View from the Summit

The fairly extensive opening of archives in postcommunist states has rendered permanent a previously rarely applied manner of presenting history, that of the publication of documents. Books that in extenso included medieval or eighteenth-century documents were basically addressed to a narrow circle of specialists, while the authors of numerous publications of documents relating to the Soviet Union or communist Poland hoped to attain a circulation resembling that of monographs or biographies. One could hazard the view that the reason lies either in the assumption that some of these books are to outright supplant monographs; that such collections of documents can be composed more rapidly than writing an actual book; or, finally, according to the authors’ conviction that the reader appreciates more the opportunity to become acquainted directly with “material evidence” than reading its fragments reproduced by the historian and accompanied by his comments. The publications in question thus perform a double role: they make documents available to researchers and students who are unable to conduct their own wider quests in distant and often inaccessible archives; and they are a way of narrating history and proposing that the readers should undertake the effort of interpreting the documents on their own. Such is the character of the successive volumes in the National Security Archive Cold War Readers series.

The most recent volume in this tradition is Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989. This imposing 750-page book (not counting the introductions, acknowledgements, calendar, and indices) is composed of three equally important parts: syntheses by Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton; a record of a conference on the fall of communism held in 1998 in Musgrove, Georgia; and 122 documents selected from Russian, American, German, Polish, Czech, and Hungarian archives. The documents encompass five years, with the first originating from 15 March 1985, i.e., four days after Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the office of Secretary General of the Soviet Communist Party, and the final dating from 13 April 1990, when Gorbachev met with the Polish General Wojciech Jaruzelski (then leader of the Polish communists and recently elected president), when Poland was undergoing its first phase of transformation. In other words, this was a period that inaugurated and completed the disintegration of the European part of an imperial system with a capital in Moscow, which had existed de facto since 1945. The Soviet Union—the core and fundamental sector of this empire—was to survive for not quite another two years and collapsed in December 1991, after its heretofore republics gained independence. The chronological selection of
the documents (the dates of their origin) reflects well the dynamic and rapidly growing “density” of the events: eight documents come from the first two years (1985–1986), 27 from the following two years (1987–1988), as many as 81 from 1989, and six from 1990. I do not assume that the authors consciously planned such a configuration; they simply followed the course of events, which they regarded as worthy of distinction, while history—as is often the case—likes to suddenly accelerate. They were quite correct to opt for this approach.

Once again, I shall refer to figures, which is not to say that I regard interpretations based on quantitative data as reasonable by their very nature. Our attention is drawn to the fact that out of a total of 122 documents as many as 87 originate from Russian archives, 22 from several American archives and libraries, eight from German collections, two each from Polish and Hungarian archives, and a single one comes from Czech collections. Presumably, this is not accidental, and there are probably a number of reasons, with the first, of lesser importance, being the linguistic competencies of the authors of the selection since relatively few Polish, Hungarian, Rumanian, or Bulgarian documents have been translated into English (not to mention Russian). Another cause, stemming from the authors’ research specializations, is the attention focused on the Soviet Union, which quite naturally stirred—and still stirs—special interest among historians. Consequently, the authors were concerned predominantly with reaching documents produced by Soviet institutions, with the National Security Archive proving itself to be a true master in pursuing this task and enjoying its numerous successes, some of which are presented in the book under examination. The same milieu has proved itself just as active in obtaining documents of American state institutions.

It seems, however, that the most prominent reason why Soviet (Russian) and American documents comprise about 90 percent of those presented in the reviewed volume is the acceptance of a premise claiming that the key to understanding, and thus describing, the fall of the system of communist states in Europe is perceiving it from the viewpoint of the Cold War, the Bipolar World, and Superpower Rivalry. From this viewpoint, the notes with which advisers supplied Gorbachev or the analyses prepared by the CIA for the President are decidedly more important than those which the opposition activists conveyed to Lech Wałęsa or the reports of the Bulgarian security apparatus about the prevailing mood at home. At the same time, this is a totally legitimate perspective and one that is used most often because it remains the most natural for a reader, especially a non-professional one. However, it slightly depletes the overall picture since the historical puzzle becomes deprived of certain particles and even whole segments whose mere faint traces we come across in the registered talks held by the leaders and their advisers. I might have overstated