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Vladislav Zubok. *Collapse: The Fall of the USSR*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780300268171

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Introduction by Norman M. Naimark, Stanford University

Vladislav Zubok was a witness to the end of the Soviet Union, and with this impressive book, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*, he has become one of, if not the, leading historians of its downfall. His distinguished academic career began at Moscow State University and the prestigious Institute for the USA and Canada (ISKRAN), which was founded and led in the late Soviet period by the famous Georgy Arbatov (1923-2010).[1] He is now Professor of International History and Head of the Russian International Affairs Program at the London School of Economics. After first coming to the United States in August 1991 at the time of the coup, Zubok held a number of postdocs, research, and faculty positions, including at Temple University, where he was Professor of History. During the 1990s and early 2000s, drawing on his deep knowledge of the history of Soviet international affairs, a gift for inventive archival research, and an ability to interview a variety of informants, Zubok published a wide range of books, among them two superb monographs on Cold War history, as well as important works on the Soviet intelligentsia in the late Soviet period.[2]

The following H-Diplo series of four substantive reviews of *Collapse*, with Zubok's response at the end, explore one of the most crucial set of events in the twentieth century: the almost completely unexpected fall of the Soviet Union. How did the collapse come about and why did it happen when it did? Was the fall of the Soviet Union inevitable and could it have been avoided? What about the role of Soviet leader Mikhail Sergyevich Gorbachev? Could he have saved the party and state? Did he doom the entire enterprise of reform to failure by his fatal missteps and poor leadership? What was the role of the West versus the powerful domestic determinants of decline? Could and should Washington have provided the kind of financial help that Moscow desperately needed? What about the faltering economy and the yawning (and growing) gap between prosperity in the West and the shortages and hardships in the Soviet Union? Did that propel the Soviet Union down the path to self-destruction? Then, there are the inevitable questions about the Soviet Empire, however one defines it exactly. How would Moscow deal with the significant stirrings in Eastern Europe for complete sovereignty? And how would the Soviet leadership manage the increasingly strident national movements in what might be called the "inner empire": Ukraine, the Baltic States, and the Caucasus, among others? How did the crucial relationship between Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, which Zubok describes in particularly fascinating detail in the book, help sink what he calls the "leaky old ship" of the Soviet Union?

There are other questions that Zubok could have asked, as noted by his reviewers. But they all agree that the book is an extremely important contribution to the literature and that his research is both comprehensive and revealing. They praise his archival work and his wide-ranging interviews for uncovering new angles and unknown materials for understanding the fate of the Soviet Union in the period from Yuri Andropov's reign to that of Yeltsin. They emphasize the relevance of the book, especially the analysis of the Ukrainian-Russian split up of 1990–1991, to the contemporary tragedy of warfare in the region. I would add myself that the book is crisply and engagingly written; it is mercifully free of jargon and can be considered a genuinely "good read." Especially for those who experienced that period in Soviet history, the book brings it alive again with insights and information that simply were not available at the time and that shed genuinely new light on a complex and difficult period of Soviet rule.

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[1] See his essay on his formative years: Vladislav Zubok, "The Making of a Russian Cold War Historian during the Last Years of the Soviet Union," ed. Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo Essay 386, Essay Series on *Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars*, 9 November 2021; https://issforum.org/essays/PDF/E386.pdf.

[2] Zubok, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (with Constantin Pleshakov; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2009), and Zubok, *The Idea of Russia: Life and Work of D.S. Likhachev* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2017).

Michael Ellman broaches a number of interesting and important questions about Zubok's rendition of Gorbachev's handling of the Soviet economy in this period. Zubok believes that with better policy, and resolute and forceful implementation from the Kremlin, the Soviet Union's economic problems could have been successfully overcome; the fall of the country, in other words, was not inevitable. Ellman is not so sure; the structural economic problems were deeper and more abiding than Zubok indicates, notes Ellman, and a "China-style" solution, or a Leninist New Economic Policy (NEP)—in which a unified party holds the reigns of political power and market mechanisms are introduced and managed from the center—were not likely to succeed for a variety of deep-seated reasons, among them the chronically backward agricultural sector. Ellman is also skeptical whether financial and institutional help provided by the United States or Western Europe (or together in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]), would have made a substantial difference in avoiding the collapse. Ellman is intrigued by the counterfactual arguments that infuse Zubok's narrative, but he remains unconvinced that they can be demonstrated to be realistic.

Natalia Kibita also focuses on the economic arguments laid out by Zubok. "The Soviet economy needed reforms," writes Kibita, summing up Zubok's argument, "but not the kind of reforms Gorbachev launched." She emphasizes the crucial place of the Soviet central ministries in the potential success of perestroika. In his response, Zubok agrees that the relationship between the party and state institutions are critical for the playing out of the economic reforms. Both agree that Gorbachev relied on the separation of the party from the ministries to reinforce the overall supervision of economic change by the party. Kibita emphasizes that ministerial autonomy increased tension between the center and the republics and exacerbated separatist desires. At the same time, Zubok agrees that the diminution of the ministries' abilities to manage their respective industries would have been (and, indeed, after August 1991 was) catastrophic for the whole economy. Kibita reflects some of Ellman's skepticism about the potential Western "bail out" of the Soviet economy by the West. As she pithily notes: "The Americans were prepared to invest, just not to donate."

Of Zubok's reviewers, Julia Newton is the most critical. She agrees with his analysis, as do, in the main, the other reviewers, that the fall of the Soviet Union was not inevitable, that the policies of the West were not the main drivers of reform, and that the contingencies of the Gorbachev period, more than long-term structural deficiencies of the Soviet system, were the crucial factors in the collapse. But she strongly disagrees with his analysis of the role of Gorbachev—what she calls Zubok's "negative obsession with the Gorbachev factor." Like Ellman, she is dubious about Zubok's counterfactual history and thinks that although Gorbachev made "mistakes," he had good reasons to make many of the decisions he did at the time given the circumstances of his leadership. Newton believes that Zubok underestimates the fierce opposition within the party to Gorbachev's program, which prompted him to feint and jab rather than deliver the kinds of knock-out punches that could have, in Zubok's view, delivered a successful reform. In contrast to Zubok's quite critical views of Gorbachev's abilities as a political leader ("feckless," "indecisive"), Newton, representing at least a significant part of the historiography,[3] admires his "extraordinary tactical skill, steely courage, and political ingenuity." Unlike Zubok, she believes that Gorbachev's political reforms "made sense," and she echoes Ellman's doubts that the Chinese model or an Andropov-style "conservative reformism" would have done better.

Newton emphasizes another point that several reviewers mention: Zubok's repeated references to Gorbachev's "antipathy to the use of force" and "the repeated failure of the central state to defend itself" as impediments to successful reform and as a crucial factor in the victory of the Yeltsin camp (4, 438). In his response to Newton's critique, Zubok insists that the "legitimate" use of force is part and parcel of state politics and international affairs. During domestic crises, such as the Soviet Union was experiencing at the beginning of the 1990s, there may well have been times when the use of force, or, at the least, the threat of the use of force, might have kept the ship of state—a metaphor favored by Zubok in the book and in his response to his reviewers—on course to a serious reform and potential revival in the interests of the peoples of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the most memorable line of the book, one repeated by the reviewers is: "The Soviet Union fell victim to a perfect storm and a hapless captain" (427).

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[3] See, for example, William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2017), and Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Joshua Shifrinson's review shifts gears to a more universal set of questions that focus on Zubok's contributions to International Relations theory and to the question of "When and why do great powers die?" As a social scientist, he is appropriately complimentary about Zubok's ability to engage forthrightly with alternate explanations for the collapse. On the other hand, Shifrinson would like for Zubok to expand his analysis of inter-elite discussions regarding relative Soviet economic weakness vis-à-vis the West, which he sees as a crucial factor in the downfall. He also would have liked Zubok to delve more deeply into the structural problems of the Soviet economy as a way "to assess and reflect on" in greater depth the policy discussions driving the reform program. Finally, Shifrinson picks up the issue, broached in a different way by Newton, of Gorbachev's unwillingness to use violence to preserve the Soviet state. Clearly, Shifrinson has comparative cases in mind when he expresses puzzlement that there was so little violence associated with the end of the Soviet Empire. Zubok notes in his response that there was indeed violence enough, including the exceptionally bloody civil war in Tajikistan. But Shifrinson's basic point is well taken. I recall my own fears of civil and ethnic war during the period of the Soviet break-up and my relief that, for the greatest part, this did not happen as it did with the success of the Bolshevik Revolution and the downfall of the Russian Empire. Perhaps with the tragic war in Ukraine we are experiencing the violent aftershocks of the breakup of the Soviet Union? There is much in Zubok's rich and illuminating book that would lend weight to that suggestion.

Participants:

Vladislav M. Zubok is Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His books include the prize-winning *A Failed Empire: the Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), as well as *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Belknap Press, 2009) and *The Idea of Russia: the Life and Work of Dmitry Likhachev* (I.B. Tauris, 2016). His last book *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (Yale University Press, 2021) received Reginald Zelnik Prize and was a finalist of Cundill History Prize. Currently he is finishing a brief history of the Cold War.

Norman M. Naimark is Robert and Florence McDonnell Professor of East European Studies at Stanford and Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution and Freeman-Spogli Institute by courtesy. He taught at Boston University and was a fellow at the Russian Research Center at Harvard before joining the Stanford faculty in 1988. Naimark has published widely in the fields of Cold War and genocide studies. His most recent book is *Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019). He is presently working on a study tentatively entitled, *Why Genocide?*

Michael Ellman, after five years at Cambridge University and the London School of Economics and two years (1965-67) as a postgraduate at Moscow State University, became a lecturer at Glasgow University (1967-69), research officer/senior research officer at Cambridge University (1969-75) and full professor at the University of Amsterdam (1978-2012, now emeritus professor). In 1997 he was a visiting professor at the New Economic School, Moscow. He has thrice lectured on transition economics in China. He has published extensively on the Soviet and Russian economies and history. He was a contributor to *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics* (1987) and to the *Encyclopedia of Russian History* (2004) and was a member of the editorial board of vol.5 of *Tragediya sovetskoi derevni (The Tragedy of the Soviet Village,* Moscow: Rosspen 2004 and 2006). In 1998 the International N.D.Kondratieff Foundation awarded him the Kondratieff Gold Medal for his "contribution to the development of the social sciences." He is a co-editor of the *Cambridge Journal of Economics*. His main books are *Planning Problems in the USSR: The Contribution of Mathematical Methods to their*

Solution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System* (New York: M.E.Sharpe, 1998, co-edited with Vladimir Kontorovich); and *Socialist Planning* (3rd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). He has also published numerous journal articles. Forthcoming publications include the review "Boris Mironov's New Interpretation of the Russian Revolution," in *Revolutionary Russia* (35:1, 2022, 153-163); "L.V.Kantorovich 1912-1986," in Vladimir Avtonomov and Harald Hagemann, eds., *Russian and Western Economic Thought: Mutual Influences and Transfer of Ideas*, (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 427-447; and "Russia as a Great Power from 1815 to the Present Day," Parts I and 2 (under submission).

Nataliya Kibita is a Research Fellow of Soviet History at the University of Glasgow. She received her PhD from the University of Geneva, and her first book, *Soviet Economic Management under Khrushchev: The Sovnarkhoz Reform,* was published in 2013 by Routledge. Currently, she is working on her second monograph, *Moscow, Kyiv, and the Ukrainian Regions: Soviet Legacy in Ukraine.*

Based at Oxford University, Dr **Julie Newton** is Director of the University Consortium, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, bringing together six universities in the US, the EU and Russia—Harvard, Columbia, Oxford, Sciences Po and, until the war, Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and the Higher School of Economics (HSE)—to promote engagement between Russia and Western countries. She is also a Research Fellow at Oxford in the Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre at St Antony's College, where she specializes in Russian foreign policy and Russia-US-EU relations. In addition, she is an Associate Professor at the American University of Paris, France; and in the US, she is a frequent Visiting Professor at Colorado College where she is currently teaching. Finally, until February 2022, she also had a teaching post in Moscow in the MGIMO-MGU International Master's Program in Post-Soviet Politics. Besides published articles, her books include: *Russia, France, and the Idea of Europe* (Palgrave, 2003), *Institutions, Ideas, and Leadership in Russian Politics* (Palgrave, 2011) with William Tompson.

Joshua Shifrinson is an Associate Professor with the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy and a Senior Fellow with the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland. His research focuses on international security, US foreign policy, and diplomatic history. A graduate of Brandeis University and MIT, Shifrinson is the author of *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Cornell University Press, 2018) and the co-editor, with Jim Goldgeier, of *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

Review by Michael Ellman, Emeritus Professor, University of Amsterdam

Vladislav Zubok's book offers a detailed account of the events that led to the collapse of the USSR. It is important because of the information it provides about those events, the interpretation it offers of the causes of the collapse, and its relevance for understanding current events. The book uses numerous paper and digital archives, interviews with participants in these events, and a mass of publications about them. Its sources basis is excellent. It is obviously the result of prolonged study of the causes of the collapse.

The book contains a large number of interesting details about the process leading up to the fall of the USSR. For example, Soviet leader Yuri Andropov was thinking of doing away with the national republics that comprised the USSR and replacing them with numerous states which would be the new components of the Soviet Union (52-53). This was intended as a pre-emptive blow to prevent nationalist feelings in the republics, and the views and activities of their officials, undermining the unity of the USSR. It seems that Soviet Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev went to East Berlin in October 1989 "to support the revolution" (92), i.e., to support the upheaval in East Germany that led a month later to the fall of the Berlin Wall, a remarkable goal for a Soviet leader. Another snippet of information concerns Gorbachev's agreement to a united Germany's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the former East Germany (124). This was agreed at a meeting between Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl (then German Chancellor) in Moscow on 15 July 1990. In exchange, Germany agreed to provide the USSR with cash (no sum is mentioned) and accepted (unspecified) Soviet security requirements. Kohl asked Gorbachev "to keep the financial assistance to Soviet troops a secret from the German public" (124).

Another interesting piece of information concerns the radical economic reform plan beginning with the re-establishment of monetary control and deregulation where appropriate, which was written jointly by two prominent economists, Nikolai Petrakov and Boris Fyodorov, and submitted to Gorbachev in March 1990 (128-129). Gorbachev did not adopt it because he was afraid of the potential political consequences of inflation and unemployment. Also, he did not understand economics. Zubok is of the opinion that if it had been adopted "in 1990, with the state levers and financial system still intact, the fate of the Soviet economy could have been very different" (129). That is speculation and rather optimistic. Zubok describes the frantic Soviet effort to borrow large sums from foreign countries in September 1990 in order to soften the social costs of economic reform (144-145). In addition to his approaches to the United States, the European Union (EU), and Saudi Arabia, Gorbachev even tried to raise ten billion dollars from Israel, which Israel declined to provide (145).

Zubok's account of the role of Gorbachev, the army, the KGB, and the military-industrial complex is well-informed and balanced. His description of the background to the bloodshed in Vilnius, Lithuania in January 1991 (182-184) is clear and plausible, although he neither blames nor acquits Gorbachev for the deaths. However, real life is complex, and not all events in the *perestroika* period were a direct result of unambiguous orders from Gorbachev. In discussing the relations between Russian leader Boris Yeltsin and Gorbachev in the winter of 1990–91, Zubok correctly points out that both were deluded about what was feasible (186).

Zubok also quotes US Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady as saying in June 1991: "If the Soviets go to a market system, then they can't afford a large defence establishment. A real reform program would turn them into a third-rate power which is what we want" (239). That statement provides support for the dominant perspective in Moscow today about US hostility to Russia and its attempts to reduce Russia's international status. Zubok seems surprised that in the summer of 1991 some people in the George H.W. Bush administration "were happy to see the Soviet Union collapsing" (240). But that is scarcely surprising, since the USA had spent several decades in a global conflict with the USSR. It is a bit much to expect members of the George H. W. Bush administration, even at a very high level, in the summer of 1991 to have understood the nuances of Soviet, and later Russian, politics, and the goals of Gorbachev and of Yegor Gaidar, the economist and leader of the Russian reformist ministerial team in the initial Yeltsin period. However, it is true that the US and other Western governments failed to appreciate in 1991-1992 the possibilities of stimulating the development of a normal Russia that would play a constructive and prosperous role in the world economy and its geopolitical development. The long-term results of that are very obvious at the time of writing (May 2022). Zubok provides a good account (240-242) of the uses by various Soviet political actors of the Grand Bargain illusion (the building of a stable democracy and market economy in the USSR in exchange for Western money) in the summer of 1991, although it was already apparent that the Bush administration had rejected a Marshall Plan for the Soviet Union.

The book includes a very informative account of the preparations of Soviet and Western leaders for the G7 meeting in London in July 1991 (245-250). It also includes an account of what happened at that meeting concerning the USSR (250). For example, Zubok states that the French President François Mitterrand assured Gorbachev that the leaders of Italy, Germany, and France supported him (251). He also states (251-252) that the head of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Jacques Attali, told Gorbachev that the United States was the obstacle to a large assistance programme for the USSR. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher advised Gorbachev to demand money from the G7 (253). Zubok sensibly sums up the result of the G7 meeting for Gorbachev as: "The salesman of *perestroika* was facing bankruptcy" (254).

On 29 July 1991 at a closed meeting between Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Kazakh leader Nursultan Nazarbayev, Gorbachev agreed to a deal "that would destroy the central powers and empower Yeltsin and other republics" (257). They decided to hold a signing ceremony for this agreement on 20 August. However, on 19 August 1991 the self-appointed State Committee for the Emergency Situation attempted to take power. Zubok points out that of the non-Russian republics, only Moldova and Lithuania rejected this coup (283). Zubok also makes clear the failings of the coup: its leaders failed to detain Yeltsin, failed to control television programmes, organised a press conference that undermined their position, and failed to send clear instructions to the leaders of the Party, military and KGB organisations in Leningrad and most likely elsewhere (286-290). Interestingly, one KGB officer in Leningrad quickly correctly judged which way the wind was blowing. On 19 August 1991 KGB Colonel Vladimir Putin made clear that he supported the anti-Communists and resigned from the KGB (290).

On 20 August Thatcher rang Yeltsin—at the suggestion of a Yeltsin adviser—to express her solidarity with him. This was valuable support for Yeltsin when his position was precarious (291). However, the failure of Vladimir Kryuchkov,the head of the KGB, to organise a successful coup was not unique, as President Donald Trump demonstrated in January 2021. Evidently, organising a successful coup requires careful planning and implementation and political skill. Zubok ironically concludes (303-304) that the failed coup did however enable Yeltsin to seize power and ensure the end of the Soviet Union. Zubok also notes that "In October 1993 Yeltsin acted very differently: he ordered his tank commanders to fire at the building of the Russian parliament when it resisted him, arrested all of his political rivals, and stayed in power for another six years" (303). Zubok highlights the September 1991 proposal of Grigory Yavlinsky, the economist and politician best known as co-author of the *500 Days* radical economic reform program, that he and a group of economists be granted extraordinary powers for five years in order to implement the transition to a market economy in the whole of the USSR. As Zubok sensibly observes: "Yavlinsky's technocratic utopia put the cart of economics before the horse of politics" (351). An interesting piece of double-dealing concerns the visit to Moscow of the Managing Director of the IMF, Michael Camdessus, in the autumn of 1991. He told Gorbachev that in a few years a reformed USSR could become an economic superpower. On the other hand, he told the ambassadors of the G7 that the Soviet economy was beyond resuscitation (368).

The detailed attention to US policy towards the USSR, to the divergent views in the US leadership, and to the motives of US policy is a strength of the book. As Zubok points out, US pressure to end Soviet support for the Najibullah regime in Afghanistan "did not benefit American interests at all" (345). However, it did benefit al-Qaeda.

The book concentrates on political developments and thus neglects the rapid economic decline, especially in 1991. Although Soviet budget deficits, loss of monetary control, balance of payments difficulties, and foreign debts are mentioned, they receive insufficient attention. The acute food shortages all over the country in the autumn of 1991, with bread shortages even in Moscow, are scarcely mentioned, and instead the narrative focuses on the manoeuvres of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, despite the fact that bread shortages in the capital were a clear sign that the USSR had lost the 'mandate of heaven,' to use the traditional Chinese expression for political legitimacy.[1] Food shortages also played an important role in determining the outcome of the December 1991 Ukrainian referendum.

Although not much attention is paid to the economic situation, the book does consider the various economic plans that were advocated in this period. Intriguingly, the first version of Gaidar's plan was initially rejected in late September 1991 by Yeltsin, who at that moment preferred an alternative plan which aimed at preserving the USSR (355-357).

The account of the discussion among Russian politicians in September-October 1991 about Crimea and the Donbass (365-367, 384) shows that Putin's recent claim of them is not the demand of an isolated individual aggressor. It reflects an important strand of Russian thinking in 1991 and since about the boundaries that should exist among the post-Soviet states. When organising the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Putin and his supporters thought they were just putting right an injustice done to Russia in 1991.

Zubok provides a detailed account of the December 1991 meeting in the Belovezha forest that dissolved the USSR and created the Commonwealth of Independent States (398-403). He does not think much of the principal participants in the meeting and regrets their decisions. Zubok also discusses (410, 413) Russia's interest in December 1991 in joining NATO (410-413). (Yeltsin asked for Russia, Ukraine and Belarus to be included in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, which had been created for discussion and cooperation between NATO and its former Warsaw Pact adversaries.) Gennady Burbulis, then a prominent member of Team Yeltsin, told the Secretary-General of NATO that the Russian reformers "decisively consider the possibility of joining NATO as part of our primary mission to remove all conditions for confrontation" (410).

Zubok argues that the USSR was "destroyed first by Gorbachev's reforms and then by the implacable separatism of Yeltsin's course of action," and that "A state that could not ensure its main function, a stable currency, was bound to fall apart" (397-98). The economic reforms made the situation worse, and the political reforms enabled opposition to emerge and break up the USSR. This seems accurate, even if the argument is not new.[2] A fundamental issue is why political reforms were introduced before there were successful economic reforms to provide support for them, which Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping thought a fatal mistake. This seems to have resulted from Gorbachev's early goal to carry out a neo-Leninist revolution in which the political revolution would break the bureaucratic opposition to reform and change people's behaviour so that economic reform could produce the hoped for results (61-62).[3] As Zubok sensibly observes, Gorbachev's removal of the Party from management of the economy and society as a whole was a "historic miscalculation" which led to "economic chaos, political populism, nationalism, and more" (42).

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[1] Zubok does write that in Moscow, in December 1991, "People were overwhelmed by everyday troubles, in search of their daily bread" (422).

[2] See Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998).

[3] For the role of Gorbachev's view that *perestroika* was a revolution in generating his hostility to economic stabilisation policies, see Michael Ellman, "Perestroika Economics from the Inside," in Eric Maskin and András Simonovits, eds., *Planning, Shortage and Transformation: Essays in Honor of János Kornai.* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 2000), 271-272.

Zubok argues (428-9) that the collapse was not inevitable and that had Gorbachev's policies been closer to that of Lenin (i.e., the transition to the New Economic Policy) and combined maintenance of the dictatorship with radical economic reforms, the USSR would not have collapsed. How feasible was this? Gorbachev did not understand economics, and his economic advisors had little idea of how to introduce a market economy. When their advice was followed (e.g., in the acceleration period) it had negative effects. Overcoming food shortages in the retail market would have required careful analysis of their causes.[4] It is true that such a policy (maintenance of a dictatorship combined with radical economic reforms) was implemented in China by Deng Xiaoping and was successful there, but conditions in China and the USSR were different. Decollectivisation in the USSR would have been unlikely to increase urban food supplies in the short run. Dividing the assets of collective and state farms in an economically rational way would have been difficult. Collective farmers would not have made good commercial farmers, and there was a lack of organisations able and prepared to supply agricultural inputs to individuals. Supplying credit to farmers would have required changes in the banking system. The development of a successful decollectivised agriculture would have taken years to produce the desired results. It would have required policymakers to have an understanding of agriculture and rural society, as well as of the huge difference in conditions between parts of the USSR.

As for Chinese-style coexistence of state enterprises with private enterprises, the fiasco of Gorbachev's cooperatives showed that opportunism by state industry managers was likely to prevail over the well-meaning intentions of the national leadership. Opportunism at all levels was widespread and prevented well-meaning central policies having the desired effects. The combination of private banks with monetary control would have been difficult to realise in the absence of knowledge about how to do this and the presence of entrepreneurs uninterested in maintaining macroeconomic stability.[5] Counterfactual history is always fun, but analysing what might have been is a digression from understanding what actually happened. However, Zubok's main point here—that alternative policies to those of Gorbachev might have been tried out, and would have had different results—is very sensible. Whether these different results would have resulted in a stable better outcome is uncertain. Lenin's New Economic Policy did produce economic improvements, but after some years ran into serious troubles which led to its end.

Zubok criticises the West, mainly the US, for not seizing the opportunity in 1992 to assist the Russian reformers to consolidate democracy, by which he means providing lots of money and integrating Russia into Western geopolitical institutions (433-6). Given the chaos in Russia in 1992 and the USSR's default on its debts, the unwillingness to provide more money is understandable. However, Russia *was* gradually integrated into the world economy, with large-scale imports of Western goods, significant long-term investments by Western firms in the Russian economy (e.g., Sakhalin I & II, the oil and natural gas installations built with the participation of ExxonMobil and Shell, and also Japanese firms and an Indian firm), and membership of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (already in 1992) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2012. However, the lack of Western money in the crisis year 1992 did make successful economic reforms more difficult. In addition, some of the Western economic advice that Russia received in the early 1990s was one-sided and inadequate.

Zubok is critical of the failure of the West to integrate Russia into NATO and the EU, although to their existing members Russia seemed too big and too special. It is unrealistic to expect that small countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria, or Ireland would have welcomed a country with the population and institutions of Russia into their economic club. As for France and Germany, the key EU members, they also would not have welcomed a country with the population and institutions of Russia into their economic club, since its membership would have greatly reduced their dominant role. All EU members would have doubted whether Russia would adhere to EU rules. Even the admission of Poland and Hungary has turned out to be problematic. As for NATO, it would have been very difficult to persuade all the members of NATO that admitting Russia was safe. There were few reasons to suppose that Russia would permanently respect its post-1991 frontiers, turn into a friendly and stable democracy, remain one for a long time, and dismantle its missiles that were aimed at NATO countries. *Part* of the blame for the current tense relations between NATO and Russia rightly belongs to NATO, with its disregard for Russia's interests and concerns, but it is one-sided to lay *all* the blame for this unfortunate situation on NATO itself.

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[4] See Michael Ellman, *Socialist Planning*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 299–300.

[5] Another counterfactual scenario which Zubok briefly discusses (437-438) is that of nomenklatura-style state capitalism.

This is an exceptionally well-informed book that provides a detailed account of the political events leading up to the collapse of the USSR. However, it deals with contingent events in 1985–1991 rather than the structural problems of the USSR (both political and economic) which contributed to the collapse. As a result there is no attention to the fragility of the political system,[6] the long-run decline in the rate of economic growth, the failure to overcome the technology gap and structural militarisation, and also inadequate attention to the attractions of Western soft power (supermarkets and pop culture) relative to Soviet soft power (socialism and the classless society).[7] Nor is there adequate attention to the national question as a serious threat to the viability of the USSR even prior to *perestroika*, which Andropov understood. If one understands the Soviet collapse as a combination of structural and contingent causes, then this book offers only a partial account of the collapse.[8] It explains in great detail why the USSR collapsed in 1991, rather than in some other year, but not why it was vulnerable to collapse.

Nevertheless, the book will be of great interest to everyone interested in global politics. Amongst other things it provides important background knowledge about the causes of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Policymakers, diplomats, and political advisers will find it useful reading. It contains an example of how a single misguided ruler can unintentionally destroy a major country, which may be relevant elsewhere.

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[6] This was stressed prior to the collapse from very different perspectives by Alexander Shtromas, Hillel Ticktin, and Hélène Carrère d'Encausse. Shtromas's perceptive book *Political Change and Social Development: The Case of the Soviet Union* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981) was discussed by myself in *Perspectives on Political Science* 31:3 (2002), 132-135. D'Encausse's relevant book is *Decline of an Empire: The Soviet Socialist Republics in Revolt* (NY: Newsweek Books, 1979). Ticktin's views were expressed in numerous articles in *Critique* beginning with Ticktin, "Towards a Political Economy of the USSR," *Critique* no.1 (1973), 20-41, and are assembled in Ticktin, *Origins of the Crisis in the USSR: Essays on the Political Economy of a Disintegrating System* (Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 1992).

[7] Zubok does note the very favourable impression which US supermarkets made on Yeltsin.

[8] Zubok himself writes: "Without Gorbachev's reforms, the Soviet Union could have scraped by for another decade and then collapsed much more violently than it did" (437). This implies that the Soviet Union suffered from structural problems which made it vulnerable to collapse even without Gorbachev's reforms and Yeltsin's separatism.

Review by Nataliya Kibita, University of Glasgow

Vladislav Zubok writes, "On the 8th, or the 9th, or the 10th of December [1991]…not a single government body, not a single military unit" protested against the dissolution of the Soviet Union" (409), and "on the day of his resignation, […] not a single leader of the former Soviet republics called [Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev]" (422). Such were the final moments of the first socialist state and its leader's final day in power. The peaceful demolition of the Soviet Union signalled that nobody considered it necessary to fight for its survival. The outright disrespect, almost rudeness to its leader from the leaders of the republics suggested that they believed their attitude to Gorbachev was justified. How did the Soviet Union come to the point of peaceful self-destruction? Was it doomed or was it wilfully destroyed? Could it have been saved? And did Gorbachev deserve such treatment? In his latest monograph, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*, Zubok provides answers to these and other questions that students of Soviet history or of the history of reforms in general might ask.

Collapse offers the most detailed discussion to date of Soviet high politics in the final period of the Soviet Union. Zubok paints a complex picture of the multiple interconnected factors that were in play from the time of the Andropov era, and clearly distinguishes between "the system" and "the Union." The author argues that while the system needed reforms, the Union could have been saved. Zubok places the main responsibility for the collapse of the Soviet state on Gorbachev. Gorbachev transformed the conservative reforms from above, as envisaged by his predecessor Yuri Andropov, "into a revolutionary gamble and ultimately removed the critical props on which the Soviet system and state were resting" (9).

The inclusion of a detailed discussion of economic reforms allows the author to show that the Soviet economy needed reforms, but not the kind of reforms Gorbachev launched. Gorbachev's economic reforms were both inadequate and inadequately implemented. Yet it was the democratisation of Soviet politics that was the outright wrong. It led to a paralysis of power in 1990. This, according to Zubok, was the year for Gorbachev to have introduced presidential rule, rolled back the republic's rights, replaced his unpopular prime-minister Nikolai Ryzhkov, and appointed a ruling economic junta to implement market reforms "without the morass of parliamentary debates or hopeless talks with ethno-nationalists. This could have led to chaos, but at least it would be a chaos that Gorbachev […] had the powers to control" (142), and the chaos that might have saved the Soviet Union and Russia from the Russian president Boris Yeltsin. Zubok labels Yeltsin "the political product of Gorbachev's errors and hubris" (118), and also assigns him primary responsibility for driving the Soviet Union to the abyss of its collapse. Having not taken preventive measures, Gorbachev demolished the old system without creating a new one.

Zubok shows that Gorbachev lacked an understanding of the Soviet system in general, Soviet society, and the Soviet economy in particular. Based on his reading of the vast memoir literature, he also demonstrates that Gorbachev lacked the character necessary for the job of reforming the USSR. Gorbachev dared to launch reforms without thinking them through, based on a vague concept of "socialist democracy" and an even more vague understanding of how to materialise it. It is difficult to disagree with the author's observation that Gorbachev mastered the tactics of political struggle, but preferred "endless discussion to policy-making" (106). On the other hand, with respect to foreign policy, Gorbachev's vision of a future world order free from Cold War confrontation between the superpowers was clear, and his character appeared to be less of an obstacle for him to have successfully implemented his ambitious agenda.

As Zubok admits, by assigning the centrality of the role to Gorbachev in the fall of Soviet Union, *Collapse* does not break new historiographic grounds.[1] At the same time, by paying unusually careful attention to the deliberations on economic reforms, *Collapse* makes a firm stand against the historiographic view that the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable, or that the Soviet Union was doomed.[2] Like such scholars as Mark Beissinger and Serhii Plokhy, Zubok argues that the Soviet system was predetermined to fall.[3] But contrary to them, Zubok assigns less weight to the systemic factors. Whereas for Beissinger collapse arrived after "events acquired a sense of momentum, transformed the nature of political institutions, and assumed the characteristics of their own causal structure,"[4] Zubok shows in the final chapters that Yeltsin had sufficient power to stop the Union from dissolution.

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[1] Richard Sakwa, *Gorbachev and His Reforms, 1985-1990* (New York, London: Philip Allan, 1990); Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017).

Zubok challenges the paradigm of "empire" as one that exaggerates the role of national movements. He admits that the Soviet Union was a "minefield of nationalist grievances and aspirations" (51). The discussion of the growth of nationalism in the republics in *Collapse* seems to support Beissinger's observation that the national movements proved vital as they provided a new context for the republican elites.[5] *Collapse* also illustrates the conclusion shared by Plokhy and Beissinger that the introduction of elements of electoral democracy into Soviet politics in 1989 empowered the newly elected politicians in Russia and other republics to "say whether they were willing to continue bearing the burden of empire" and whether or not "to remain under imperial rule."[6] Nonetheless, Zubok concludes that at the time, successful mitigation of economic hardships could have eased, if not completely eliminated, the nationality problems.

Zubok joins Plokhy in challenging the triumphalist interpretation of the Soviet collapse as an American victory in the Cold War, and argues that external factors, such as the cost of the arms race or oil prices, were secondary to the internal causes. This does not mean, however, that the West did not play its role in the Soviet collapse. The Soviet elites believed that the West would help them with economic reforms and provide financial help. Zubok concludes that "there was no political will or imagination among Western leaders to seize the unprecedented and historic opportunity to consolidate democracy in Russia" (433).

Indeed, to the extent that Gorbachev was the leader who began the reforms, and Yeltsin was the Russian leader who did not have any scruples about exploiting the crisis for his personal gains, it is hard to relieve them of the responsibility for the Soviet tragedy. And yet, it is when evaluating the degree of their responsibility, particularly that of Gorbachev, that *Collapse* is thought-provoking.

For example, Zubok argues that it was Gorbachev's mistake to force the Party to cede its economic and political levers of power. The Party apparatus was "the only tool that could possibly keep reforms and the entire country under control" (42). The party was undoubtedly an administrative tool for the general secretary. But as Stephen Whitefield, for one, argues, the party also depended on the ministries, and was also a tool for the ministries to lobby for their interests. Central ministries were also powerful political players.[7] In February 1990, in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU), approximately 500 out of 560 people were officials in current ministries, incapable of decisive reorganisation. The branch departments of the CC CPSU were thus also ill-equipped to implement reforms that would liberate enterprises from the ministries.[8] At the same time, by 1989–1990, the ministries saw gains in reforms and began to transform into economic, as opposed to state, agencies by turning into concerns. Without the existence of proper legal regulations, the monopoly position of former ministries strengthened. Whitefield notes that for the economist Leonid Abalkin, director of the Institute of Economics in Moscow, concerns were a reincarnation of the command economy. Gorbachev believed that separating political from economic power would increase rather than decrease the power of the top party leadership.[9] Viewed from the perspective of interdependence between the economic administrations and the party apparatus, it can be argued that Gorbachev was trapped by the *ministerialism* and the construction of the party apparatus on the branch principle that he inherited. Short of stopping the reforms altogether, the transfer of power from the party to the soviets seemed like an option to release enterprises and the party from the grip of the ministries. Democratisation can be thus viewed not as a mistake but a necessity. Besides, as Whitefield and Stephen Fortescue argue, the diktat of the central ministries caused the conflict between the republics and the centre and fuelled separatist aspirations, as the ministries notoriously neglected the needs of the regions.[10]

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[2] Yegor Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia,* trans. Antonina W. Bouis (New York, NY: Brookings Institution Press, 2007); Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[3] Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

[4] Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 36.

[5] Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization,* 26.

[6] Plokhy, *The Last Empire*, xxxi.

[7] Stephen Whitefield, *Industrial Power and the Soviet State* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 193, 208; Chris Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Collapse of the USSR* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

[8] Whitefield, *Industrial Power*, 212-3.

What arguably might have saved the reforms, provided there was consensus on which reforms to implement, was well-thought-through legislation that would align the aims of the reform with the incentives of the economic agencies, and enforcement of the rule of law to target such basic problems as violation of contract discipline by enterprises that engulfed the Soviet economy. Yet, ironically, as *Collapse* shows very well, what for the Soviet system would have been such an unorthodox solution was not on the mind of the former law student. Nor was there demand in society for the rule of law, despite strong demand for "order."

The factor of the West is another one that made me pause and reflect on the Soviet system, rather than on Gorbachev's personality. There are several references in *Collapse* to the psychological needs of the central and republican elites to be recognised and supported by the United States. Zubok argues that "by the end of 1988, Gorbachev [… was] once again adhering to the old Russian tradition of viewing the West as a partner in a grandiose project—but this time of the Soviet Union's modernization" (432), and that "in the summer of 1991, the expectation of a new Marshall Plan among the Soviet elites became almost universal" (433). What is curious is not the reliance on the western financial assistance *per se*, but the absence of a discussion among the Soviet elites as to *why* should the West invest in reforming the Soviet economy, particularly since a clear program of reforms did not exist even as late as summer 1991, and the reforms the economist and journalist Yegor Gaidar planned to implement in Russia were deemed as doomed to fail. That fact that Gorbachev was unable to explain to Chancellor Helmut Kohl where over two billion DM that Germany had already given to him had gone could not have helped Gorbachev's fund-raising efforts, either. The decision not to provide the loan rather suggests pure "cost-benefit" reasoning. Besides, as *Collapse* shows, the Americans were prepared to invest, just not to donate. Hence, the Russian feelings detected by Zubok of being cheated by the West in the 1990s, that "the triumphant West seemed to have left the struggling Russia and other post-Soviet states out of its zone of comfort" (435), may have been misplaced.

As a final point, I would like to mention the Yeltsin factor. Where Gorbachev hesitated, Yeltsin did not. Zubok clearly shows that Yeltsin was determined to destroy the Soviet Union and Gorbachev personally. But this did not mean that Yeltsin wanted to set the republics free from Russia's domination. For all his democratic rhetoric, Yeltsin is presented as a Russian leader who was ready to take all steps necessary to keep post-Soviet republics "crawling on their knees" (330) for Russia's resources. To keep control over Ukraine, it would appear that Yeltsin was prepared to use military means. Yeltsin's explanation that the Commonwealth of Independent States signed in Belavezha was created in order to avoid Russia and Ukraine being "on the opposite sides of the barricades" and his assertion that "if Ukraine had its own Army, currency, state borders, there would be no peace between Russia and Ukraine" (408) were ominous. Did anyone from his entourage ask him why there should be no peace between an independent Ukraine and Russia? The implication that if

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[9] Whitefield, *Industrial Power,* 211, 225, 231, 233.

[10] Whitefield, *Industrial Power,* 243; Stephen Fortescue, "The Restructuring of Soviet Industrial Ministries since 1985," in Anders Åslund, ed., *Market Socialism or Restoration of Capitalism?* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 136-8.

Ukraine was not part of Russia, it would become its enemy, an enemy that Russia should attack and deprive the right to exist, however, is unmissable. To the best of my knowledge, declaring war on Russia was not on the agenda of even the most ultra-nationalist Ukrainians. Indeed, as Zubok concludes, Yeltsin's personal ambitions overruled state interests, Soviet or Russian.

Zubok's line of argumentation is meticulously supported with primary and secondary sources. Abundant memoirs show that contemporaries of Gorbachev generally agreed on his characteristics and his leadership. Zubok's use of memoir material makes the characters come alive and allows the reader to submerge into the political atmosphere of the last years of the Soviet Union. *Collapse* is an excellent addition to historiography on the Soviet Union. Scholars of the period will appreciate the inclusion of a discussion of the Andropov era, which still today remains under-studied. The monograph offers plenty of new material and thought-provocative arguments to students of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet states, and states in transformation in general.

Zubok dedicates *Collapse* to all reformers, and it seems that it is with them in mind that the monograph is written. The message he conveys is clear: do not start reforms without due research and careful assessment of true reasons that guide you when launching reforms and possible outcomes.

Review by Julie Newton, St Antony's College, University of Oxford

In the wake of Western shock over Russia's unprovoked war on Ukraine in February 2022, it is a perfect moment to go back three decades and reexamine the causes, contexts, and consequences of the collapse of the Soviet empire. What really caused the Soviet Union's astonishing demise? Was it preventable, and if so, what lessons should we draw? What are the links between the Soviet collapse and today's Russo-Ukrainian war?

These are a few of the big, topical questions that Vladislav Zubok addresses in his meticulously researched book, *Collapse: The Fall of the USSR*, and his answers are certain to stimulate discussion and debate. Examples include Zubok's challenge to the widely held Western assumption—indeed, belief—that the Soviet collapse was structurally pre-determined and thus inevitable. Instead, he prioritizes the role of contingent factors in causing that collapse, including domestic political forces, external influences, and leadership quality—especially that of the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and his reform agenda. In addition, Zubok offers alternative ways of thinking about Russian President Vladimir Putin's bellicose actions today—which, for many, are rooted in the authoritarian and expansionist essence of the Putin regime itself—through his careful analysis of the unresolved circumstances surrounding the 1990–1991 Russo-Ukrainian split after 300 years of the two nations' union.

Offering both a deep and broad analysis of the Gorbachev era, this book ranks among other important efforts to explain the Soviet Union's collapse, such as those by Mark Beissinger, Serhii Plokhy, Andrei Grachev, and Stephen Kotkin.[1] And, despite some serious misgivings on my part about some of its main points (discussed below), this book makes important contributions to the field. Central among them is Zubok's persuasive argument against the inevitability of the Soviet collapse. He challenges the likes of US Secretary of State James Baker, who said "everything [that] had happened to the Soviet Union had been absolutely inevitable" (415)—a quote reflecting the "end of history" spirit that unhelpfully began to permeate American official and intellectual life around this time, based on belief in the inherent inferiority of the Communist system and the basic superiority of "the last and true faith—liberal democracy" (423).

Similarly, Zubok challenges the dominant (American) narrative based on Realist theory, which claims that the democratizing Soviet reforms were also ineluctable. President Ronald Reagan's military pressure, alongside America's superior economic and political system, according to standard narratives,[2] had so weakened the USSR after years of Cold War competition that it was finally forced to reform. But Zubok correctly sets out to demonstrate that "the unaffordable costs of defense spending did not push the Soviet leader toward reforms." Instead, "the realization of their necessity dated to the early 1960s" (432). It is an excellent point. As documented elsewhere by this writer, Robert English, and others, the shift in Soviet thinking and identity among open-minded Soviet elites beginning in the late 1950s towards Europeanist/Westernizing reforms gathered steam and evolved over the next three decades; once Gorbachev became general secretary, their reformist ideas gained institutional power and began to shape official policy.[3] Zubok is right. It is high time to correct these narratives of inevitability.

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[1] Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Andrei Grachev, *Final Days: The Inside Story of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995); Stephen Kotkin, *Armegeddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011); Peter Schweizer, *Reagan's War: The Epic Story of His Forty-Year Struggle and Final Triumph over Communism* (New York: Anchor Books, Random House, 2003).

[3] Julie Newton, *Russia, France, and the Idea of Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

Yes, Russia's historical baggage is extremely heavy, but history does not preordain Russian outcomes, contrary to Stephen Kotkin's suggestion in a recent *New Yorker* interview.[4] Nor are Russia's "persistent factors," as Alfred Rieber puts it, towards authoritarianism, economic backwardness, cultural marginalism, expansionism, and sphere-of-influence mentality necessarily "*permanent* factors."[5] (We know from social science that change in political culture can and does happen under the right conditions and auspicious circumstances.[6]) Nor does the nature of Putin's Russia, its authoritarian, corrupt political system, and Putin's need to retain power, satisfactorily or fully explain Russia's offensive actions towards Ukraine since 2014, contrary to what many popular journalists and politicians (such as Catherine Belton or Radek Sikorski)[7] suggest. In short, essentialist explanations, which prioritize inherent nature over more contingent causal factors, lead to a lazy focus on inevitability, which in turn oversimplifies the situation and obscures more complex and realistic understandings of historical change.

It is thus commendable that Zubok sets out to overturn entrenched essentialist explanations of the Soviet Union's collapse, and he is right to stress the importance of contingency in causing that collapse. The trouble is that his own single-minded explanation—the negative impact of the Gorbachev factor—overlooks or oversimplifies the complexities of the situation. Zubok blames the collapse largely on Gorbachev's "feckless" leadership, which he holds primarily responsible for making a hash of the economy, unpicking the levers of centralized authoritarian control, and incompetently unleashing a pandemic of nationalist populism which Gorbachev then refused to stem (428). For him and for other major critics of Gorbachev, the USSR would have been spared collapse in 1991 had it not been for Gorbachev's reforms, or if Gorbachev had cracked down coercively before it was too late. That may be true, but it should be remembered that without Gorbachev's transformative reforms, the country would have remained essentially the same as it was before: strongly authoritarian, repressive, coercive, and most likely poor; Poland and the other satellite states would have remained trapped in the Soviet sphere; and the Baltic states and Ukraine, for whose sovereignty many are now willing to fight and die, would have remained part of the USSR.

Moreover, this negative obsession with the Gorbachev factor leads Zubok to give short shrift to more nuanced explanations, and to oversimplify and be insensitive to the excruciating predicaments facing the Gorbachev leadership. By 1990, the Soviet state began unravelling because of complex interactions among multiple factors–a mix of contingent and systemic–including: leadership (preferences and decisions); economic pressures (high defense spending, vast Brezhnev-era agricultural subsidies, historically low oil prices, structural economic and political weaknesses[8]); institutional shifts; the role of ideas, identity, and nationalism; and external and transnational influences. It is the way these multiple factors interacted, rather than the impact of any single factor, that best tells this complex story. While Zubok discusses many of these factors, he still puts the blame squarely on Gorbachev's (and then Boris Yeltsin's) shoulders, which oversimplifies the complexities and leans towards a Thomas Carlyle-style "great man" explanation of historical change.[9]

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[4] David Remnick, "The Weakness of the Despot: An Expert on Stalin discusses Putin, Russia, and the West," *The New Yorker,* 11 March 2022; https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/stephen-kotkin-putin-russia-ukraine-stalin.

[5] Alfred J. Rieber, "How Persistent are Persistent Factors?" in Robert Legvold, ed., *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 205-276.

[6] Archie Brown and Jack Gray, *Political Culture and Political Change in Communist States*, 2nd Edition (New York and London: Springer, 1979); Archie Brown, ed., *Political Culture and Communist Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984); Brown, *Soviet Politics and Political Science* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974).

[7] Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Took on the West* (London: William Collins, 2020); Radek Sikorski, Speech to German Council on Foreign Relations, "Sikorski: Russia Ukraine War - What Do We Do Now?" (October 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0FZ5XOK3YE. While their analyses make excellent points based on solid research, their tendencies to stress monocausal explanations oversimplify the drivers of Russian foreign policy.

[8] For excellent account of the combined impact of post-1986 oil price collapse and Soviet structural weaknesses, see: Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 15-19.

Gorbachev's "fatal flaw," in Zubok's view, was being "unable to make tough decisions and then stick with them" (425). Gorbachev may have been a "grandmaster of *nomenklatura* politics," but Zubok dismisses him as "a poor decision maker" in the central decisions that could (or would?) have changed the union's fate (431).

It is undoubtedly true that Gorbachev made mistakes. The economic reforms he enacted had many negative effects, leading Zubok and other scholars to accuse Gorbachev of having addressed economic problems too little, too late, and too indecisively. Indeed, by the time Soviet economist Nikolai Petrakov joined Gorbachev in early 1990, indicating Gorbachev's embrace of marketization as the only viable economic choice for the country,[10] it was perhaps too late to make a difference. In addition, Gorbachev made a mistake when he tacked to the right in order to form a right-wing alliance inside the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the winter of 1990–1991 to keep his adversaries under control;[11] this backfired, enabling bloodshed in the Baltics in early 1991 and the attempted coup in August.

Gorbachev also probably erred by refusing to run for the position of Soviet president in March 1990 in a union-wide vote while he was still relatively popular[12] (reliable poll data shows that Yeltsin did not overtake Gorbachev in popularity until May-June 1990, but this was not clear at the time—and thus explains Gorbachev's hesitation to run).[13] Winning (or even losing) an all-union election would have afforded Gorbachev important electoral legitimacy as the first Soviet (and Russian) leader to give the people a chance to remove him in free elections,[14] which would have allowed him to compete better with Yeltsin, who was elected in June 1991 as just the president of a republic, albeit the USSR's most important one.

Less clearly a mistake was Gorbachev's refusal to split the Communist Party of the Soviet Uniont (CPSU). With hindsight, it is easy to criticize Gorbachev for not following the advice of his advisors, Aleksander Yakovlev and Georgii Shakhnazarov, to forge a new social-democratic party (along the lines of the Social Democratic Party in Germany [SPD]). This might have afforded Gorbachev a stronger, more coherent party platform from which to compete with Yeltsin.

In fairness to Gorbachev, however, counter-factual history is impossible to prove. In addition, Gorbachev had compelling reasons for his actions at the time. He resisted splitting the Party for fear of a take-over by the conservative Party apparatus, which, as Anatolii Chernyaev said, he likened to a "rabid dog": "I can't let this lousy rabid dog off the leash. If I do, all this huge structure will be turned against me."[15]

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[9] Robert Service, "Goodbye, Lenin: Review of *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* by Vladislav Zubok," *Literary Review*, no 503, December 2021, https://literaryreview.co.uk/back-issue/503

[10] Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 149; Archie Brown, *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 339—340.

[11] Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor,* 202.

[12] Grachev calls that refusal to call a general election for the Soviet presidency "perhaps the fatal error" of Gorbachev's tenure: Andrei Grachev, *The Final Days: The Inside Story of The Collapse of The Soviet Union* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020), 202; Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor,* 202-203.

[13] Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor,* 203.

[14] Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 203.

[15] William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2017), p. 591.

Indeed, for seven years, Gorbachev's faced such a formidable conservative opposition inside the Party apparatus that he, a "brilliant tactician," tacked and vacillated, making him appear more indecisive than he really was.[16] Zubok disputes this explanation:

> Those who have studied Gorbachev's reforms before contend that he had to walk a tightrope, balancing between making long-overdue changes and offsetting the backlash of hardliners. Otherwise, he would have been ousted as Nikita Khrushchev had been in 1964. It is often said that the "August coup" of 1991 validates this. This book demonstrates questions and qualifies these assumptions. There were still plenty of diehard ideologues in the Party, yet in the 1980s the Soviet bureaucracy was no longer a phalanx of "Stalinists" determined to resist any sort of change…Opposition to Gorbachev inside the Party and state always remained diffuse, leaderless, lacking a clear alternative strategy (428).

For Zubok, the real explanation for Gorbachev's vacillations lies in the Soviet leader's incompetence and lack of resolve.

Other major scholars of the Gorbachev era strongly dispute this claim.[17] The vast majority of the Party apparatus was deeply conservative, objected to Gorbachev's unilateral concessions in conventional military weapons, and had battalions at their disposal from the KGB, the military, and the Ministry of the Interior. The majority of the Party apparatus, along with the heads of Soviet ministries, supported the August 1991 coup.[18] That Gorbachev maneuvered—and succeeded (at least until the attempted coup)—in trying to forge a middle ground in this highly polarized political environment, and that he outflanked the majority old guard, who certainly had not embraced the kind of transformative democratic reform that was implemented under their noses, is testimony to the Soviet reformer's extraordinary tactical skill, steely courage, and political ingenuity. It seems unfair—and wrong—to label as "feckless" and "indecisive" the Soviet leader who succeeded, beyond all expectations, to peacefully end almost 50 years of Cold War, dismantle the brutally cruel and tyrannous Soviet system and its stifling single-party rule, bequeath more freedoms to the Russian people than any time in Russia's 1000-year history, and reverse Russia's autarky and open it to the global community of nations.[19] These are hardly the accomplishments of a "feckless" or "indecisive" leader.

Although it is true that his economic reforms were unsuccessful and incoherent, as Gorbachev wavered between plans by Soviet economists Nikolai Ryzhkov, Stanislav Shatalin, Nikolai Petrakov, and Grigory Yavlinsky, it is hard to imagine any economic plan that could have successfully or clearly transitioned the Soviet Union's heavily industrialized and militarized economy to a market economy after six decades of central planning without inflicting serious economic harm on unprepared populations. His most vociferous critics greatly overestimate the ease with which Gorbachev could have moved to radical economic reform. As Gorbachev himself reminded International Monetary Fund (IMF) Director Michel Camdessus in 1991, "just a year ago [1990], all somebody had to do was mention a market economy, without a word about private property, and right away he was a traitor in the eyes of many people…A year or two ago, the putschists would have been able to set up a veritable dictatorship."[20] Gorbachev was right to be ambivalent given the explosive impact on the Soviet peoples, who had been more heavily indoctrinated by *six* decades of fixed prices than any other society on earth, by the kinds of staggering price hikes required to achieve market-economic liberalization, privatization, and stabilization.[21]

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[16] Taubman, 691; Grachev, 196-198.

[17] Pavel Palazchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter* (Penn: Pennsylvania State University, 1997), 199-200; Grachev, 22, 101, 196-198. Grachev even says the "conditions of fierce struggle" had even worsened over time "from the forces of the old, outmoded, reactionary past and the former Party-state structures and economic apparatus" (205)—which was understandable given that Gorbachev's reforms impinged on their "political status and vital interests" (101).

[18] Andrei Grachev, 22, 101. He writes, "people seldom ask how many coups d'état Gorbachev managed to avoid in six and a half years of reform. Any of these potential coups could have occurred under much less favorable circumstances… There had been rabid opposition to him on the part of the conservative political bodies and the conservative public. Tanks would not have been needed to halt the process of reform—a simple closed-door vote by the Party leadership would have been sufficient" (101).

[19] Archie Brown, "Gorbachev and Perestroika: a 25th Anniversary Perspective," *Baltic Worlds*, Vol. III, No. 3, 2010, 22-26, http://balticworlds.com/a-twenty-fifth-anniversary-perspective/

Moreover, the USSR, with its heavily industrialized/militarized economy, negligible sector of private agriculture, and 60-year-old deeply entrenched command economy, had stifled any meaningful entrepreneurial culture of private enterprise. In addition, Gorbachev believed, the Party bureaucracy, with its centralized grip on all aspects of economic and political life, was the "main obstacle" to changing that culture and "to the modernization and revitalization of the Soviet socialist project" (42).

For these reasons—combined with Gorbachev's personal belief in democratization for its own humanistic sake –the reform-minded Soviet leader prioritized political reform over economic reform, starting with "de-centralization," "*glasnost*," and "democratization" (22). Even if their ultimate goal included economic reform, the Gorbachev leadership believed that economic reform would be impossible without first removing the political/institutional/bureaucratic constraints and attenuating the Soviet state's/CPSU's stranglehold over the economy.[22] Moreover, given the economic zeitgeist of the era that stressed the "correlation between limited government and sustainable economic growth,"[23] Gorbachev's early focus on political reform to remove bureaucratic obstacles to pave the way for economic reform made sense.[24]

For Zubok, however, the political route was a dangerous mistake. Instead, "the most natural choice would [have] be[en] the road already taken by China," consisting of economic reform first without democratic reform, or, as Zubok puts it, "a combination of state capitalism and liberalization of small businesses" (229)—a kind of "Andropov-style conservative reformism" (a reference to the head of CPSU Central Committee Secretariat Yegor Ligachev's views [40]), without Gorbachev's "misguided de-centralization" or democratization (42). A state capitalist economy that gave enterprises more rights within a centralized, authoritarian polity (16-18), Zubok believes, would have avoided the economic chaos of 1990–1991 and, above all, saved the Soviet state.[25] As he puts it in another passage, "A much more logical path for the Soviet system would have been the continuation of Andropov-like authoritarianism, which enjoyed mass support, combined with radical market liberalization—just what Lenin had done many decades earlier [Lenin's New Economic Policy of the 1920s]" (428).

Quite apart from the fact that this approach shuns democracy and rule of law for the sake of political stability and authoritarian rule, there are two other problems with this contention. First, the Chinese model was hardly suitable for the USSR in the late 1980s;[26] Zubok himself acknowledges the USSR's vastly different starting point from China (61). But this difference makes China's route highly questionable as a counter-factual alternative to *perestroika.* As Harley Balzer explains, because China's economic reforms had begun a decade earlier by decollectivizing farming, Chinese peasants were inculcated with an entrepreneurial culture from the start; Deng Xiaoping's Chinese reforms had thus begun with a bottom-up, "spontaneous shift to household responsibility" that Beijing "accepted" but "did not organize."[27] Over time, China's decollectivized peasants became the new labor force for new industrial zones.[28] Moreover, because the Cultural Revolution had wiped out much of the officialdom in China's Communist Party apparatus, Chinese reformers had far fewer bureaucratic obstacles to overcome.[29] From there, China's economic growth exploded, mostly because of "some regional decentralization and many entrepreneurs pushing or altering the boundaries of the permissible" within a favorable context with fewer entrenched institutional obstacles.[30]

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[20] Grachev, 26.

[21] Grachev, 124. Grachev stresses his profound concerns "not only [about] economic distress but social catastrophe."

[22] Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 131-32. Also, it is no coincidence that Gorbachev started reform in 1985 not in the economic, but foreign policy domain, where there were relatively fewer institutional and bureaucratic obstacles to change (131).

[23] Harley Balzer, "What Have We Learned, and Not Learned, from a Quarter Century of Transition," *NewsNet*, Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, October 2016, vol. 56, n. 5, 4. http://aseees.org/sites/default/files/downloads/october%202016.pdf

[24] More specifically, Gorbachev actually began his reforms in 1985 in the political domain of *foreign policy*—the area that he could "transform most comprehensively" with relatively fewer institutional and bureaucratic obstacles. This would generate momentum and pave the way for reforms in other domains. Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 131.

[25] Vladislav Surkov and Vladimir Putin share Zubok's view, along with a variety of Western scholars. Ronald Suny wrote: "'Gorbachev's policies were contradictory and politically dangerous' because they eroded 'central state and party power and authority.'" See: Chris Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Collapse of the USSR* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 7.

For this to have happened in the USSR, the super-centralized Party and its powerful interest groups demanding fat subsidies would have had to have gotten out of the way, at least partially, in order to revitalize both the Soviet economy and Soviet society, while simultaneously balancing the risks to the Soviet state that decentralization would invariably pose. For Gorbachev, the solution was to erect new bottom-up institutions, including genuine parliamentary bodies such as the Congress of Peoples' Deputies, Russia's first ever competitive and fair elections, and freer information. This democratization gradually loosened the Soviet state's traditional levers of central control—the very levers that Zubok asserts were critical for keeping the Soviet state intact. But Gorbachev was hardly blind to these risks (though admittedly he was not sufficiently aware of the unintended consequences of decentralization in the early years of *perestroika*)[31]; by the later years, he faced the extremely negative impact that decentralization had on the center's capacity to collect federal tax revenues.[32] As he endeavored to address those risks, however, Yeltsin's mounting pressure at every turn complicated things enormously. Still, Gorbachev hoped/labored to renegotiate the union through the power of persuasion and compromise around new, voluntary, loosely federal institutions, which were analogous to the European Economic Community, and which he reasonably believed would be a more enduring, peaceful—and humane—approach.

Zubok argues, however, that this was a pipedream; Gorbachev's "misguided decentralization" and democratization risked state-collapse from the start. "Just as Andropov had warned," writes Zubok, [Gorbachev's] experiment with "'socialist democracy'[33] was a highly dangerous enterprise. Gorbachevian *perestroika*, the way it was conceived, could not succeed. Instead, it exposed the Soviet Union to the demons of economic chaos, political populism, nationalism, and more" (42).

Zubok returns to the idea of Chinese-style reforms as the better model. But this idealization of the China model, as discussed above, distorts the reality and sources of China's success. Indeed, as Balzer notes, "China's three-decade run of economic growth has been badly misconstrued in Russia, fueling related myths of a strong leader, centralization, and state enterprises generating economic success."[34] Upon these myths,

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[26] Miller*,* 177-78; Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 494-95.

[27] Harley Balzer, "What Have We Learned."

[28] Balzer, "What Have We Learned."

[29] Brown, *The Rise and Fall,* 494-95, 590.

[30] Balzer,"What Have We Learned."

[31] Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor,* 65.

[32] Miller, 156-58, 160.

[33] In fact, Andropov did not object to the concept of "socialist democracy," which was commonly used in official discourse even in Brezhnev's time. Moreover, it was not "social*ist* democracy" with which Gorbachev experimented, but a very different concept—West European-style "*social* democracy" as in Germany (SPD). See: Archie Brown, "Gorbachev and *Perestroika*: a 25th Anniversary Perspective," *Baltic Worlds*, Vol. III, No. 3, 2010, 22-26, http://balticworlds.com/a-twenty-fifth-anniversary-perspective/.

[34] Balzer, "What Have We Learned."

Putin has rebuilt Russia today, but Russia is further away than ever from the kind of buoyant economic miracle that China experienced. Zubok's idealization of the China model also leads to the dismissal of the link between democratic institutions and economic growth, but this oversimplifies reality; in fact, there is a strong correlation between one of the core pillars of democracy—the rule of law—and per-capita economic wealth and low corruption.[35]

There is a second problem with Zubok's contention that Andropovian/Chinese-style reform would have better served the USSR: he praises the use of force as a political tool to safeguard the state and castigates Gorbachev's unwillingness to use force to put down insurrection or preserve the Soviet state at all costs. "Gorbachev…[had] a visceral aversion to the use of force. An admirable moral quality in an individual, this was a huge political flaw in the leader of a country with a tragic history and facing a rising wave of toxic nationalism" (105). In another passage, Zubok elaborates, "…His [Gorbachev's] aversion to force and violence…shared by other elites of his generation made them surprisingly feckless when the political and economic storm came," leading to a "collective paralysis" whereby neither he, nor anyone in the Politiburo, "could stomach…, if need be, maintaining order through force" (428).

Throughout the book, Zubok laments Gorbachev's reluctance to use force. In the critical year of 1991, Zubok postulates that "a resolute use of force could have cemented and crystallized the state structures, yet the order [from the putschists] for this never came" (431). Contemplating counter-factuals, Zubok concludes, "The Soviet Union could have gradually made its way into the world economy by a process of trial and error, with a *nomenklatura*-style state capitalism, and certainly with its institutions of power preserved.…Only Gorbachev's penchant for compromise and antipathy to the use of force helped them [i.e., the nationalists, liberals and forces of chaos] succeed" (437-8).

It is extremely difficult to believe that the use of force, rather than the power of persuasion, to keep the union together would have produced a more satisfactory situation for Russia and its former republics then or now. Keeping the Soviet Union together through coercion would have meant perpetuating systems of brutal repression, dictatorship, and over-centralized dysfunction. It is difficult to accept that maintaining state boundaries at all costs was more valuable than Gorbachev's efforts to break free from Russia's "persistent tendencies" by laying the institutional foundations for a flourishing, knowledge-based economy, thriving civil society, and constructive foreign policy. That Gorbachev failed to achieve these goals is as much down to contingent factors of bad luck (historically low oil prices, a US leadership that was unwilling to offer more economic support at crucial moments) and the unintended consequences of his reforms (the rise of republican nationalism, populism, and Boris Yeltsin's Russian nationalistic opportunism), as it is to Gorbachev's own political misjudgements and missteps. Among those mistakes, this writer would never include his reluctance to use force.

This is not simply a value judgement. In recent years, the use of force as a choice to achieve political goals has tended to lead to net-negative, unintended consequences over the long term. America's invasion of Iraq in 2003 is just one example. After $2 trillion spent and the lives lost of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and 4500 US service members, the US has only negative equity to show for using force to resolve that political problem.[36] In Russia, Yeltsin's use of force in October 1993 against his political adversaries—described at the time as a necessary "civil war"' to ensure the democratic future of Russia—is now considered the turning point when Russia began its slow descent back towards authoritarianism.[37] Moreover, today, Putin's decision to use of force against Ukraine—"they did not leave us any other option for defending Russia and our people, other than the one we are forced to use today"[38]—stands out for its unintended, calamitous consequences for Russia, Ukraine, and the world, which will last generations.

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[35] On the link between rule of law *and* per capita wealth + low corruption, see: Sanjai Bhagat, "Economic Growth, Income Inequality, and the Rule of Law", *Harvard Business Law Review,18* November 2020, https://journals.law.harvard.edu/hblr/2020/11/economic-growth-income-inequality-rule-of-law/ : "We consider 134 countries during the period 1984-2019 and find a significant positive relation between Rule of Law…and GDP per capita. Notably, this positive relation has improved over time …[and] is robust…. Additionally, we document that lesser corruption in the political system is correlated with higher levels of GDP per capita."

[36] "Costs Of The U.S.-Led War In Iraq Since 2003," from the "Costs of War" Project, Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/2022/IraqWarCosts; Neta C.

In conclusion, despite my disagreements with some of Zubok's central arguments, it is important to recall that this book makes substantial contributions to the field. Admirably well researched, *Collapse* rightly challenges mainstream narratives that the Soviet collapse was somehow inevitable because of the Soviet Union's systemic factors, stressing instead the role of more contingent causes, including the quality of leadership (although the unmitigated, damning judgement of the Gorbachev factor [and Yeltsin] seems excessive and even strident at times), the influence of the US and Europe, the rise of nationalism, the state of the global economy, and so on. In addition, this book offers a wealth of new and interesting details about the woes of Gorbachev's efforts at economic reform. It documents how the US, far from seeking the Soviet Union's collapse, in fact worked hard to prevent its dissolution; it describes how intensely Soviet leaders looked to the West for help, support, and legitimacy, but tragically never received the kind that could have made a difference to the fate of perestroika. It provides new insights into the roles and inner workings of key KGB and military actors who designed the failed coup of August 1991. And most of all, *Collapse* grippingly retells the story of the Ukrainian-Russian divorce in 1990–1991 in far greater and more interesting detail than is offered elsewhere—details that remind us just how the relevant the collapse of the Soviet empire remains 30 years later for understanding Russian actions today.

Crawford, "The Iraq War has cost the US nearly $2 trillion," *Military Times* 6 February 2022, https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2020/02/06/the-iraq-war-has-cost-the-us-nearly-2-trillion/

[37] Lilia Shevtsova, "1993: Russia's 'Small' Civil War," 3 October 2013, Carnegie Moscow Center, https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/53189

[38] Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," 24 February 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843

Review by Joshua Shifrinson, University of Maryland

When and why do great powers die? If the twentieth century was defined by the geopolitical upheavals of the world and cold wars, it was nearly as decisively shaped by the death of many of the system's leading powers. Wilhelmine Germany, Imperial Russia, and Austria-Hungary went the way of the dodo in World War One; Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and Fascist Italy were eliminated during World War Two; the Soviet Union was done in at Cold War's end. Many of these great powers were soon reconstituted in various forms, albeit with accompanying territorial and domestic changes. Still, the upheavals ushered in by their collapse carried effects both foreign (for example, local conflicts, transnational terrorism, and beyond) and domestic (for instance, civil war and factional struggles).

The study of great-power collapse, however, remains a gap in the theoretical and historical literature. Despite the scholarly attention paid to "state death" and "great power decline" as general phenomena, important research on the collapse of individual great powers, and a range of hypotheses one might intuit, we know surprisingly little about the ruination and outright collapse of great powers themselves.[1] Making this absence all the more surprising is the distinct way in which great powers have (and have not) died: where many dead states were destroyed on the battlefield, relatively few powers over the last century—Nazi Germany and, to a partial extent, Italy and Japan—died through force of arms. The puzzle of great power collapse looms large.

Vladislav Zubok's important volume, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* does much to advance this conversation. Narrowly, and as the title implies, Zubok is concerned with the causes and processes behind the demise of the Soviet Union three decades after the state of Lenin and Stalin exited stage left. Still, the book is of broader interest than just the topic of the subtitle, given that it is equally a treatment of both what great power collapse looks like from the perspective of domestic political elites, and an assessment of why elites acted as they did. Although—as elaborated below—there are questions and ambiguities surrounding Zubok's overarching thesis, even these issues point to productive scholarly routes for assessing the Soviet collapse in particular and great power collapse writ large. It is a valuable and impressive contribution to historiography and International Relations (IR) theory.

Zubok's argument is deceptively straightforward. In his telling, the Soviet collapse was a matter of contingency brought about as Soviet political elites dithered, squabbled, and extemporized over how and whether to reform the increasingly moribund—particularly economically—Soviet system. General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who inaugurated far-ranging reforms only after these problems had mounted for decades, receives particular criticism for being a dilettante when serious leadership was needed. Without a clear understanding of how the USSR operated, or a vision of how to revitalize the Soviet system, Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* eviscerated the USSR's political institutions while exacerbating the preexisting socio-economic dilemmas, thereby driving the USSR into the ground. Still, Zubok's treatment is not solely focused on Gorbachev: Soviet conservatives, leaders of Soviet republics, and radical reformers also receive a share of the blame for first blocking earlier reforms (in the case of conservatives) and then bickering among themselves in ways that rendered successful reform nigh-impossible (428).

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[1] On state death, see Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); on great power rise and decline, see Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, 1st ed (New York: Random House, 1987) and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); on specific great powers, see: Samuel R. Williamson, *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Volker Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973); and Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

This combination of delayed change, ill-conceived reforms, and elite infighting produced two second-order effects. First, it simultaneously undermined the existing political, economic, and security foundation upon which the Soviet system was constituted, yet prevented a new domestic order from consolidating. In turn, the resulting leadership and legitimacy vacuum allowed fissiparous tendencies to accumulate, as ethno-nationalism and independence movements arose to challenge the idea of the "the Soviet Union" as an entity. The net effect, so Zubok contends, was a Soviet Union that was done in from within by "a perfect storm [of problems] and a hapless captain" (427).

There is much to like in this volume. For one, it offers a synthetic treatment of the Soviet Union's last decade and the manner in which Soviet leaders grappled—or did not—with the array of strategic, political, and economic issues confronting their state. Other recent volumes have profitably examined Gorbachev's role in the Soviet collapse, explored the last few years of the USSR's existence, and examined the Soviet demise in the broader sweep of the end of the Cold War.[2] Zubok, however, makes a singular contribution to the ongoing revival in end of the Cold War scholarship by treating the USSR per se as an object of study over a meaningfully long period of time.[3] In doing so, he usefully integrates the burgeoning scholarly record with a wealth of primary source materials, particularly interviews and archival materials, that should be of interest to other researchers.

More important is the book's engagement with extant popular and scholarly claims surrounding the Soviet collapse. As is made clear throughout the volume, Zubok is not solely interested in promoting his thesis. Rather, he also tries to show why other arguments—what, in political science jargon are "alternate hypotheses"[4]—as to the drivers of the Soviet collapse are wanting. Prominent among these are claims surrounding the singular roles of Gorbachev, the idea of an inevitable Soviet collapse because of the nature of Communist systems, and (most prominent of all in many circles) notions that a combination of American pressure and a Soviet economic "implosion" (3) precipitated the USSR's demise.[5]

Indeed, it is precisely this engagement with alternate arguments that makes the volume more than narrowly a study of the Soviet demise. After all, existing scholarly claims about, inter alia, Gorbachev and American pressure are not *only* claims about Gorbachev and American pressure. Rather, they reflect broader theories about, for example, the role of leaders or systemic pressures. In proposing that certain key arguments fail to explain the course of the Soviet collapse, Zubok is effectively challenging the utility of such variables as general causes for great power collapse writ large, and advancing a particular *innenpolitik* argument based on the Soviet "case" that might apply to other episodes. Ultimately, what makes Zubok's effort valuable and attracts more than Soviet and Cold War historians to the work is that by forthrightly engaging other arguments, outlining where he believes alternate explanations fall short, and advancing a new thesis, Zubok lays the foundation for the broader study of great power collapse.

That said, one comes away from *The Collapse* with several lingering questions and a desire for greater analytic clarity. Two prominent issues relating to the underlying cause of the Soviet collapse and the evidence used to understand this development, and the process by which the collapse took place, stand out. On the first, Zubok is convincing in his argument that potential causes such as the inherent unreformability of the Soviet system and the singular role of Gorbachev did not produce the Soviet implosion. He is less compelling, however, when discussing the role played by systemic forces in the form of declining Soviet economic, political, and diplomatic dynamism relative to the United States and the West and the resulting competitive pressures.

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[2] See, for example,

[3] See, for example, e.g., Wilson, *Triumph*; Mary E. Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, 1st edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

[4] Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[5] In addition to works cited in notes 9-12, see Taubman, *Gorbachev*.

For all Zubok foregrounds the destructive dithering of the Soviet elite and Gorbachev's inability to manage the maelstrom, the extent to which Soviet decline relative to the United States and the West, especially but not solely in economic affairs, animated many of the debates that caused elite infighting is notable. Joining other studies of Soviet problems, Zubok's evidence shows that this process began in the late Brezhnev and Andropov eras before accelerating precipitously once Gorbachev came to power (17, 44, 432).[6] This trend generated hard policy choices, both domestic, like how to revive the ailing Soviet economy and allocate scarce resources, and foreign, such as whether to engage the West or pull up the ramparts (68-69)—but were all fixed on the same core problem of how to revive Soviet fortunes in relative terms. Indeed, by this logic, the impetus for the changes which eventually (per Zubok) caused the collapse of the USSR might not have emerged absent losses relative to, and resulting pressure from, the United States/the West.[7]

To be sure, Zubok's history demonstrates that specific responses to the problem of Soviet decline generated subsidiary problems. For instance, *glasnost* and *perestroika* begat debates over Soviet political and economic democratization, which begat contestation over the future social compact, and so on. Still, if the original motivation that pushed the Soviet elite into action was essentially international, so too was the original source of the Soviet collapse. Or, to draw a bad analogy, a medical patient might die from the effects of a medical procedure (e.g., chemotherapy, a heart bypass) designed to treat an underlying condition, but few would dispute that the condition itself (e.g., cancer, heart disease) was the root cause of death. Zubok's work suggests that this is what occurred in the Soviet Union. Assigning causality is difficult but, while elite infighting and contingency may have killed the USSR in a clinical sense, the evidence strongly implies that declining Soviet relative performance was the "underlying condition."[8]

This tension between Zubok's thesis and the evidence itself further points to a missed analytic opportunity. Having suggested that questions over Soviet performance were the impetus driving Soviet elite behavior, Zubok only loosely engages the sources of Soviet problems. This is all the more frustrating in light of Zubok's thoughtful engagement with existing accounts of the Soviet demise. After all, other treatments of the Soviet collapse argue, inter alia, that a general revival among Western economies,[9] poor Soviet economic and strategic choices,[10] and Western pressure on the Soviet system, particularly in the Reagan years, all weakened USSR.[11] Still, these—and others—are all distinct underlying causes and should have had different observable effects on Soviet elite behavior. The more Soviet leaders saw poor Soviet economic performance as a domestic problem, for example, the more Soviet infighting may have concerned the nature of Soviet internal planning; conversely, the more Western pressure was to blame, the more Soviet debates ought to have focused on surmounting Western intransigence.

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[6] Marc Trachtenberg, "Assessing Soviet Economic Performance During the Cold War: A Failure of Intelligence?," *Texas National Security* Review 1:2 (March 2018) 77-101, https://doi.org/10.15781/T2QV3CM4W; Taubman, *Gorbachev.*

[7] Or, to put it differently, the Soviet collapse may have been an unintended byproduct of the sort of containment policy originally advocated by George Kennan. Kennan, of course, believed containment would eventually ameliorate Soviet ill-behavior without necessarily collapsing Soviet power. Insofar as containment involved pressuring the USSR at home and abroad, however, there is a potential link to be drawn.

[8] For a related treatment, see William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 91–129.

[9] Wilson, *Triumph*; Fritz Bartel, *The Triumph of Broken Promises: The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (Harvard University Press, 2022).

[10] Among others, see Melvyn P Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, 1st ed (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Jack Snyder, "The Domestic Political Logic of Gorbachev's New Thinking in Foreign Policy," *International Politics* 48, no. 4–5 (May 2011): 562–74, https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2011.22; Snyder, "International Laeverage on Soviet Domestic Change," *World Politics* 42, no. 1 (October 1989): 1–30.

[11] Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 1st ed (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994); Norman Bailey, *The Strategic Plan That Won The Cold War: National Security Decision Directive 75* (McLean, VA: Potomac Foundation, 1998).

To be clear, this is not to fault a leading historian for not having written a political science book! Instead, what I am suggesting is that Zubok's focus on elite debates over how to bolster the Soviet state could have been refined to more rigorously consider what these deliberations tell us about higher-level drivers of the Soviet collapse. Moreover, one does not even need to accept that the internal choices leading to the Soviet collapse were really about Soviet relative performance to see additional ways of linking Zubok's analysis with further reflections on causality. Thus, focusing on the content of Soviet debates could equally have allowed Zubok to further examine the impact of Soviet institutions and political culture, ethno-nationalism, and so on. In short, Zubok's book thoroughly traces the evolution of Soviet policy disputes and their role in the collapse, but might have done more to assess and reflect on the content of these contests and their broader scholarly and policy implications.

Separate from the thesis and evidence, there are also unaddressed puzzles in Zubok's history that merited further scrutiny. Most notable is the dog that did not bark: all things considered, why was the Soviet collapse so peaceful? As other scholars amply document, the Soviet Union's formation out of the fragments of the former Russia was a bloody affair; similarly, its maintenance (particularly under Lenin and Stalin) was steeped in violence and coercion.[12] Yet, faced with the prospective demise of the system itself, force was the exception rather than the rule. Aside from reasonably isolated and limited tragedies in the Baltics and Caucasus, the Soviet collapse proved relatively violence free. Even the half-hearted coup of August 1991 is illustrative of the trend: despite the fact that the coup was led by comparative conservatives who were opposed to further decay and who enjoyed the support of the much of the Soviet security apparatus, coup leaders were simply unwilling to use force to assert their writ.

The Soviet willingness to fade away was and remains a conundrum, yet Zubok spends relatively little time deeply probing the phenomenon. The closest he comes is in his discussion of Gorbachev's personal, almost moral aversion to the use of violence (e.g., 105, 183, 427). Still, this argument is less than satisfying. After all, Gorbachev was a careful student of Soviet history, including its use of force, and willing to use other highly coercive tools to pursue his ambitions. Given this background, it is odd to attribute Soviet quiescence to Gorbachev's personal qualities—or, put differently, one wants to know why an admirer of Lenin and expert in the use of power concluded that force was a line which could not be crossed.

Indeed, this puzzle is thrown into even sharper relief by the conditions under which Gorbachev labored and the trajectory of the Soviet implosion. For one thing, many of the most high-minded leaders in history have used force to achieve their objectives, (hence notions of the ends justifying the means), just as many political leaders—high-minded or otherwise—turn to violence when their survival in office and/or survival of their state is imperiled. Gorbachev might have been an exception to these trends, but an exploration of why and how he came to be an outlier and—crucially —was able to ensure the whole of the Soviet state followed his lead would have been of use. In addition, the events surrounding the August 1991 coup against Gorbachev's rule suggest that something besides Gorbachev was at play. A coup is by definition led by a group that no longer trusts other factions, thereby creating a situation where the use of force should be feasible and reasonably attractive. Yet even with Gorbachev out of the way and a comparatively hardline group of leaders temporarily in charge, the Soviet guns remained silent. Again, this implies a deeper driver of Soviet peacefulness than Gorbachev alone—a development Zubok alludes to but never fully develops (285-300). In short, an accounting for Soviet quiescence not only merited further investigation given the scope of the book, but might have helped bolster (or refine) Zubok's claims.

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[12] Amply detailed in Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (Penguin Press, 2015); and Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941*, illustrated edition (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).

Still, these are reasonably limited quibbles that arise largely because Zubok has written a thorough and rigorous history. In the final analysis, *Collapse* is likely to become one of the standard volumes for anyone interested in the end of the Cold War and the demise of one of the bipolar era's two superpowers. Scholars and policymakers alike would do well to look to the volume not only for its history, but for consideration of the process and dynamics of great-power collapse as a general phenomenon. If there are questions and unaddressed puzzles emerging from the work, they simply provide avenues for others to engage, refine, and extend the material covered in Zubok's valuable book. Anyone writing on the Soviet collapse or great-power collapse in general will have to grapple with this book.

Response by Vladislav Zubok, London School of Economics

I am deeply grateful to Michael Ellman, Nataliya Kibita, Julie Newton, and Joshua Shifrinson for their very careful reading of my book. Their comments are constructive, attentive to details, balanced, and professional. *Collapse* appeared shortly before the decision of Russian leader Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine, and then my reconstruction of the Soviet state's demise and Russian-Ukrainian tensions in 1991 became suddenly inseparable from this tragedy. The "history" of that time truly blew back in our faces.

I wrote my book not to offer a definitive verdict, but rather as an invitation to debates. As this forum reveals, there is a lot that is still up in the air, including such fundamentals as structure versus contingency and agency. We know how structural problems brought virtually all empires down. Yet it took decades. The Soviet problems produced a collapse in just three years—a truly unique case, one that clearly points in the direction of contingency and agency. Originally, I wanted to de-center my narrative away from the done-to-death Mikhail Gorbachev-Boris Yeltsin feud. Yet the new sources forced me back to this topic, and rewarded me and the readers with new fantastic aspects and details. Some of the reviewers think that such an approach does not "break new historiographical ground" and presents a major limitation. Some argue in favour of a structural approach or the "subjectivities" by regional and peripheral actors. I would welcome another book that would use the prism of the "bottom-up" dynamics, and have more on economy and socio-cultural histories. I am sceptical, however, that such a book would fundamentally challenge my conclusions.

Michael Ellman's pioneering works on the Soviet economy and its destruction inspired me,[1] so I am doubly grateful for his words of support and encouragement. I cannot agree, however, that I did not "pay much attention" to economic roots and dynamics of the Soviet collapse. The definition of "how much is enough" aside, I shed a new light on how the Gorbachev-Ryzhkov reforms inadvertently hollowed out the trunk of the Soviet centralized economy, because the reformers toyed with market forces without understanding their nature. The disastrous failure of economic *perestroika* led Gorbachev and his entourage not to corrective measures, but to a highly destabilizing political liberalization. The outcome was a rapid wrecking of the macroeconomic stability of the USSR. The Soviet state blundered into an inflationary storm, lost control of the fiscal levers, and faced a major crisis of supplies and balance of payments. The book also highlights the desire of Yeltsin to do what Gorbachev failed to do: launch a radical economic reform within the Russian Federation only, thereby impressing the West. While Yeltsin's reformist aide Yegor Gaidar understood the logic of macroeconomics, the Russian reformers had their share of illusions as well, such as an eventual reconstitution of an economic-financial bloc around Russia, which included Ukraine.

The main and fateful economic vulnerability of the Soviet Union, in my view, was the division of the financial system into "cash" and "cashless" forms of currency. The reforms of 1988–1989 left gaping holes in the partition between the two, and this caused the progressive loss of Soviet macroeconomic stability, which was much more consequential than the fall of oil prices and trade balance deterioration. The political liberalization delivered the second blow by ripping the supply and production chains. Up to the summer of 1990, it was entirely within Gorbachev's power to stop the process of de-funding the state and the economic break-up. Not doing so became one of the most fatal failures of his leadership.

The book explored how the West reacted to all this: with incredulity and without any clear understanding of the causes and drivers of the Soviet economic crisis and financial bankruptcy. Western banks stopped giving credit to the Soviet state and were afraid of crediting "sovereign" republics. The failure of Western credit lines contributed to economic doom inside the Soviet polity: Gorbachev presented himself as an indispensable negotiator with the West, but his credit line became exhausted as well. I agree with Ellman that economic grievances, including food shortages (more feared than real) played a big role in determining the outcome of the Ukrainian referendum in December 1991. People saw the stunning economic and financial collapse of the center and switched their hopes and allegiances to the republican authorities, in fact to anyone who promised better deal and prosperity around the corner.

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[1] Above all this: Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, eds., *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998).

Ellman wrote that I "do not think much" of the three Slavic leaders that dissolved the Soviet Union, and even "regret their decision." In fact, two chapters of the book put this decision in an historical context, and explain the hasty and improvisational nature of the USSR's liquidation. The tension between Yeltsin-Gaidar reformist design and the realities of the Union (the absence of borders and customs between the republics) led to the Russian government to patch up its conflict with Ukraine and quickly grab the remains of the Soviet state apparatus, especially the army and security structures. In the end, all post-Soviet republics had to face market shocks without state resources to mitigate them. Whether one regrets it or not, it is hard to deny what happened: hyperinflation, the inevitable result of the state collapse; the destroyed chances, however minimal they were, of Russian democracy to take roots; that the unexpected Russo-Ukrainian "divorce" developed a huge potential for Russian nationalist grievances and passions.

Ellman raised important questions: What were the options? Who could have produced better policies? This leads to a discussion beyond the remit of my book. My take, however, is simple: as long as the state retained control over economic processes, complete collapse could have been prevented, and not necessarily by brute force. I do not subscribe to the binary of collapse or the old post-totalitarian status. There were choices between those extremes: such as Nikolai Petrakov and Grigory Yavlinsky's steady privatization, and the early presidential election of Gorbachev with denial of such elections to the heads of the republics.

My image of a perfect storm and a hapless captain needs a third element in the light of Ellman's criticism: a leaky old ship. Still, the reckless and radical way that the ship was handled and tossed into the storm is nothing short of astonishing. In the end, Ellman says that a major lesson of the book - how a single misguided ruler can destroy a major country - "may be relevant elsewhere." I cannot ask for more understanding than this, when I look around.

Nataliya Kibita read my mind when she commented on my dedication to "all reformers." I would perhaps expand her formula about "smart reforms" by adding: "analyse your errors fearlessly." None of this was available in Gorbachev's circle. Moreover, decades later Gorbachev and his prime minister Nikolay Ryzhkov were vague and evasive on questions of substance about their economic course. Ryzhkov in his interview to Michael McFaul in the 1990s was critical of the Supreme Soviet as a vehicle of governance (as opposed to the source of reforms), yet never seemed to realize why the policies of his government brought the Soviet economy to a terminal crisis. Reformers who persist in their errors, whatever their ideology, may end up being "the Bourbons who never learn."

Kibita brings up an important point for the discussion of economic *perestroika*; the role of the central ministries. An excellent expert on the economic dynamics between Soviet central bodies and regional agents in the 1950s-60s,[2] Kibita agrees with what Stephen Whitefield argued: the ministerial apparatus in the center was practically synonymous with the Party apparatus.[3] I do agree that the Party-State relationships must be better explored. My only concern is that we view the central ministers too much through liberal lenses: not as "business conglomerates" with a potential of China-like transformation, but rather in black-and-white light as only the obstacles to the "true" market reform. On this point I prefer to be more open-minded. The evidence I viewed brought me to the conclusion that the Soviet leadership in 1986-1988 did not want to keep the Party in power by transferring the management of economy to the ministries. In fact, the opposite took place:

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[2] Nataliya Kibita, *Soviet Economic Management under Khrushchev: The Sovnarkhoz Reform* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[3] See her entry in this forum for citation.

Ryzhkov was determined to liberate the "red directors" from "the stifling" party controls. Gorbachev supported Ryzhkov's reforms for his own ideational reasons: the General Secretary convinced himself that the party apparatus had begun to sabotage his *perestroika* and should be excluded from the economy. He also thought that the Party should return to square one: to become again a Leninist political force for change, guided by political, not economic interests. This was a delusion that left the economy without its "dirigiste" pulpit. The evidence also reveals that Gorbachev correctly suspected that, without the central ministries, the entire economy would break down. This is exactly what happened after August 1991.

On Ukraine, I should clarify Kibita's misstating of my argument. I did not argue that Yeltsin planned to keep the Union and Ukraine by force. This is an argument implicitly present in Plokhy's book,[4] not mine. Yeltsin of 1991-1992 was not Putin many years later. The story is more nuanced: Yeltsin and his "government of reforms" genuinely believed that in order to have a successful transition to a market economy, they should both dismantle the Union, keep Ukraine within economic and financial common realm, and gain recognition and legitimacy from the West. The Voshchanov Declaration on the Ukrainian borders in August 1991 was an episode, not a policy. The very reality of a Yugoslavia-like conflict between the two Slavic republics contained both Moscow and Kyiv. Yeltsin and Gaidar did not want to use the army against Ukraine. Rather, they reacted to the warning by American economist Mikhail Bernstam that a sudden economic divorce between the republics might inadvertently create a dynamic leading to a war. It remains true, however, that Yeltsin remained an adept of a great Russia and believed that a neighbourly Ukraine would "have nowhere go" and would remain part of some kind of liberal economic Russian "empire." History, as always, turned out to be very different from his illusion.

Julie Newton's review scrutinized my book in a remarkable way, starting with praise only to end with principled critique, and accusations. I am pleased to find her generally in support of my push-back against entrenched Western cliches about "eternal Russia." I also share her distaste for monocausal simplicity. She and I part ways, however, over the Gorbachev factor. She argues that the story of the Soviet collapse can be better explained as a complex story of interaction of multiple factors, including structural, external and internal, etc. The assumption seems to be that most of those factors were out of Gorbachev's control. In contrast, I see Gorbachev leadership as the lynchpin of all those factors—unleashing them in a classic "Pandora's box" way. Of course, Gorbachev could not have prevented separatism or tamed nationalism, even by force. Yet it is remarkable how doggedly he dismissed the warnings about nationalism and for how long he believed he could "harmonize" them with his failing perestroika. On the centrality of the Gorbachev factor, I am closer to the arguments of Archie Brown.[5] Without the leader's decision to delegate his awesome power to multiple actors, the story would have been vastly different. Explaining the Gorbachev factor is not at all a Carlyle-like approach history, as Newton suggests, but rather what we find in Steven Kotkin's biography of Stalin, and in Taubman's biography of Khrushchev: a study of logic and of the fragility of the Soviet power due to the unbridled power of the Soviet leader.[6] At the same time, my book reveals a different Gorbachev factor from Brown's and Taubman's. Far from "monocausality," my approach reveals a possibility of different reformist paths. As I state above, the choice was not "either/or."

Newton is not the first reviewer to accuse me of being nostalgic for the rule of force at the expense of democracy and the rule of law, even accuses me of "praising the use of force" and regretting that Gorbachev not "cracking down before it gets too late." This is absolutely incorrect. I do not in the book "praise" the use of force. Gorbachev's style of leadership and his remarkable principles, I argue, turbocharged reforms, yet in such a way that made the collapse probable. Instead of addressing this problem, he knocked down the old system of controls while neglecting to build a new one. The reason for this, I argue, was ideological and historic: Gorbachev feared that this would kill reforms outright, and rushed even more towards devolution of power. Anyone who would say that this was the only "right" way is completely out of touch with history. Newton's comments on the use of force are a new normative standard, but do not accord with the literature by many political scientists and International Relations (IR) scholars. *Legitimate* use of force is "the stuff" that states and international systems are made of, in the past and today. The crux of the matter is who defines "legitimacy." In crisis situations, with power struggles, the boundaries between legitimate and non-legitimate become extremely confusing. More democracy helps little on a sinking ship; leadership, sangfroid, and ability to stop panic may help more. Newton attributes to me the view that Gorbachev's "fatal flaw" was being "unable to make tough decisions and then stick with them" (425). US national security adviser Brent Scowcroft said this in his classified interview ten years after the Soviet Union. And I concur with his conclusion.

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[4] Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

[5] I have in mind his book *The Gorbachev Factor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[6] Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin. Vol. 2. Waiting for Hitler, 1928-1941* (London: Allen Lane, 2017); William Taubman, *Khrushchev. The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004).

Newton's review casts the last Soviet leader as a liberator, who suddenly broke up the deeply-entrenched monolith of Russian path dependency. She argues that Gorbachev succeeded because he "bequeath(ed) more freedom to the Russian people than any time in Russia's 1000-year history." "Freedom versus tyranny" in Russian history is another huge topic that is much larger than my book. Newton and I are in full agreement that the Gorbachevian *perestroika* was an outcome of the post-Stalin thaw, not a reaction to President Ronald Reagan's pressures or falling oil prices— the nostrums repeated in every neocon "history review" to this day. Yet we disagree on how freedom can come to a country that hardly ever had it in institutionalized form. There was a lot of new freedom in Russia in 1905-1907, and between March and October 1917. There were free elections. All this, however, was paralleled by the state's collapse, anarchy and extremism, financial ruin, uncontrolled ethnic violence, and more. In the spring and summer of 1917, the provisional government of moderate socialists and liberals adhered to democracy and rule of law; the result was the Leninist coup and *tutti quanti*. History does not work in linear way, and breaking the state in order to get more freedom is not a good recipe.

It is comfortable, when power, security, economic growth, and liberal principles overlap and work in synergistic way—but more often they do not. Arguing over empty shelves that "more democracy would be more growth and raise all boats" is fine in principle, but does not make shelves fuller and people less angry and prone to get out in the street. The clues to liberal democracy continue to elude us, not only regarding Russia and China, but also in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, the rest of the Middle East, in some respects in Poland and Hungary, and perhaps most recently even in the United Kingdom and the United States.

In 1988-1991 the state and party elites in the Soviet Union were conservative, but they were *not* against reforms. If the party was such an obstacle to capitalism, why did Russian (and Chinese) party leaders managed to become such unbridled capitalists? Gorbachev turned out to be really a feckless state-builder and alienated the key elites that he had. This task of reassembling the state remained unfulfilled until…Vladimir Putin. For the admirers of Gorbachev, Putinism is a revenge of the Russian past, a negation of all that Gorbachev did. Yet one can see Putinism as an authoritarian reaction to the chaos that Gorbachev's (and Yeltsin's) governance had produced. In any case, Gorbachev's noble aspirations stand today in ruins.

Newton's robust defense of Gorbachev's economic (non) decisions allows me to say more about this aspect of the story. She praises"Gorbachev's efforts to break free from Russia's "persistent tendencies" by laying the institutional foundations for a flourishing, knowledge-based economy, thriving civil society, and constructive foreign policy." The problem is that Gorbachev failed "to lay" the former, and this failure doomed the two latter desirables. What made Gorbachev so indecisive about launching Petrakov's or Yavlinsky's version of reforms was his fear that the elites and the people would turn against him and his illusory goal of "democratic socialism." And this indecision paralyzed reforms for a crucial year. In fact, the "people" were divided: some continued to oppose to market reforms as late as in 1999, others viewed them as the only option already in the summer of 1990. Yeltsin reacted to Gorbachev's indecision and took over the magic "wand" of economic reforms; this gave him popular legitimacy and ultimately control of the state. In contrast, Gorbachev waffled and kept speaking about "socialist choice" until he lost all state levers he possessed. I do not agree with the temporal limits that Newton proposes: before some point, she seems to say, radical reforms were too early and risky for Gorbachev and beyond some (unidentified) point, they were "too late." This temporality pulls us back to the familiar thesis of inevitability of the Soviet collapse, because everything was too difficult to change until there was nothing left to save.

The format of the forum does not allow me to respond to many other interesting points that Newton raises. Academics can argue ad infinitum how to run reforms and bring democracy to autocratic societies. It is clear to me that one should not apply the same criteria to leadership in a crisis-ridden federated democracy and a terminally ill Communist "empire." Still, it would be an interesting exercise to compare Gorbachev's ordeals and achievements to those of presidents Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

In his review Joshua Shifrinson is less interested in Gorbachev's pros and cons and more intrigued by the broader implications of the Soviet collapse. I was also intrigued by this. Placing the demise of the Soviet Union in the context of the international system raises fascinating questions: Why did most of the Soviet leaders, not only Gorbachev and Yeltsin, expect to be "included" into the international system and why did they feel so deceived later on, when they were not? And what was the impact of the emerging global liberal order (and "Washington Consensus") on the disastrous outcome of Soviet reforms? Historians are slightly better than political scientists in understanding war and change—if only because they can dedicate many more pages to primary sources, which are confusing to some, revealing to others. Where IR and political scientists are infinitely better is in swaying terminological clout. When Shifrinson eloquently states that "Zubok lays the foundation for the broader study of great power collapse"—I can only bow to him and ask for a collaborative effort to explain what these foundations are.

Shifrinson prods me to address the external impetus to Soviet reforms more than I do at the first chapters of book. His prodding is founded on a neo-realist approach to the topic. I would remind the readers that I quote Alexander Yakovlev, Gorbachev's reformist soul-mate, who told a gathering of Party propagandists in late 1985: "The country weakens, and by the year 2000, we will become the second-rate power" (22). This quotation rhymes with what US Secretary of Treasury Nicholas Brady of the George H.W. Bush Administration said at a closed meeting in the White House in June 1991: "If the Soviets go to a market system, then they can't afford a large defense establishment. A real reform would transform them into a third-rate power, which is what we want" (239). The tension between these two quotations invites a big discussion. The Soviet Politburo and Soviet elites consented to Gorbachev's reforms with the expectation of avoiding the first verdict. Yet how many realized what fate expected the Soviet Union, if it followed market reforms? My attempts to get into the heads of the military-defense complex leaders reveals a story of their confusion, but also their remarkably pro-market confusion –not their resistance to market reforms. Some feared indeed that market reforms would destroy the Soviet might. Yet others had illusions that Western capitalists would help them modernise this might.

Most remarkably, there was a growing group of Soviet senior officials who considered the loss of the first power status to be "a good thing." This group included reformers like Yakovlev, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, Gorbachev's aides like Anatoly Chernyaev, etc. And in the Russian opposition, Yeltsin and some members of his reformist entourage purposefully pursued the destruction of the superpower. What made all those different people to want further destabilization of the Soviet Union was not just its terrible past and awful present, but also the dream of inclusion into the US-led international liberal order. If one continues the line proposed by Shifrinson, the main international impulse for the Soviet leaders and elites to ditch the past trappings of power was this. Soft power, not US pressure, produced such a remarkable "band-wagoning" effect.

When *perestroika* began to fail as an economic, and then political, project, the inclusionary expectations of Gorbachev's circle and the oppositional groups continued to grow exponentially, thereby precluding conservative "corrective steps:" the use of force, crack-down on separatism, and curbs on *glasnost*, political liberalisation, etc. Even without Gorbachev's anti-violence proclivities and preferences, we then can conclude that more and more segments of the Soviet central elites, even in the Party, gradually convinced themselves that in one way or another the Soviet Union's inclusion into the US-led order was an inevitability. Initially, it was Shevardnadze and his aides who thought that "leaning" on the United States was inevitable; by August 1991 even the Cabinet of Ministers recognized that without Western loans, the Soviet economy would be kaput. In the summer of 1991 most of the Soviet central elites, with a major exception of the KGB's Vladimir Kryuchkov, wanted to collaborate with Western "partners," despite their intransigence, and were prepared to come forward with more concessions to secure such partnership.

Shifrinson's review calls for greater rigor in addressing the conundrum of "peaceful collapse." I agree, with two caveats. First, Gorbachev was an "expert in the use of power" in bureaucratic games, not in the Leninist sense, in which "power comes from the streets" and requires reaffirmation of state monopoly on violence. Yeltsin was much better at doing the latter. Second, the Soviet collapse was not peaceful in the Baltics and South Caucasus, but also in Tajikistan, where a civil war, a direct corollary of the state's dissolution, took lives of hundreds of thousands. A more comprehensive answer to Shifrinson's inquiry can also be discovered in the quest for recognition and legitimacy by all of the separate republics of the crumbling Union. The motive of maintaining partnership ties with the US and other Western countries was also the motive against using force on August 20, 1991—at least as strong as the well-known motive not to shed blood of the Muscovites who came to defend Yeltsin and the Russian parliament. What made Gorbachev such an admirably successful "outlier" from Soviet brutal power patterns was not only his tactical genius and ability to pull the wool over the ears of Soviet hard-liners. It was a unique turn of history, when the majority of Soviet elites convinced themselves—erroneously—that it was possible to destroy the Soviet system and yet remain a respectable great power, albeit not against but in partnership with the West.

During the following thirty years of post-Soviet history of Russia, Russian elites, reshaped by Vladimir Putin, disabused themselves of such notions, and swung in the opposite direction against the "perfidious" West. At some point Putin came to the same conclusion as Brady in 1991, but from the opposite perspective. He increasingly interpreted the inclusion of Russia into the US-led international system as implying too much dependency and constraining Russia's return to greatness. Above all, Russia's playing by US rules meant for him the road to a third-rate power status. His attempt to turn back the clock is being played out before our eyes.