Hoover and the FALL of the SOVIET UNION

The last decade of the twentieth century bore witness to momentous international changes, the impact of which would have a lasting effect not only on the world but on the Hoover Institution.

On September 1, 1989, after nearly thirty years of service, W. Glenn Campbell retired as director to become counselor to the Hoover Institution. His successor was John Raisian, a labor economist who had come to Hoover in 1988 as a senior research fellow and associate director for research and operations.

The change in leadership at Hoover coincided with the “Autumn of Nations,” when Soviet satellite states in the Eastern Bloc asserted their independence and held democratic elections. In September 1989, owing to the Solidarity movement’s actions in Poland, the first noncommunist government in the Eastern Bloc in nearly fifty years was sworn in. Legislation mandating democratic elections in Hungary was passed in October. Hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters spearheaded the “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia, leading to the overthrow of the Communists and the appointment of a new government in December. Similar protests in Bulgaria led to free elections in June 1990. In Romania events took a violent turn; Communist president Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife were tried and executed in December 1989. In early November 1989 the Berlin Wall, which had separated the two sides of the city for nearly thirty years, was breached by Berliners and border controls effectively ceased. This paved the way to dismantling the wall and the reunification of East and West Germany in October 1990. By the end of 1991 what had once been the Soviet Union had totally dissolved.

Those tremendous political and social shifts—the most substantial upheavals on the world scene since World War II—presented a unique opportunity for change and growth in Hoover’s programs. In January 1991, the Institute established an office in Warsaw, Poland, to coordinate collecting efforts for the library and archives from the newly independent states of Central and Eastern Europe. Although materials had been acquired from the Eastern Bloc before the collapse of communism, after the Iron Curtain fell, collecting efforts could be systematized and individuals and institutions, after the specter of persecution by the government vanished, were more willing to come forward with materials. One of Hoover’s most significant acquisitions came as a direct result of the fall of the Soviet Union, when, in November 1991, Charles Palm, head archivist and deputy director at Hoover, initiated a cooperative exchange program with the Committee on Archival Affairs of the Russian Republic. That massive undertaking involved microfilming millions of documents from the State Archives of the Russian Federation, the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, and the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History. The resulting 11,818 reels of microfilm contain materials that highlight the mechanisms of power in the USSR, the administrative system of the Soviets, and international activity of the USSR, among other areas, making this the richest source of archival documentation of the internal workings of the Soviet Union outside Russia.

In the 1990s, Hoover continued to organize its research programs around international studies of geographic areas, international security affairs, national economic growth and monetary policy, the utilization and organization of the nation’s natural and human resources, the role and impact of government in society, and social and political philosophy. New program initiatives, prompted by the dramatic upheavals on the world stage, included economic and political reform in Central and Eastern Europe, democracy in developing countries, American institutions, and sovereignty and statecraft. The approach to researching these areas has taken a variety of forms. The core of Hoover’s research program revolves around the scholars associated with the Institution, who include some of the preeminent thinkers in the fields of history, economics, politics, and public policy. Hoover retains a core of research fellows associated with the Institution on a permanent basis; in addition, fellowships in such various areas as national security affairs, diplomatic affairs, peace, and the media bring scholars to Hoover for a period of weeks or months. The scholarly output of Hoover’s fellows is realized in books published by the Hoover Press, articles published in national journals and newspapers, conferences, seminars, essays, and radio and television interviews.

At the outset of John Raisian’s directorship, Hoover’s Board of Overseers set up a development committee to work with the director to establish fund-raising objectives and engage the overseers in fund-raising activities. The initiative’s crowning achievement was the successful “Ideas Defining a Free Society” campaign from 1995 to 2000, which raised $100 million for the Hoover endowment fund, surpassing its goal of $75 million.

The principles that the Hoover Institution espoused since its foundation were vindicated by communism’s collapse. Despite that totalitarian ideology’s failure, however, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, new challenges are emerging; thus Hoover’s mission, as stated by its founder, to “dynamically point the road to peace, to personal freedom, and the safeguards of the American system,” is more relevant than ever.