

Online Historiana Contributors' Meeting



Saturday, 9th November 2019 will mark the 30th anniversary of what has come to be known universally as “the Fall of the Berlin Wall” and Historiana is planning to commemorate this by producing a transnational, multiperspective Source Collection. We hope that it will provide content and learning materials which history teachers will be able to use when they and their students are examining the end of the Cold War era. As such, it will appear on the Historiana website as both a stand-alone Source Collection and also be incorporated into our module on The Cold War.

The thousands of East Germans who poured through the border checkpoints in Berlin after 9 November did not trigger the collapse of Soviet communism in eastern Europe. The process of relatively peaceful transition to non-communist governments had already begun in Poland and Hungary in the spring and summer of 1989 and these changes had encouraged many East Germans to take to the streets to demand similar political and economic reforms. But, if not a trigger, the fall of the Berlin Wall was certainly a catalyst that increased the pace of change elsewhere in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union. By the end of December 1989 major political changes had taken place in East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Romania, and, at the same time, further changes were taking place in Poland and Hungary. In the spring of 1990 demands for greater autonomy and even independence within the Soviet Union intensified, particularly in Armenia, the

Baltic States, Georgia and Moldova and the Russian Federal Republic declared its sovereignty in June 1990. By the end of 1991 a superpower that had existed for nearly 70 years had dissolved.

Most political scientists and historians have concentrated on the systemic changes rather than the role of ordinary people at that time. Their study of human agency in the events of 1989 tends to be limited to the role of key figures such as Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Bush, Kohl, Wałęsa and Havel, and the role of the reformers within the Communist Party who believed that the one-party state could be maintained if censorship was reduced, travel was made easier and more consumer goods were produced. But we still know very little about the perspectives and actions of ordinary citizens and what led them to shift from calling for reform to supporting a peaceful or “velvet revolution” and democratic transition. And yet, as one of the leading historians of the Cold War, Professor Jussi Hanhimäki, has pointed out: *“while broad systemic changes and structural shifts may have created the conditions for change, it was the people who ultimately brought about change.”*

So, at EUROCLIO we decided that while so many people who lived through the events of 1989 - on both sides of the Iron Curtain - are still alive and kicking this would be a good time to learn about what these events meant to them. We are not going to ignore the role of the political elites in Moscow, Washington, Paris, London and the capital cities of Eastern Europe. Clearly their actions and inactions were a major factor in what happened. But we also want to explore what ordinary people were thinking, feeling and experiencing at that time and also find out about their hopes and fears for the future once such dramatic changes were taking place.

So how will we set about this task? In October and November of 2018 EUROCLIO organised two Webinars on the Russian Revolutions of 1917. We asked the participants to send us sources from their own countries that would reflect the multiplicity of perspectives circulating at that time (these could include official and revolutionary positions, the views of the media, workers, peasants, soldiers and the bourgeoisie). The results of this pilot project have been very successful and convinced us that this ‘crowd-sourcing approach’ is potentially a very effective way for Historiana to develop transnational, multiperspective source collections.

If you are interested in the events of 1989, and specifically the Fall of the Berlin Wall and its impact on Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and would like to participate in this upcoming Online Meeting on September 5th, please register [via Zoom](#). I look forward to meeting you online!

Bob Stradling, Editor-in-chief, Historiana