

## INTRODUCTION

### THE END OF OR RETURN TO SOVIETOLOGY? - REFLECTIONS ON THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL AND BEYOND

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It was during one of the rare evening lectures of my undergraduate studies that a fellow classmate arrived late and told us that the Berlin Wall was being torn down. This was a time of no internet, no smartphones, and no instant information access, meaning that all we could do was to feebly try and concentrate on the lecture until we could race home to turn on the television. This was no mere feat since this was a group of students who were in the midst of a Bachelor's degree in 'Soviet and East European Studies', suddenly faced with the prospect that the very relevance of their diploma was changing. This proved especially prophetic 2 years later – I had been home in Canada just two weeks after a month's intensive Russian language course in Moscow when I was woken up with the news of the putsch against Gorbachev. For a few days my fellow classmates and I sat incredulously in front of our televisions as first our hopes for a more open USSR seemed dashed, and then our familiar Soviet reality came crashing down, just as the Berlin Wall had almost 2 years earlier. What was happening to our world?

This internal conflict between our desires for a freer and more democratic Eastern Europe and our uneasiness with losing a predictable and known 'enemy' would last for some time, as the former Soviet bloc would be torn apart and reconfigured during the following years. A memorable, and somewhat self-mocking, reflection on this apparent contradiction can be found in Andrew Bond's January 1992 editorial in the newly-renamed journal *Post-Soviet Geography* (1992, 4-9). Here, the author half-heartedly bemoans the situation in which many academics, advisors, and policy-makers suddenly found themselves: "*Banter at the office these days combines feigned longing for the "good old days" of the former USSR, with its command economy, totalitarian rule, and information control, with incredulity that the Soviets would be so inconsiderate as to put us Western geographers through such trauma*" (1992, 4).

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The article underlines that generations of so-called ‘Sovietologists’ or ‘Kremlinologists’ had relied upon certain assumptions about the workings of the Soviet system that were based upon the (approved and partially-censored) official statistics and press of the Soviet state itself. One did not question state interventions and controls over large segments of the economy, strategic development projects and announcements about the ethnic, social or gender composition of certain committees! However, these certainties were a thing of the past, lost ‘luxuries’ that could no longer be counted on to ensure a steady supply of information that justified large salaries paid for by governments wary of an ideological enemy (1992, 5). As one might expect, Bond goes on to foresee some of the challenges that the many newly independent countries and state-socialism-free nations would be facing in the years to come, with the economic transition standing out as the greatest problem. However, the article also makes a key observation: while Western researchers of the region had been denied or had limited access to the field, the collapse of the Soviet system would change this. The ‘hard’ borders that kept us out of the region were suddenly non-existent – or at least much softer. That younger researchers would be able to collect their own empirical data would lead to not only a more rigorously verifiable and reliable body of research, but “Soviet geography may well become less of an armchair exercise, as opportunities for on-site work expand and [...] our 21<sup>st</sup>-century successors may well spend more time poring over field notes and interview logs than deciphering arcane newspaper clippings in a dusty corner of the library” (1992, 6).

The more than twenty-five years that have passed since the momentous fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the rebirth of East-Central Europe and Russia have certainly provided opportunities and hope for the countries of the region, as well as for the research community. Highlights have included the reintegration of many of the states of the former Warsaw Pact into global systems and structures, culminating in membership of the European Union with its economic growth, disappearing borders, unhindered mobility, and increased personal freedoms. United Germany today provides political, economic, and, arguably during the recent refugee crisis, moral leadership for the continent. However, the region’s development over the years has not been without its problems, including the Yugoslav wars, secessionist conflicts in Georgia’s autonomous regions and eastern Moldova, rapid demographic decline, economic instability, and increased social polarisation. More recently, Russia especially is perceived as drifting towards authoritarianism, armed conflict has erupted in Ukraine, the Crimean Peninsula has been annexed, and many formerly socialist states have experienced a palpable rise

in political populism and nationalism. Today, the stand-off between the West and Russia is often debated in terms of a ‘New Cold War’ (Shuster, 2016; Krickovic & Weber, 2015), as both sides re-arm and engage in new forms of competition and confrontation through economic sanctions, propaganda, and cyber warfare. Just as in 1989-1991 people are left asking what is happening to our world.

What the papers in this special issue represent is a reflection on how our world has changed since 1989-1991, and how it is still changing. Perhaps the events of those years did not usher in an era of permanent co-operation and integration between East and West as expected; while borders are being increasingly securitised and the EU’s noteworthy Schengen achievement teeters on a knife-edge, it seems incorrect to speak of a return to Cold War. As many correctly point out (Rojansky & Salzman, 2016; Stavridis, 2016), the current understanding of ‘East’ and ‘West’ is not defined by an ideological divide, dialogue remains between the two former superpowers and now includes newly-emerged powers (e.g., the EU, China, India), and today’s global citizens are no longer isolated from one another through the diffusion of information via modern communications technologies. I am quite confident that there will be no return to ‘Sovietology’, and, just as Andrew Bond predicted in 1992, young researchers have needed to respond to the challenges and make the most of the opportunities to conduct independent research, continuously undermining the borders that remain between ‘West’, ‘East’, and other regions of our increasingly globalised world.

### References:

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