

A View from Brussels: Secret NATO Reports about the East European Transition, 1988–1991. Edited by Gusztáv D. Kecskés. Budapest: Research Centre for Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Cold War History Research Center, 2019. 250 pp.

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is back in the news. When Vladimir Putin renewed his invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a chorus of voices blamed the violence being unleashed on Russia's western neighbor on the West, reprising an argument already made in early 2014 when Russia forcibly annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and started a war in the eastern Donbas. Claims of a direct, causal relationship between NATO expansion and contemporary Russian aggression must meet a high evidentiary standard. Now, the opening of archival materials on the late 1980s and early 1990s offers scholars insight into what actually happened at the end of the Cold War and the factors that shaped the transformation of Eastern Europe.

Gusztáv D. Kecskés's *A View from Brussels* presents a selection of important documents from NATO's archives which shed new light on the end of the Cold War. As editor, Kecskés has chosen documents that highlight just how contingent the events of 1989–1991 were. For example, while many in NATO may have welcomed the fall of the Berlin Wall in theory, in practice they worried what the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe would mean for European stability, hard-won over the past four decades. The (largely) peaceful revolutions of 1989 unleashed a powerful new force in international politics, and NATO would have to adapt to the new realities. First and foremost: did NATO itself have a future in a world without the Warsaw Pact and a significantly diminished—or possibly dissolved—Soviet Union?

Through eight judiciously selected documents from the NATO archives in Brussels, Kecskés paints a picture of an alliance racing to keep up with the scope and pace of changes within the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe. As Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost reforms remade politics and everyday life within the Soviet Union, Brussels watched the transformation and wondered how the Cold War would transform—and how long it could last. An April 1988 stock-taking exercise covers a dizzying range of issues, from nationalist unrest in the Soviet Union (particularly in the Baltics and the Caucasus) to new policy currents in

Eastern Europe. Then, nearly two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, policy-makers remained unsure as to whether this marked a transformation in relations between Moscow and its Eastern European allies, which would enable them to exercise greater independence, eschewing the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine. Another analysis from May 1989 noted the divergence between Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his senior military officers as the Kremlin cut the defense budget, and the rest of the Warsaw Pact (with the exception of Romania) followed suit. Fascinatingly, on 8 November 1989, the day before East Germans tore down the Berlin Wall, NATO analysts demonstrated a solid grasp of just how bad the situation in Eastern Europe had become (from the perspective of its communist leaders), and how precarious Gorbachev's position in the Soviet Union was. It was all downhill from there.

In many ways, the post-1989 documents selected by Kecskés are the more interesting ones. The reader has a window into a military alliance trying to grapple with its *raison d'être* if not disappearing, then certainly diminishing. While still a nuclear power with civilization-extinguishing capabilities, a Soviet Union without allies and bursting at the seams cast a much less fearsome shadow over Europe and the world. Here, the fact that the editor has chosen only documents reflecting a consensus of experts reporting on events east of the crumbling Iron Curtain to the North Atlantic Council, while understandable—and valuable, leaves readers wondering how national assessments differed from these international products. In other words, as the fault lines in the East grew into chasms, did any cleavages develop in the West as NATO and its members were faced with new events? Alliances, after all, are not just unitary actors: they are in many ways the result of compromise between the countries and policy-makers who comprise them. Similarly, all eight of the documents were for discussion at the North Atlantic Council, in order to understand how they were received (and the extent to which Council members even paid attention), readers will have to turn elsewhere. Advisory memoranda, such as those that Kecskés collects, are only one part—albeit an important one—of the policy-making process; but it is up to political officials to act upon them.

A View from Brussels helps us understand the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new European security order. Kecskés has brought together documents which shed new light on how NATO understood that process and the conclusions which shaped the alliance's role during the pivotal years between 1988 and 1991. The eight reports in the volume illustrate how, gradually, NATO analysts looked past the Cold War, at the same time as they chronicle the convulsions of its denouement. *A View from Brussels* is an important contribution both as a teaching tool and an account of a critical phase in the history of international relations.

