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**Andrei Kozyrev. *The Firebird: The Elusive Fate of Russian Democracy*.** Forward by Michael McFaul. Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780822966517 (paperback, \$22.00).

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On one warm spring morning in 1975, a young staffer with the Soviet mission in New York, Andrei Kozyrev, bought a copy of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, and sat in the Central Park on a bench, reading it till dusk. When he finished reading, he left the book on the bench. He was afraid to take it back to the mission for fear of being exposed as a 'dissident' (the novel had been banned in the USSR). "That was the moment," Kozyrev recalls, "when I lost all my illusions about the political arrangements under which the people of the Soviet Union were living. I knew I couldn't defect, not out of loyalty to the system, but because of the devastating effect it would have on the lives of my relatives back home. Instead I became an 'internal dissident,' denying the Soviet system in my heart but never challenging it openly" (9). Fifteen years later the system collapsed, and Kozyrev – by then a mid-ranking diplomat – was propelled to the top as the first Foreign Minister of post-Soviet Russia. This memoir is an account of his exploits on the job, which he held until 1996, when he was replaced by Evgenii Primakov.

I looked forward to the book with eager anticipation. Kozyrev remains one of the most enigmatic figures of the Yeltsin era. He has a reputation of a staunch liberal and a pro-Western idealist who tried to bring Russia into close alignment with the West. His (many) Russian critics allege that he did so by selling out Russia's national interests, with the more empathetic accounts arguing that he did so because he was so impossibly naïve.<sup>1</sup> Russia and the West ultimately parted ways, and Kozyrev settled to a quiet retirement in the United States, leaving in his wake a nagging question: could it have been any different? I thought the book would provide some of the answers.

Kozyrev does not pull any punches. His portrayal of Russian President Boris Yeltsin, with whom he worked closely for several years, is far from complimentary. He calls out Yeltsin for his "deep-seated and overwhelming lust for power." "It worried me a lot," Kozyrev recalls. "I knew that it [the lust for power] could grow like a cancer and devour the fragile embryo of democracy" (56). This was in connection with Yeltsin's reported eagerness to take over former president Mikhail Gorbachev's office in the Kremlin, a fact that other contemporary witnesses have also noted with scorn.<sup>2</sup>

Kozyrev has interesting things to say on the subject of the winding down of the USSR. He recounts in some detail the secret meeting at Belovezha, where Yeltsin and his Belarussian and Ukrainian counterparts signed an agreement that committed the Soviet Union to history. Kozyrev was one of the drafters of the Belovezha Accords. He writes: "The signed document

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Evgenii Primakov, *Vstrechi na Perekrestkakh* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2017). For a more sympathetic view see Leonid Mlechin, *MID: Ministry Inostrannykh Del* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Anatolii Chernyaev's Diary for 1991, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB345/The%20Diary%20of%20Anatoly%20Chernyaev.%201991.pdf> [Entry for December 27, 1991].

establishing the commonwealth [of independent states] was in effect a death sentence for the Soviet Union, the largest country on earth and our fatherland. It was an emotional moment for us. Yet we knew it was inevitable, and we had done our best to avoid a much more disastrous outcome” (51). It is difficult to imagine the feeling. After all, one does not often get to draft a document in the dead of the night, far from the public eye, that would have such far-reaching consequences for one’s fellow citizens and, indeed, for the world.

In the pages that follow, Kozyrev recounts his efforts to put out the fires started by the Soviet collapse, including the civil war in Tajikistan and the conflict in Moldova. The Foreign Minister’s portrayal of his own actions occasionally borders on the heroic, whether it was in evading anti-aircraft fire in the mountains of Afghanistan, calming down hostile crowds of demonstrators in Transnistria, or negotiating with local battlefield commanders in Nagorno-Karabakh. Some of the over-hyped drama notwithstanding, Kozyrev’s account is useful insofar as it shows Moscow’s moderating influence in these local conflicts, i.e. a genuine desire to attain a peaceful solution (and not promote a neo-imperialist agenda, as it sometimes appeared from the West). In this regard, Kozyrev is in line with another prominent Russian memoirist, Anatolii Adamishin, though he shows none of Adamishin’s bitterness over reported American efforts to interfere with or derail Russia’s mediating efforts in its so called “near abroad.”<sup>3</sup>

Kozyrev comes across as very sensitive to the accusation that he did not understand Russia’s national interests, in particular to the story, first popularized by Dimitri Simes (and later exploited by Evgenii Primakov), of Kozyrev asking former U.S. President Richard Nixon to help define Russia’s interests. Nixon was reportedly appalled.<sup>4</sup> Kozyrev both indirectly confirms the story in his memoir, and defends his record. What he meant, he argues, was to look beyond Russia’s “traditional” or “historic” interests. Russia’s military-security apparatus and the old bureaucracy wanted nothing more than to “change the Communist red banner to the new tricolor flag over the Kremlin, and then go back to business as usual.” He adds: “Unfortunately, Yeltsin finally succumbed to their pressure” (124).

What Kozyrev does not explore in sufficient depth is whether he himself had a change of heart as he gained more experience at the helm of Russia’s foreign policy. Intimations to this effect appear in the contemporaneous diplomatic correspondence. For example, President Bill Clinton’s Russia lead (and later Deputy Secretary of State) Strobe Talbott privately noted in early 1994 that after the ultra-nationalist victory in Russia’s December 1993 parliamentary elections, Kozyrev “seems to have concluded that both his own interests and Russia’s require a tougher, more nationalistic line....Quite simply and bluntly,” Talbott added, “he has become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.”<sup>5</sup> Adamishin also notes a change of tone, though closer to 1995, citing Kozyrev’s comments to the effect that “when we [Russia] agree with the West, they consider us a democratic country but when we stand up for our own interests, i.e. do what everyone else does, we are being accused of returning to the past.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, both Talbott and Adamishin portray a much more nuanced Kozyrev than the picture drawn by Kozyrev himself in the memoir.

This is not to say that Kozyrev does not criticize the American foreign policy. For example, he quite bitterly recounts insufficient U.S. financial help to Russia in the early 1990s, as well as its conditionality (204). He also complains that the U.S. aggressively pushed Russia out of its own traditional markets, leaving Moscow to nurse its wounds and sell weapons and

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<sup>3</sup> For Adamishin’s take see Anatolii Adamishin, *V Raznye Gody: Vneshnepoliticheskie Ocherk* (Moscow: Ves’ Mir, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Evgenii Primakov, *Vstrechi na Perekrestkakh* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraph, 2017), 192-193. For Dimitri Simes’s take see Dimitri K. Simes, *After the Collapse: Russia Seeks Its Place as a Great Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Strobe Talbott to Warren Christopher (undated, January 1994), Clinton Presidential Library: M-2014-0905, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57236>.

<sup>6</sup> Anatolii Adamishin, *V Raznye Gody*, 417.

technology to rogue regimes (196-197). Overall, he feels that the West lacked “a figure of [Winston] Churchill’s caliber” in the 1990s who would have helped Russia make the perilous transition to democracy (197).

This book is a useful contribution to the growing body of memoirs on the transitional 1990s.<sup>7</sup> A quarter of a century and more separates us now from the events in which Kozyrev played a part. Now that we see the nature of the world to which the end of the Cold War gave birth, it is very important to revisit the 1990s and understand what went wrong, what roads were taken (or not), and with what consequences. Kozyrev’s memoir, which, like many memoirs, is a little self-serving, nevertheless offers fascinating insights into Moscow’s foreign policy at a time when everything seemed possible, including, perhaps, a prosperous, democratic Russia that was anchored in the West. Kozyrev chased that goal like that *firebird* of the Russian fairy tale, after which the book is titled, though unlike the hero of the Russian fairy tale, he never managed to catch it. Didn’t even come close.

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<sup>7</sup> Kozyrev is a latecomer to the field. Among his colleagues who have already authored memoirs on the early- to mid-1990s are: James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: Putnam, 1995), Warren Christopher, *In the Stream of History: Shaping Foreign Policy for a New Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), Douglas Hurd, *Memoirs* (London: Little, Brown, 2003), Malcolm Rifkind, *Power and Pragmatism* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016), Qian Qichen, *Waijiao Shiji* (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2003), among many.