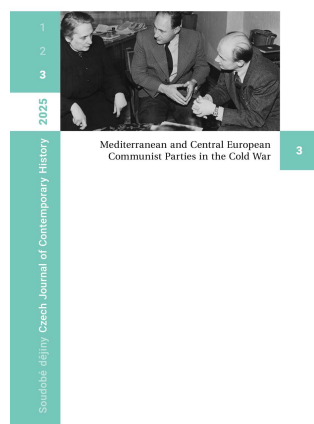


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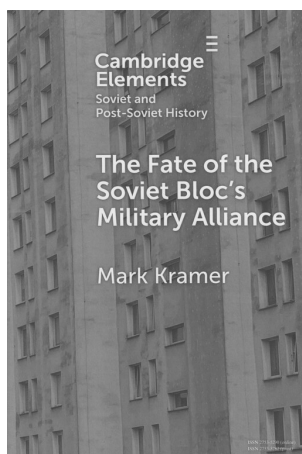
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How to Interpret the End of the Warsaw Pact?

About the Latest Book by Mark Kramer

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KRAMER, Mark:

The Fate of the Soviet Bloc's Military Alliance: Reform, Adaptation, and Collapse of the Warsaw Pact, 1985–1991.

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Viewed retrospectively from a distance of more than thirty years, the termination of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, or Warsaw Pact, after the fall of communist power in Central and Eastern Europe does not look too surprising. In the early 1990s, however, the speed with which it was dissolved overwhelmed many observers. Nevertheless, they could only speculate about the exact reasons. Over time, some direct participants began to reveal the causes in their personal accounts. These also served as an important source for the first historians who attempted to examine the end of one of the two major Cold War alliances through a more analytical lens. A turning point in this regard was the gradual declassification of the internal documentation of former member states relating to the negotiations on the Warsaw Pact's fate during the era of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. In recent years, several academic studies have been published that contribute significantly to understanding the last years of its existence and explaining its rapid demise.¹ But one can agree with Mark Kramer, the author of the book under review, *The Fate of the Soviet Bloc's Military Alliance*, that all the existing works have specific limitations, and thus an integrated analysis of the

political and military changes that led to the collapse of the Warsaw Pact is still needed. Indeed, given the sources available, the perspective of small member states has dominated most of the research to date, while the key decisions in Moscow that determined the fate of the alliance have not been adequately traced.

A View from Moscow without a Breakthrough

On this basis, Kramer – a major voice in Cold War and Eastern Bloc historiography – focuses his latest book primarily on the post-1985 Soviet decision-making process regarding the future of the Warsaw Pact. He relies largely on Soviet sources, supplemented by a few documents from other member states, namely East Germany and Czechoslovakia. What is certainly to be appreciated about the book is that it seeks to provide a view from the Eastern Bloc's centre of power. On the other hand, it does not seem to present any groundbreaking empirical findings to dramatically revise what has been written on the organization with the use of different sources. It should be noted, however, that Kramer probably did not have the opportunity to conduct systematic archival research in Moscow and had available to him only the records he had collected during his previous long professional career. Thus, the historiography is still waiting for a work based, for example, on the minutes of the special meetings of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Secretariat that preceded the Warsaw Pact summits, where the Soviet political leadership and military top brass discussed the upcoming agenda for the alliance. If these have been preserved and remain in the Moscow archives, their analysis could offer a major breakthrough.

Kramer confirms many of the earlier findings. He points out that when Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, the Warsaw Pact was still a formidable military counterweight to NATO. He also reflects on its important dimension as an effective mechanism for (authoritative) political consensus-building among member states. Similarly, he confirms that upon taking office, the new Soviet leader was interested not in loosening but in strengthening the organization. It was only the enormous challenge of trying to revitalize the Soviet

¹ BÍLÝ, Matěj: *Varšavská smlouva 1985–1991: Dezintegrace a rozpad*. Praha, Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů 2021 (English version IDEM: *The Warsaw Pact, 1985–1991: Disintegration and Dissolution*. London – New York, Routledge 2022); WETTIG, Gerhard: *Gorbatschow: Reformpolitik und Warschauer Pakt 1985–1991*. Innsbruck – Graz, Studien Verlag 2021; MILES, Simon: We All Fall Down: The Dismantling of the Warsaw Pact and the End of the Cold War in Eastern Europe. In: *International Security*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (2023), pp. 51–85; BÉKÉS, Csaba: Hungary and the Dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (1988–1991). In: *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2023), pp. 4–23.

economy, Kramer explains, that prompted Gorbachev to adjust Moscow's policy toward the Eastern Bloc, with far-reaching implications for the Warsaw Pact. The last Soviet leader thus plays a key role throughout the text, which is perfectly understandable given his crucial involvement in adopting new policies with profound consequences.

The most notable contribution of the book is evident in two areas. First, it shows well the significance of Gorbachev's speech at the United Nations in December 1988, announcing, among other things, a unilateral and unconditional withdrawal of part of the Soviet troops with their armaments stationed on the territory of the Warsaw Pact countries in Central Europe. It was neither an empty political gesture nor a cosmetic cut, but a decision with dramatic military consequences. This moment has been generally underrated as a milestone in ending the Cold War. Second, Kramer follows up on his earlier research into discussions within the Kremlin leadership in the spring of 1989 about the conditions under which the Soviet Union would provide military assistance to its allies. This is the key part of the book, although some of the conclusions have been published before.² It is revealed that Gorbachev and his reform-minded associates feared that the Soviet Union's existing alliances could serve as a potential ground for military intervention to save the crisis-ridden communist power in the Eastern Bloc. From the reformists' perspective, Kramer shows, the source of concern was not so much the Warsaw Pact but rather the bilateral treaties that Moscow had concluded with states in its sphere of interest in Europe since the 1940s. It is an incentive for further research on the relatively underestimated bilateral pillar of the Soviet alliance system in Europe, which remains overshadowed in the historiography by the multilateral framework of the Warsaw Pact. The significance of these treaties is well illustrated by the fact that the post-1989 non-communist leaders in the Warsaw Pact states considered their revision as similarly important a task as the organization's dissolution.³ Although Kramer deals with this episode only in passing, he goes further than most authors, who usually overlook it completely. He uses the entire discussion primarily to show that in March 1989 the Soviet leadership clearly ruled out military intervention in the allied countries even if the communist monopoly on power was jeopardized.

² KRAMER, Mark: The Demise of the Soviet Bloc. In: *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (2011), pp. 788–854.

³ BÍLÝ, Matěj: Redefining Alliances: The USSR-Central Europe Negotiations on Bilateral Treaties at the Cold War's End. (Article accepted for publication in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2025.)

Overlooked Perspectives

On the other hand, Kramer's approach has certain limitations. Since the book is written primarily through a Soviet lens, the smaller member states mostly disappear from the story. While Kramer does not resurrect the "satellite" paradigm (clearly opposing it, p. 53), he largely fails to reflect on their policies toward the alliance in the first five years of Gorbachev's rule. Only after 1989 do they emerge as autonomous actors. This sometimes results in questionable conclusions that are at odds with the perspective offered by a deeper analysis of the Soviet allies' policies. For example, Kramer argues that East German leader Erich Honecker was "stunned and dismayed" (p. 32) by the unilateral military reduction initiated by Gorbachev in 1988. In contrast, the existing literature shows that disarmament and defense cuts were probably the only field in which the positions of Gorbachev and the orthodox communist leaders in the allied countries did not differ in the late 1980s.⁴ Moreover, the non-Soviet member states are treated as a too homogeneous entity. But their interests and assertiveness in pursuing them differed dramatically in the examined period. This was one of the most important factors in the loss of the Warsaw Pact's cohesion.

The book's introduction contains a comprehensive summary of the existing literature on the Warsaw Pact. In the text itself, however, Kramer uses it only sporadically; he follows the *ad fontes* approach, and if literature is referred to, it is mainly his previous works. Thus, some of the debates and issues resonating in historiography are absent in the book. One can state two examples. The first is the dispute over whether Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu urged the Warsaw Pact to take *military* action in the summer of 1989 to support the Polish communists against the election-winning Solidarity. Kramer does not seem to doubt this, although other academic studies and the published personal accounts are more reticent in this respect.⁵ In fact, Ceaușescu's calls can also be interpreted as an attempt to use collective pressure by the member states to establish a "national unity government" in Poland, in which communists and security forces would keep key positions and marginalize the opposition's influence.⁶ As the Romanian

⁴ SCHAEFER, Bernd: The GDR in the Warsaw Pact. In: *Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security* [online], 2007. [Accessed 2025-02-27.] Available at: http://www.php.isn.ethz.ch/lory1.ethz.ch/collections/coll_gdr/intro2644.html?navinfo=44755.

⁵ Kramer has presented the thesis before, sparking discussion in the academic community. Continuing Debate: Ceaușescu's Appeal for Joint Warsaw Pact Action on 19 August 1989. In: *Wilson Center* [online], 2015. [Accessed 2025-02-27.] Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/continuing-debate-ceausescus-appeal-for-joint-warsaw-pact-action-19-august-1989>.

⁶ NOWAK, Jerzy: *Od hegemonii do agonii: Upadek Układu Warszawskiego – polska perspektywa*. Warszawa, Bellona 2011, p. 167.

historiography reveals, Bucharest also assured Moscow that the aim was not to launch a military intervention, but only to discuss on an alliance basis how to help the Polish comrades in their “war for socialist development” in the country.⁷ Second, Kramer does not reflect on the problem of the language Gorbachev used in talks with his counterparts from the allied countries. As Gorbachev’s biographer William Taubman points out, it was an ideological language that was not always clear and allowed for different interpretations. It is somewhat paradoxical that Kramer emphasizes in Gorbachev’s words before 1988 the same dimension that hardliners in the Eastern Bloc, according to Taubman, took away from their meetings with the Kremlin leader, particularly phrases evocative of the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine. But these might be, Taubman notes, merely the tactical virtue of reassuring conservative comrades.⁸

Another limitation of the publication is its brevity. Despite being a book, with a main text of 54 pages, it should be seen as a comprehensive study rather than a monograph. Although it covers a period of only six years, these were extremely dynamic and eventful. As a result, many aspects are explained in overly brief manner. This is particularly the case in the chapters “The Dissolution of East European Communism” and “Disbandment of the Warsaw Pact”. The latter, in particular, does not bring much new empirical data or interpretations in its six pages. Above all, the fundamental question of why the Gorbachev leadership did not more assertively defend the survival of the organization after 1989, despite this being initially their clear and acknowledged goal, remains to be answered by future research.

Issues in Need of Further Discussion

Despite some limitations, Kramer’s book will certainly find its place in the literature on the Warsaw Pact. More importantly, some of Kramer’s interpretations are fertile ground for discussion. This review focuses on four issues. Did Gorbachev’s policy towards the Warsaw Pact become innovative as late as 1988? Was the Warsaw Pact primarily an instrument for keeping “orthodox” communist regimes in power in member states? When did the Brezhnev Doctrine of the limited sovereignty of socialist countries effectively end? Why did the main proponents

⁷ RETEGAN, Mihai: Režim Ceaușescu a zmiány w Polsce: Lato 1989 roku. In: MACHCEWICZ, Paweł (ed.): *Polska 1986–1989: Koniec systemu*, Vol. 1. Warszawa, Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk 2002, pp. 176–181, here p. 180.

⁸ TAUBMAN, William: *Gorbachev: His Life and Times*. New York – London, Simon & Schuster 2017, pp. 287–288.

of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in the early 1990s abandon their original idea of replacing it with a pan-European security system?

First, Kramer believes that, before 1988, Gorbachev did not differ much from previous Kremlin leaders in his policy toward the Warsaw Pact. This is documented by his selected words regarding the relations between European socialist states and the role of the organization in them. The author highlights Gorbachev's call for "strengthening the unity", countering "any centrifugal tendencies", "increasingly close cooperation", and "obligatory consideration not only for its own interests but also for common interests". It is not only the extent to which this interpretation ignores the aforementioned nature of Gorbachev's language stressed by Taubman. The thin book leaves no room to consider other aspects of Gorbachev's words before 1988. In particular, Kramer concludes that the goals of the June 1986 document "On Topical Questions Regarding Collaboration with Socialist Countries"⁹ was fully consistent with earlier Kremlin policies. But a closer reading reveals that the memorandum was highly critical of the past, acknowledging that relations between socialist countries had lacked sincerity, frankness, and trust and that multilateral mechanisms were often formal in nature. In the document, Gorbachev not only called for an entirely different form of collaboration (although he justified it in ideological terms by mentioning the changing international situation), but even noted that "for objective reasons, a period of change in leadership is taking place" in the allied countries. The book also fails to mention that Gorbachev, upon taking office, encouraged the Warsaw Pact members to act more actively and independently in their foreign policies, intending to make the organization an effective coordinating platform in this regard. Changes in the alliance's political structures indicate that these were not entirely empty words. For the first time in three decades, they began to meet regularly, and new consultative bodies were established, including several expert groups and the Multilateral Group on Current Mutual Information.

The question is whether Gorbachev remained conservative on the Warsaw Pact for as long as Kramer suggests. At a meeting with members of the allied Committee of Ministers of Foreign Affairs in March 1987, for example, he stated that the member states were governed by "sufficiently mature" parties, which Moscow respected and additionally refused to continue to play a leading role, albeit logically it would always occupy a special position in the socialist community. He stressed that cooperation would now be restricted to political and

⁹ An English translation is available online: Memorandum from Mikhail Gorbachev to the CC CPSU Politburo on Topical Questions Regarding Collaboration with Socialist Countries, June 26, 1986. In: *National Security Archive* [online]. [Accessed 2025-02-27.] Available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28330-document-10-memorandum-mikhail-gorbachev-cc-cpsu-politburo-topical-questions>.

ideological matters. The military aspects were clearly to be put aside. But he also threatened that “the one who will not embrace the change and will remain satisfied in their own dominion, is the one who will be wiped out by perestroika”.¹⁰ Indeed, Gorbachev’s aforementioned ambiguity and the limits of his thinking were manifested at the same time. In one breath, he warned that “imperialism” saw *perestroika* as an opportunity to escalate anti-communist sentiments, words clearly evoking the language of the past. This is an ambiguity that must be kept in mind when studying the Gorbachev period. Recent research, however, shows that the shift in the Soviet leader’s rhetoric was evident even to the not-so-reform-minded communists who, long before 1988, had begun to see his policies as a potential threat to their position, and sought alternatives.¹¹

Second, Kramer sees the Warsaw Pact as an instrument of “keeping orthodox communist regimes in power” in the member states. In his view, this was the alliance’s main *raison d’être*. Accordingly, the organization’s rapid disintegration is largely explained by the fact that this mission disappeared after 1989. The thesis seems questionable as it ignores the factor of a sense of possible external threat, e.g. from Germany, which was apparently authentic for the communist leaders of many member states and, at least in the case of Poland, survived 1989 for a while. The Warsaw Pact is usually associated with the 1968 military suppression of the Prague Spring, but the operation was not, in fact, officially sanctioned by the alliance.¹² If the Brezhnev leadership had understood the organization in the way that Kramer does, it probably would not have consistently tried to prevent domestic issues and disputes between member states from being discussed in the Pact’s bodies from the early 1970s. This was also largely the case during the Polish crisis in 1980/1981.¹³

This certainly does not mean that the Kremlin completely abandoned the idea of military interventions in its European sphere of influence after 1968. But for

¹⁰ *Národní archiv* [The National Archives of the Czech Republic], Prague, fond [collection] Předsednictvo ÚV KSČ 1986–1989 [Presidency of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia 1986–1989], svazek [fascicle] P32/87, bod [point] 1, Záznam z přijetí ministrů zahraničních věcí zemí Varšavské smlouvy s. Gorbačovem [Record of the Reception of the Foreign Ministers of the Warsaw Pact Countries by Comrade Gorbachev], 30. 3. 1987.

¹¹ VOJTĚCHOVSKÝ, Ondřej – PELIKÁN, Jan: *V čase odkvétání: Československo a Jugoslávie v období pozdního socialismu, 1969–1989*. Praha, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy 2021, pp. 216, 224–225.

¹² BÍLÝ, Matěj: Konec neslavného spojení: Varšavská smlouva zanikla před třiceti lety, její vnímání je stále ovlivněno mnoha mýty. In: *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2021), pp. 116–124, here pp. 116–117.

¹³ IDEM: *The Warsaw Pact, 1969–1985: The Pinnacle and Path to Dissolution*. Washington, Academica 2020, pp. 113, 415.

such an eventuality Moscow probably intended to use other, less official mechanisms. In fact, the Warsaw Pact founding charter did not allow such a practice “on paper”, referring to the principles of the United Nations Charter, including sovereignty and the inviolability of borders. Paradoxically, in the aforementioned section of the book dealing with the discussion within the Soviet leadership in the spring of 1989 about possible military assistance to the allies, Kramer reveals that the bilateral treaties between the Eastern Bloc countries, especially those of the Soviet Union with Czechoslovakia and East Germany, provided the most viable legal framework to justify such an intervention. This was apparently noted even by the new non-communist governments in Central Europe in early 1990. Czechoslovak diplomacy, for example, identified the revision of the document as equally important as negotiating the withdrawal of the Soviet troops. In fact, the Warsaw Pact’s founding charter was seen as a possible model for a new bilateral treaty because, in the Czechoslovak view, it respected the principles of international law.¹⁴

The fact that the available documents are silent on the idea of the Warsaw Pact being seen by its leaders primarily as a guarantee of the survival of communist power in the member states after the Polish crisis, is also supported by the retrospective testimony of Miloš Jakeš. In 2017, the former party leader of Czechoslovakia, who was known for his hardline statements and stances, did not deny that a military solution had been a possibility in 1989. However, according to him, this depended on the willingness of individual party leaderships to resort to the use of force to suppress opposition, not on the Warsaw Pact agreements. He believed that the first such decision could have triggered a domino effect throughout the Eastern Bloc, but on a domestic rather than a multilateral basis. Jakeš, surprisingly lucid, factual and outspoken, claimed that he had noticed no serious tendencies to use the Warsaw Pact alliance in this way in the late 1980s.¹⁵

Third, related to this perception of the Warsaw Pact is the question of when the Brezhnev Doctrine effectively ended. The book disagrees with the interpretation that this moment was the Soviet refusal to intervene militarily in Poland in the early 1980s, and especially the Kremlin’s unambiguous message to Polish leader Wojciech Jaruzelski in December 1981 that sending foreign troops was

¹⁴ *Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta republiky* [The Archive of the Office of the President of the Czech Republic], Prague, složka [fascicle] VH 1990, 26.–27. 2. SSSR, Moskva, Smlouva o přátelství, spolupráci a vzájemné pomoci mezi ČSSR a SSSR [USSR, Moscow, Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the Czechoslovakia and the USSR], 14. 2. 1990.

¹⁵ Interview with Miloš Jakeš conducted by the author, 28 March 2017. Author’s personal archive.

completely ruled out.¹⁶ On the contrary, Kramer believes that Moscow would reconsider its position if the Polish operation to suppress the opposition failed and a civil war erupted in the country, endangering Soviet military units there. Thus, he considers the debate in the Soviet leadership in March 1989 and the adoption of a secret resolution dismissing the sending of troops to save the communist power in the Eastern Bloc that was threatened by an internal crisis as the real turning point. The question is whether this was not merely a confirmation of a long-standing policy. Was not the main change primarily that in 1989, Gorbachev began to speak publicly about the fact that the social and political order in individual countries had changed in the past and could change in the future while emphasizing the universal right of the people themselves to make such choice?¹⁷ As historian Simon Miles notes, it was not so important whether the Kremlin leadership actually buried the Brezhnev Doctrine in the midst of the Polish events, but whether the outside world believed that it was still valid.¹⁸

Fourth, any analysis of the negotiations on the Warsaw Pact's future in 1990 and 1991 inevitably touches upon shaping the post-Cold War international order. An important aspect of this is the turn taken by the states of the emerging Visegrad Group toward a new security architecture in Europe. As Kramer notes, they were initially allured by the prospect of a pan-European security organization to replace the alliances of the bipolar era, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The reason they abandoned the vision in late 1990, he argues, is that there was no real pan-European military force to replace the aforementioned organizations (pp. 46–47). But this is not the complete story. A closer look at Czechoslovak, Hungarian, and Polish documents declassified in recent years reveals that Central European leaders abandoned the idea mainly because it lacked support from key actors, especially the Western powers. If pursued consistently, the issue had the potential to complicate relations with the West, which was anything but desirable for the non-communist Central European governments. Moreover, the preference for a pan-European solution was not much different from Moscow's position at

¹⁶ MASTNY, Vojtech: The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland in 1980–1981 and the End of the Cold War. In: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (1999), pp. 189–211, here p. 204; ZUBOK, Vladislav: *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press 2007, p. 270; MILES, Simon: *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War*. New York, Cornell University Press 2020, p. 52; BÍLÝ, M.: *The Warsaw Pact 1969–1985*, p. 482.

¹⁷ Address by Mikhail Gorbachev to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, 6 July 1989. In: SAVRANSKAYA, Svetlana – BLANTON, Thomas – ZUBOK, Vladislav (eds.): *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989*. Budapest – New York, Central European University Press 2010, pp. 492–496 (document 73).

¹⁸ MILES, S.: *Engaging the Evil Empire*, pp. 52–53.

the time, which was unsuitable for Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, given their geopolitical reorientation toward the West. Thus, in the fall of 1990, their governments began to support a solution that left the countries temporarily without security guarantees but, at the same time, opened the way for their successful integration into the Western security system in the long term.

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Keywords:

international relations; Cold War; post-Cold War; Eastern Bloc; Visegrad Group; Warsaw Pact; North Atlantic Treaty Organizations (NATO); Soviet Union; Mikhail Gorbachev; Russia; United States

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