



Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment (Modern Library Chronicles Series Book 32)

By Stephen Kotkin

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Twenty years ago, the Berlin Wall fell. In one of modern history's most miraculous occurrences, communism imploded—and not with a bang, but with a whimper. Now two of the foremost scholars of East European and Soviet affairs, Stephen Kotkin and Jan T. Gross, drawing upon two decades of reflection, revisit this crash. In a crisp, concise, unsentimental narrative, they employ three case studies—East Germany, Romania, and Poland—to illuminate what led Communist regimes to surrender, or to be swept away in political bank runs. This is less a story of dissidents, so-called civil society, than of the bankruptcy of a ruling class—communism's establishment, or “uncivil society.” The Communists borrowed from the West like drunken sailors to buy mass consumer goods, then were unable to pay back the hard-currency debts and so borrowed even more. In Eastern Europe, communism came to resemble a Ponzi scheme, one whose implosion carries enduring lessons. From East Germany's pseudotechnocracy to Romania's megalomaniacal dystopia, from Communist Poland's cult of Mary to the Kremlin's surprise restraint, Kotkin and Gross pull back the curtain on the fraud and decadence that cashiered the would-be alternative to the market and democracy, an outcome that opened up to a deeper global integration that has proved destabilizing.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In 1989, all East European Soviet satellites abruptly broke free, triggering a similar breakup inside the U.S.S.R. In this addition to the Modern Library Chronicles series, Princeton history professors Kotkin (*Armageddon Averted*) and Gross (*Neighbors*) deliver a perceptive account of how this happened. They deny that freedom-loving citizens (civil society) led the transformation, pointing out that, except in Poland, no organized opposition existed. The only true establishment was the incompetent, blinkered, and ultimately bankrupt Communist system—an uncivil society. Even in private, all awaited the collapse of capitalism and increasingly focused on the moral superiority of socialism in the face of the unnerving economic superiority of the West. In 1989 the bottom fell out. Polish leaders agreed to a quasi-free election, which unexpectedly voted them out; faced with peaceful demonstrations and a mass exodus of citizens, East German leaders resigned. Except for a bloody attempt to stave off the inevitable in Romania, all satellite governments peacefully dissolved, often with comic-opera ineptness. Combining scholarship with sparkling prose, the authors recount a thoroughly satisfying historical struggle in which the good guys won. 16 pages of b&w photos; maps. (Oct. 13)

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Review

"Following hard on the heels of *Armageddon Averted*, Stephen Kotkin has written a brilliantly original account of the fall of the Soviet empire. Almost everything on this subject up until now has been journalism. Kotkin's genius as an historian is to turn conventional wisdom on its head and force us to rethink completely a revolution we thought we understood merely because we lived through

it."
—Niall Ferguson, Laurence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard and author of *The War of the World*

"In this lively and fast-paced study, two distinguished Princeton historians, Stephen Kotkin and Jan Gross, analyze the 1989 revolution in Eastern Europe as a product of the political bankruptcy of 'uncivil society,' meaning the communist elite. Using the case studies of Poland, Romania, and the German Democratic Republic, the authors combine deep historical analysis of the development and failures of East European communism with brilliant insights into the events of 1989 themselves. The book makes a critical contribution to our understanding of the annus mirabilis." —Norman M. Naimark, Robert and Florence McDonnell Chair of East European History at Stanford University

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

Stephen Kotkin is Rosengarten Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at Princeton University, with a joint appointment as Professor of International Affairs in the Woodrow Wilson School. He is the author of the enormously influential books *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* and *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970—2000* and contributes regularly to *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, and the BBC.

Jan T. Gross a native of Poland, also teaches at Princeton, where he is the Norman B. Tomlinson '16 and '48 Professor of War and Society. He was a 2001 National Book Award nominee for his widely acclaimed

Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland. His most recent book, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz*, was named one of the best books of the year by *The Washington Post*.

Users Review

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