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Pavel Palazchenko. *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997. x + 394 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-01603-0.

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Interpreting the End of the Cold War

Pavel Palazchenko's memoir makes an important contribution to historical understanding of the final years of the Soviet Union, although Palazchenko had very limited involvement with Soviet policy formulation until the last two years of the Soviet Union. He began his career as an interpreter in 1974 and advanced from working at the United Nations to interpreting for the Soviet Foreign Ministry in 1980. When the new leadership of General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and Foreign Affairs Minister Eduard Shevardnadze arrived, Palazchenko began to interpret for them, especially Shevardnadze. In 1987 Palazchenko moved into the Foreign Ministry in the arms control section of the USA and Canada department and continued to interpret for Shevardnadze. He interpreted for Gorbachev at the last U.S.-Soviet summit conferences and joined Gorbachev's new President's Office in January 1991. When Gorbachev left in December 1991, his interpreter and advisor found himself discharged as a result of the closing of the President's office. He soon found employment as a consultant to the Gorbachev Foundation, a Moscow-based think tank and completed this memoir in 1992.

Palazchenko offers a semi-insider perspective on two of the most important developments of the 1980s: the end of the Cold War with respect to direct Soviet-U.S. negotiations and the demise of the Soviet Union. The perspective is limited in that before 1987 Palazchenko did some interpreting at the Geneva and Reykjavik summits, but did not participate very much in policy discussions with Shevardnadze's leading advisors in the Foreign Affairs ministry. There are definite limits to what Palazchenko observed and participated in with respect to both processes, and the Soviet interpreter also exercises restraint out of respect for his Soviet leaders and their partners in the many talks in which he served as the interpreter. At the Reykjavik summit, for example, Gorbachev asked Palazchenko to attend a meeting of the principal Soviet officials after the first day of talks and review the interpreter's notes on Gorbachev's talks with Reagan. During the presentation, Gorbachev commented from time to time. The author, however, provides no insights on the nature of Gorbachev's comments or general Soviet strategy at the conference. [1]

Palazchenko's personality also shapes his restraint as he provides, in chapter one, very little information about his family background beyond his grandmother's arrest in 1949 and despatch to the prison camps. Palazchenko came of age during Khrushchev's destalinization campaign, reading Novy Mir, singing songs by the Beatles, and reacting angrily to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. After graduating from the Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow, the young Soviet translator joined the U.N. as a translator and spent five years in New York before shifting to the Geneva Arms Control talks in 1981.

As an observer, Palazchenko develops credibility through modesty concerning his own contributions and the avoidance of hindsight in presenting his views. When Palazchenko started to interpret for Shevardnadze and Gorbachev in 1985, he does not claim to contribute advice or to being involved in the preparation of recommendations to either official. By the time of the Reykjavik summit, Shevardnadze did, to his interpreter's surprise, ask for his opinion, and, after he entered the Arms Control division of the Foreign Ministry, Palazchenko gained increased familiarity with other Soviet officials and participated in discussions on arms control issues and other Soviet policy problems. Gorbachev, however, apparently

did not consult directly with Palazchenko until near the end in October 1991, and other officials seemed to consider Palazchenko more of an interpreter than a player in Soviet circles. [2]

Palazchenko has remained modest about his role and contributions. As a participant in the two anniversary conferences on the Geneva and Reykjavik summit conferences held at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Palazchenko deferred to other Soviet officials, such as Anatoli Chernyaev, a personal adviser to Gorbachev, Sergei Tarasenko, the principal policy assistant to Shevardnadze, Alexander Yakovlev, adviser to Gorbachev and Politburo official, and Alexander Bessmertnykh, Deputy Foreign Minister and Minister, and interpreted for several of the Soviet participants. [3]

As an observer at all of the summit conferences and interpreter for most of Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's meetings with Secretaries of State George Schultz and James Baker, Palazchenko offers interesting insights on both U.S. and Soviet participants. The Soviet interpreter favors George Bush over Reagan, although he admits that "one could not help liking Ronald Reagan. He was affable, animated..." (pp. 39-40), but, similar to other Soviet officials, the interpreter found Reagan's "rhetorical anti-communism" unnecessarily counterproductive. Soviet officials initially did not hold Reagan in "high regard", according to Palazchenko, and at Reykjavik he suggested that "Reagan seemed to be somewhat confused. He was not used to discussion of arms control matters in any detail..." (pp. 55-56). By the Moscow summit in 1998, Palazchenko believed that Reagan had gained some respect among Soviet officials, but Palazchenko admits to some frustration at the slow pace in arms talks and the failure to "wrap up START and put the whole tedious and unproductive process behind us...." (p. 93).

After Bush and Baker announced a pause and review on relations with Moscow including START, Gorbachev responded with understanding, but Palazchenko and other officials worried about losing time in 1989 and wanted further agreements with Washington to head off mounting internal opposition. Nevertheless, Palazchenko concludes that Shevardnadze started off with Baker where he left off with Schultz, a relationship that had attracted increasing mutual respect and successful arrangements on both Soviet-U.S. issues and difficult challenges such as the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The four principals found it difficult to move the START treaty to a conclusion, as negotiators and interested groups on both sides, kept raising new, and increasingly obscure, technological issues until the bottle was finally corked in July 1991 (pp. 235, 258, 272, 286).

Palazchenko devotes nine of fourteen chapters to the 1989-1991 period in which he effectively blends relations with the U.S. with the end of the Soviet Union. Since Palazchenko never became a close adviser of Gorbachev and did not actually move to the President's Office until May 1991, he retains a foreign policy perspective, picturing Bush and Baker as attempting, within important restraints, to assist Gorbachev as he increasingly maneuvered with dwindling domestic support to withdraw from the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe and simultaneously nudge the Communist Party and the domestic system to representative government and multiparty politics. Soviet leaders appreciated the efforts of Bush and Baker to avoid taking advantage of the growing weakness of the Soviet Union and to assist as much as they could Gorbachev's efforts to deal successfully with mounting challenges from all directions: retreat from Afghanistan, ethnic strife in Azerbaijan, Lithuanian efforts to secede from the Soviet Union, the challenge of German unification, and Berlin's move to join the NATO alliance.

Bush and Baker were definitely more personally involved with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze than Reagan and Schultz, and Palazchenko suggests that Bush had a superior understanding of diplomacy compared with Reagan and helped shape a most difficult transition to bring the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion. As separatism intensified in 1990, Shevardnadze and Palazchenko sometimes expected too much from the relationship with Bush and Baker, such as their desire for Washington to take a firm stand on the integrity of the Soviet Union. [4] Palazchenko offers a sympathetic but not uncritical perspective on Gorbachev's maneuvers to keep the Soviet Union intact, noting the many challenges he faced from nationalism to opponents in the Communist Party, the Soviet military, the KGB, the Foreign Ministry, and reformers who turned from Gorbachev to Boris Yeltsin.

Palazchenko offers an attractive analysis of Gorbachev as a conciliator, attempting to lead through persuasion, and achieving significant success in ending the Cold War, but running out of time and allies in his quest to lead a reformed Communist Party and entrenched, de facto governing bureaucracies into representative government in the Soviet Union. Besides encouraging U.S. support for Gorbachev, Palazchenko also wrote articles

supporting Gorbachev's foreign policies under a pen name in the Soviet press. On April 11, 1991, Palazchenko wrote an article that emphasized the importance of cooperation between Yeltsin and the Soviet President (p. 280).

Palazchenko does criticize Gorbachev on several issues, most notably his failure to ask the people to vote in the first president's election (p. 179), Gorbachev's mishandling of the public response to KGB violence in Lithuania in January 1991 (p. 245), the resignation of Shevardnadze (pp. 238-243), and the Soviet President's lack of success in maintaining the support of democratic forces that turned to Boris Yeltsin. With the exception of the assault on a television tower in Vilnius, Palazchenko, however, directs more criticism at Gorbachev's adversaries. Party hardliners receive the strongest criticism, but Palazchenko also criticizes the resistance of young Foreign Ministry officers to the unification of Germany and radical democrats who break with Gorbachev over his efforts to reform rather than abandon the Communist Party.

As events move towards the August coup, Palazchenko provides increasing detail on Gorbachev's scrambling efforts to keep the Union together with a new treaty and to advance the new post-Cold War relationship with the U.S. in dealing with problems such as the Gulf War, the opening of Middle East negotiations, and the intensification of ethnic strife in Yugoslavia. At the same time Palazchenko also offers expanded comments about his own feelings and reactions to these events. When Palazchenko left for the President's office in May to work with Anatoly Chernyaev, he found himself in an office in the party Central Committee's headquarters surrounded by party bureaucrats who angrily resented Gorbachev and Shevardnadze's loss of the Soviet empire and the President's failure to crack down on democrats. Palazchenko was on vacation at home in Moscow on August 19 and expected the coup to succeed. He decided that he would not work with the new government and supported Gorbachev's belated resignation as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Chernyaev finally moved the President's Foreign Affairs office to the Kremlin as angry mobs forced the closure of Party headquarters.

The picture that Palazchenko offers of Gorbachev's final months in office is filled with sadness and thoughts of what might have been. A professional superior, such as Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh, is dismissed by Gorbachev for failing to denounce the coup; an effort to restore the magic of the Gorbachev-Shevardnadze relationship flounders on accumulated resentment until it is too late. At the last meetings with Bush and Baker in Madrid the Americans pursued an underlying theme with Gorbachev: "We don't really understand what is happening in your country. Do you? "; and Palazchenko noted in the eyes of American officials friendly to the new relationship a view of Gorbachev as "already a goner" (p.339).

Yet as Palazchenko indicates in his "Afterword" written in 1996, Gorbachev deserves considerable favorable recognition for his leadership, most notably in ending the Soviet empire and in moving the domestic political system away from "a basically Stalinist" regime with remarkably little violence in either case (p.370). The leadership of his successor, Boris Yeltsin, during the past seven years further reinforces Palazchenko's assessment in this study.

Notes:

[1]. Later in the text when Palazchenko is interpreting for Shevardnadze in meetings with President George Bush and Secretary of State James Baker, the Soviet interpreter does quote from notes. He also provides extensive quotes from a Richard Nixon meeting with Gorbachev in April 1991 to demonstrate that Nixon favorably endorsed Gorbachev's accomplishments in the interview and wrote the opposite when he returned home. See pp. 274-278.

[2]. In Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 416, Gorbachev favorably notes Palazchenko's service as an interpreter and professional diplomat; in Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Random House, 1995), the Soviet Ambassador, who returned to Moscow in 1986 as the Communist Party Secretary in charge of International Affairs, does not mention Palazchenko. On the American side, Secretary of State James Baker does make several references to Palazchenko in *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), pp. 79, 211-212, 574n, but Ambassador Jack Matlock omits the Soviet official in* Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union_ (New York: Random House, 1995).

[3]. The two conferences were "The Cold War: Ten Years Later", Nov. 13, 1995, and "High Noon at Reykjavik," Nov. 18, 1996. C-SPAN covered both conferences, and copies may be obtained from the Reagan Library.

[4]. When Bush encouraged the Ukranian parliament

to negotiate with Gorbachev during his visit to the Soviet Union in August 1991 shortly before the attempted coup, precipitated considerable criticism in the U.S. See pp. 227, 302.

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