Michael Meyer disagrees, and in this extraordinarily compelling account, explains why. Drawing together breathtakingly vivid, on-the-ground accounts of the rise of Solidarity in Poland, the stealth opening of the Hungarian border, the Velvet Revolution in Prague, and the collapse of the infamous wall in Berlin, Meyer shows how American intransigence contributed little to achieving such world-shaking change. In his reporting from the frontlines of the revolution in Eastern Europe between 1988 and 1992, he interviewed a wide range of local leaders, including VÁclav Havel and Lech Walesa. Meyer’s descriptions of the way their brave stands were decisive in bringing democracy to Eastern Europe provide a crucial refutation of a misunderstanding of history that has been deliberately employed to help push the United States into the intractable conflicts it faces today.

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Editorial Review

Review
"The twentieth century ended with a bang in 1989 and Michael Meyer has vividly captured the drama, import and energy of that fascinating year....This is a riveting, rollicking read with many surprises along the way." -- FAREED ZAKARIA, AUTHOR OF "THE POST-AMERICAN WORLD"

"I thoroughly enjoyed "The Year That Changed the World." It is a gripping, colorful account of the rush of events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet empire. It is also a convincing reappraisal of where credit lies and what lessons should be drawn for U.S. leadership." -- JAMES HOGE, "FOREIGN AFFAIRS"

" A coolheaded reconsideration of the revolutionary fervor that tore down the Iron Curtain in 1989...Meyer skillfully g rasps the crux of these events and ably conveys their remarkable significance. Meyer 'liberates' the record with sagacity, precision and remarkable clarity." -- "KIRKUS REVIEWS" (STARRED REVIEW)

About the Author
Michael Meyer is currently Director of Communications for the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Between 1988 and 1992, he was *Newsweek*'s Bureau Chief for Germany, Central Europe and the Balkans, writing more than twenty cover stories on the break-up of communist Europe and German unification. He is the winner of two Overseas Press Club Awards and appears regularly as a commentator for MSNBC, CNN, Fox News, C-Span, NPR and other broadcast network. He previously worked at the *Washington Post* and *Congressional Quarterly*. He is the author of the *Alexander Complex* (Times Books, 1989), an examination of the psychology of American empire builders. He lives in New York City.

From The Washington Post
From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com Reviewed by Gerard DeGroot Friedrich Nietzsche once described an argument about history. "I have done that," claims memory. "I cannot have done that," pride retorts. Or, to put it differently: The past is what happened, history what we decide to remember. We mine the past for myths to buttress our present. The good historian is a myth-buster. Michael Meyer is a very good historian. As Newsweek's bureau chief for Eastern Europe in 1989, he watched the world turn on a dime. The myth he busts in this book concerns the contribution the United States made to the collapse of communist regimes that year. Some Americans want to believe that those regimes crumbled because of White House manipulation -- clever diplomacy backed by raw power. In fact, American meddling was rather benign and, during that fateful year, conspicuously ill conceived. The preferred myth begins with Ronald Reagan speaking at the Brandenburg Gate on June 12, 1987. "We hear from Moscow about a new openness," he sneered, demanding proof. "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" According to the myth, the wall came tumbling down because Reagan, like some benevolent wizard, shouted "open sesame!" The moral drawn is that evil, dictatorial regimes crumble when confronted by righteous indignation. Cue Saddam Hussein. George W. Bush, who idolized Reagan, tried to emulate his hero. His distortion of the past inspired tragedy in the present. The real story, minus the comic book hero, is more complicated -- and interesting. Reagan still plays a role, but as diplomat, not Rambo. His contribution came in accommodation; his willingness to talk to Gorbachev gave the Soviet leader the confidence to break molds. Gorbachev, furthermore, did not tear down the wall; he merely suggested that change would be tolerated. The events themselves were played out by a cast of thousands in Budapest, Berlin, Prague, Warsaw and Bucharest. There was no script; this was an improvisational drama conceived by Camus, with

help from Kafka and Molière. The Soviet Union came to the realization that its empire was no longer affordable. Like other imperial powers, it cut and ran, leaving colonial subjects to sort things out for themselves. Chaos naturally resulted. Hidden deep in this brilliant book is the perfect phrase: Events were shaped by "the logic of human messiness." The regimes in Eastern Europe were destroyed not by monolithic force, but by myriad human beings reacting impulsively to the freedom of possibility. Watching from afar, we saw what seemed like neat little dominoes falling. In fact, what happened was as capricious, and messy, as a tornado. Chance played a huge part. Meyer points out, for instance, that the "fall" of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989, was an accident. It all started when Hungary unilaterally decided to open its border with Austria, thus offering East Germans an opportunity to join their cousins in the West by taking the long way around. Tens of thousands departed every day. With his country bleeding to death, East German leader Egon Krenz recklessly decided to grant freedom of travel, the logic being that if movement was not forbidden, his people would return. The policy was to be implemented "ab sofort" -- "immediately." Krenz's "immediately" meant the next day, in controlled fashion. The East German people took "sofort" to mean "now." They converged on Checkpoint Charlie that night. A frightened border guard, lacking guidance, waited a few hours and then opened the sluice gates to a torrent of humanity. In an instant the wall fell, and so, too, did the logic of East Germany. What was supposed to have been managed reform became instead a chaotic revolution of people walking. Krenz, who had hoped to salvage some elements of socialism, lost control of events when Easterners crossed to the other side. History pivoted on the misinterpretation of a word. Krenz called it a "botch." "Our leaders all wear a uniform mask and declare identical phrases," the Czech dissident Vaclav Havel told Meyer in October 1989. "Perhaps at the moment of history, the masks will fall, and it is only at that moment that we know who is who. . . . We may be surprised to find that the masks concealed an intelligent face." Meyer unmasks some intelligent faces, unlikely heroes who, at the moment of history, acted wisely. Chief among them was Hungarian Prime Minister Miklos Nemeth, a communist who decided that communism did not work and quietly conspired to destroy it. In contrast to Czechoslovakia and East Germany, Hungary's revolution was a coup carried out by a few sensible men. My students would call this a "friendly" book. Meyer recounts momentous events in an accessible, engaging and intensely dramatic way. I had occasionally to remind myself that I was reading nonfiction; history is seldom written with such verve. The book is a two-for-one deal: a fine piece of analysis and a fascinating personal memoir. Added as a bonus are some poignant lessons: Dialogue often beats force, and heroes are sometimes quiet.
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Users Review

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