

**Serhii Plokhy.** *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union.* New York: Basic Books, 2014. 520 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-05696-5.

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The Soviet Union expired in a whimper with Mikhail Gorbachev's resignation speech on December 25, 1991, after a dramatic year of political infighting in the Kremlin and bold action in Kyiv. The Soviet Union lost its "outer empire" in Eastern Europe in 1989-90. The dissolution of what Serhii Plokhy calls "the last" European empire did not come as a dramatic implosion over a short period of time like the Habsburg Empire in the final days of World War I. The Soviet Union may have had economic problems since the 1970s, but it was not known as "the sick man" of Europe like the Ottoman Empire had been in its final decades of muddling through. The final days of the Soviet Union were marked by political infighting amounting to a classical Greek drama among the political leadership class. Once Boris Yeltsin's bold leadership arrested the coup of the old Communist apparatchiks in August 1991, the final months of the Soviet Union were marked by a gargantuan struggle between President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union trying to hang on to power and saving the Soviet Union and President Yeltsin moving Russia out of the union as Ukraine was breaking away following the Baltic states.

Given the current crisis over Ukraine's historical borders, this book, which is written by one of the world's leading authorities on Ukrainian history, could not be more timely. If anyone wonders

how the borders of the post-Soviet succession republics were being determined in the fall of 1991, this fast-paced account of the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 provides the answers. If anyone is keen on understanding the death throes of the Soviet Union and Moscow's struggle with the growing spirit of independence among constituent republics, this is the book to read.

Ukraine's drive to independence in 1991 tipped the balance in the implosion of the Soviet Union. Plokhy's main point is that electoral democracy ended the Soviet Union after the Communist plotters tried to save it in a coup that failed. The "fall of the Soviet Union" came about as a result of the Ukrainian referendum of December 1, 1991, "in which more than 90 percent voted for independence." The December 1 referendum overruled the March 1991 referendum in the Ukraine. In March, 70 percent of Ukrainians had voted for participation in the union but with the demand of reforms. As Plokhy puts it: "The Union lived or died depending on the vote of its citizens" (p. 394). The arrival of electoral democracy changed everything as leaders now depended on popular support.

Plokhy's book concentrates on the second half of the *annus mirabilis* 1991 leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Plokhy introduces the four main antagonists in the opening chapters.

The main drama unfolded inside the Kremlin between the incumbent president and chief of the Communist Party, Gorbachev, and “the party crasher” and leader of Russia, Yeltsin (pp. 24ff). George H. W. Bush, the American president, was a principal actor in this drama, too, often playing the role of the sounding board and passive mediator—some might say Delphic oracle—between Gorbachev and Yeltsin. The leaders in Moscow and Leonid Kravchuk in Kyiv regularly kept him informed in crunch times. Bush came to Moscow for the first time in his presidency in late July 1991 for a summit meeting with Gorbachev. On this trip, he also visited the Ukrainian capital Kyiv—Ukraine at this point being “a sovereign if not yet independent state” (p. 53). Kravchuk, the speaker of the Ukrainian parliament and fourth principal actor, welcomed Bush to Kyiv. In his speech to the Ukrainian parliament, where the Communists still held a solid majority, Bush did not want to undermine Gorbachev’s policy of holding together the Soviet Union by favoring outright Ukrainian independence, making the confusing distinction that “freedom is not the same as independence” (p. 64). In the summer of 1991, Bush did not support nationalist movements, such as Rukh (the People’s Movement of Ukraine for Perestroika), and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Washington pursued, in the words of National Security Council staffer Nicholas Burns, a policy of “stable decline” (p. 64). The Communists liked Bush’s cautious approach to Ukrainian independence, but Rukh rejected it and so did Ukrainian Americans. William Safire, the sharp-witted *New York Times* columnist, dubbed it the “Chicken Kiev speech,” making fun of the president’s proverbial indecisiveness (p. 65).

In the next section, Plokhy recounts in compelling detail the breathtaking drama of the August coup in Moscow. Like Bush taking time off in Kennebunkport, Gorbachev was vacationing in his summer villa in Foros in the Crimea, not far from Yalta (Plokhy is familiar with the Black Sea seaside resorts as his previous book was on the

Yalta conference of 1945). In the afternoon of August 18, the coup plotters in Moscow cut Gorbachev’s communication links with the outside world and had the nuclear briefcase carried to Moscow. Gorbachev was deeply hurt by the treason of his close associates led by Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov and KGB chief Vladimir Kriuchkov in Moscow, people he had appointed to high office. He was also afraid of the contingency of a Romanian scenario, fearing the kind of bloodshed that ended Nicolae Ceaușescu’s rule. Gorbachev refused to sign documents that would have handed over power to the plotters, which caused disagreements among them about how to proceed. Yeltsin considered the coup “illegal” and sprang into action, organizing the resistance from the Parliament building (the Russian White House) (p. 93). A crucial telephone call on August 19 between Bush and Yeltsin encouraged Bush to condemn the coup (his initial reaction had been waffling). Yeltsin sent his Russian foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev to Paris to organize Western condemnation of the coup with a call “to bring back Gorbachev,” which was a crucial element in the success of the Yeltsin anti-coup faction (p. 113).

Plokhy elaborates a hairy subplot in the coup’s high drama, namely, the monumental mistrust between Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Gorbachev’s principal worry at the time of the coup was how to deal with Yeltsin, who on August 18, the day when the coup began, had issued “a decree taking over all-Union institutions responsible for supply chains on the territory of the Russian Federation” (p. 84). Yeltsin was not sure whether Gorbachev, while in the Crimea, was playing a “double game.” Maybe Gorbachev was on the side of the plotters, using his former aides “to do the dirty work of crushing the democratic opposition and then returning to Moscow as the savior of the nation” (p. 113). Gorbachev’s new union treaty was ready for adoption but was killed by the coup.

The storming of the Russian White House by Soviet army units, planned for the night of August

20 but never taking place as the plotters lost their nerve, is narrated in compelling detail. Due to the hedging of bets in the coup leadership, the assault was stopped as Russian soldiers did not want to spill the Russian blood of the defenders of the White House. The Soviet military had learned from the crushing of independence movements in Tbilisi (April 1989) and Vilnius (January 1991) and did not want to be made responsible for the bloodshed, so the planned assault was called off. Plokhly notes that American intelligence officials shared with Yeltsin telephone intercepts between the plot leaders and military commanders. Once the plot fell apart, Yeltsin went back to worrying about Gorbachev and his intentions after the coup.

Plokhly terms Yeltsin's and Russia's ascendancy vis-à-vis Gorbachev and his efforts to hold together the Soviet Union a "countercoup" in the postcoup period (pp. 131ff). Yeltsin pressed Gorbachev to accept the decree that he signed during the coup giving the Russian Federation economic sovereignty. He also intervened in Gorbachev's ministerial appointments, pushing him to fire Defense Minister Mikhail Moiseev. After his return from the Crimea, Gorbachev was trying to save the Communist Party as well as the Soviet Union. Yeltsin pushed back every step of the way, humiliating President Gorbachev on national TV by suspending the activities of the Communist Party in a meeting with Russian deputies. All Gorbachev could do was step down as general secretary of the party, transferring the party property to local Soviets. Finances of the disintegrating party were in shambles as party officials began helping themselves to party assets.

The real shock to the Soviet Union came when Ukraine declared its independence on August 24. The plotters in Moscow put pressure on Kravchuk to support the coup. Kravchuk waffled to hang on to his position as speaker of the parliament by maintaining relative peace in the streets and by doing everything "to avoid giving the military a

pretext to introduce a state of emergency in Ukraine" (p. 156). The nationalist Rukh firmly condemned the coup. On the day the coup was unraveling, Kravchuk "jumped on Yeltsin's bandwagon," as Plokhly puts it (p. 161). Kravchuk's caution during the coup made sense and paid off. On August 23, Kravchuk was in Moscow and witnessed Gorbachev's power waning and Yeltsin in command. He did not want "any part of a Yeltsin run Union" (p. 164). The next day the Ukrainian parliament voted for independence, with a referendum to be held on December 1 confirming the vote. The Communists supported the resolution for independence too, since Yeltsin had "declared open season on communists" in Moscow (p. 167). Yeltsin accepted the vote; Gorbachev was deeply upset.

Now the race was on to preserve the Soviet Union. Also, quarreling over the borders of a disintegrating union began. Ukraine was reminded in an article of the pro-Yeltsin newspaper *Nezavisimaia gazeta* that if the Supreme Soviet of the Crimea declared independence it might "set off the process of partition that might lead to a violent confrontation between the two largest Soviet republics" (p. 171). A Soviet parliamentary delegation was sent to Kyiv to save the union on August 28. Now that Yeltsin had undermined both Gorbachev and the union, after the coup he embarked on saving the latter. It was one thing to let the anti-Communist Baltics, Armenia and Georgia go, it was another thing to release "the Slavic Ukraine" run by Communists from the Soviet Union (p. 173). Not only might border wars ensue but nuclear anarchy with the breakup of the Soviet Union might also threaten global political stability. The Moscow delegation to Kyiv got nowhere, insisting that they had not come to raise territorial questions. The self-confident and "plumpish" Kravchuk appeared to some Russians as a character out of a Nikolai Gogol play (p. 224). Russian-Ukrainian relations were sliding toward a "civilized divorce" (p. 181). Kazakhstan, another

nuclear republic, followed the Ukrainian example.

The empire was indeed disintegrating while an exhausted Yeltsin took a long vacation. Gorbachev used Yeltsin's absence from Moscow to attempt a "political comeback" (p. 183). He reversed Yeltsin's attempt for Russia to take over the Soviet central bank while he began working on a new union treaty to save the Soviet Union, of which he was still president. The most Kravchuk and Nursultan Nazbararbayev, the president of Kazakhstan, were willing to discuss was a loose confederation.

Plokhy argues that the Bush administration's push for Baltic independence amounted in the end to encouraging the breakup of the Soviet Union. The successive declarations for republican sovereignty before and after the coup "followed the Baltic example" (p. 195). Yet Bush treaded very carefully when it came to recognizing the Baltics' independence. With the Republican right wing breathing down Bush's neck, pressure grew on the White House to recognize the independence of Lithuania and its Baltic neighbors. Bush did so reluctantly on the last day of his vacation in Maine, hoping that Gorbachev would follow suit. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney wanted the president to go further and recognize Ukraine too. Yet Bush remained cautious and did not want to encourage the breakup of the USSR and potential bloodshed. He also did not want to abandon Gorbachev, argues Plokhy: "George Bush did almost everything diplomatically possible to keep the Soviet Union alive" (p. 206).

Secretary of State James Baker traveled to Moscow for a human rights conference. Baker suggested that respect for human rights and democracy were two of the five principles on which U.S. policy should be based in the region; the others were national self-determination, the inviolability of national borders, and respect for the international obligations of the USSR. On this trip, the Russians made major concessions in their

foreign policy, namely, pulling their troops out of Cuba and ending aid to the Communist regime in Afghanistan. With this "fire sale of Soviet foreign policy assets" (p. 204), Moscow hoped for some type of Marshall Plan from the United States—an American bailing out from their increasingly difficult economic situation, sparked by the deterioration of the relationship between the center and the republics. But who to support and ship aid to—Gorbachev or Yeltsin? Moscow or the newly emerging independent states? One way of dealing with the situation in Moscow after the coup was for Bush calling both Kremlin presidents Gorbachev and Yeltsin regularly.

While the Soviet Union was slipping into economic free fall, Yeltsin continued to have medical problems in September. Meanwhile his chief advisers in the "Sverdlovsk mafia" were dealing with the growing economic problems caused by the uncertainty of economic and political union (p. 215). Yegor Gaidar, a young thirty-five-year-old economist, suggested shock therapy: liberalizing prizes to revive collapsing markets and incentivizing state and collective enterprises to start trading again. The government also had to cut drastically its own expenditures, including food subsidies. Yeltsin reluctantly accepted these tough economic nostrums. Meanwhile the republican leaders saw the need of some type of economic union agreement, while Gorbachev kept insisting on a political union. Back in Moscow, Yeltsin agreed to an economic community of "independent states" but proceeded to undermine it by announcing that Russia was cutting off funds to most all-union ministries. This came after Yeltsin's Russia nationalized oil and gas enterprises on its territory, pocketing the revenue. "By enriching Russia and bankrupting the Union, the Russian leaders gained a potent new weapon to use against the center," concludes Plokhy (p. 226). At the end of October, Yeltsin announced his economic reform plans (Gaidar's shock therapy); he informed Bush about it in advance, not Gorbachev.

Gorbachev went to Madrid in late October to bask in the limelight of international attention—as it turned out the last time—during a summit meeting on the Near East. Meanwhile the Moscow press made fun of him as “the emissary of a non-existent state” (p. 234). In a heart-to-heart talk with President Bush, Gorbachev asked for \$10-15 billion in American aid to get over the difficult winter. Bush promised only \$1.5 billion. Bush was much more worried about the future of the nuclear arsenals in the post-Soviet succession states. Gorbachev assured Bush that control over the nuclear arsenals would remain under the central control of the military; Ukraine and Kazakhstan planned to seek a future nonnuclear status.

The final demise of the Soviet Union came as a result of the Ukrainian referendum for independence on December 1. President Bush had decided on November 26 that the United States would recognize Ukrainian independence and announced it a day later. Gorbachev felt betrayed as his plan to preserve the union received a death blow. The overwhelming Ukrainian vote for independence on December 1 may have surprised Gorbachev but few observers; 90 percent approved independence. The percentages were even higher in western Ukraine. The vote was clearly in favor in the more “Russian” oblasts of eastern Ukraine too—85 percent in Odessa, 77 percent in Donetsk, and 54 percent in Crimea. Kravchuk was elected president of the new state of Ukraine with 61 percent of the vote. Yeltsin embraced Ukrainian independence and embarked on negotiating a union agreement with Ukraine and Belarus.

On December 7, Yeltsin arrived in Minsk with his entourage of advisers to negotiate such a treaty. Nobody knew what type of union it would be—federation, association, or commonwealth—that he would negotiate with Kravchuk and Stanislau Shushkevich, the head of the Supreme Council of Belarus. Fortified with ample supplies of Zubrovka vodka, the “tripartite Slavic summit” moved to the Viskuli hunting lodge in the pristine

Belavezha forest in western Belarus (p. 302). Kravchuk quickly buried Yeltsin’s idea of a new union. The Russo-Belarusian group favored a commonwealth next. Kravchuk personally was involved in drafting an agreement with Yeltsin’s advisers for a “Commonwealth of Independent States,” declaring Soviet law null and void on their territory and giving states the right to declare their nuclear free status (p. 308). They agreed that by leaving the Soviet Union they were at once dissolving it. They called Nazarbayev to rope Kazakhstan into the commonwealth (the other Central Asian republics would follow later). Yeltsin called Bush to inform him of the “Belavezha Agreement” but not Gorbachev who thought the commonwealth agreement amounted to a coup.

In mid-December, Baker came for what amounted to a farewell tour to the Soviet Union. He did not bring news of a new Marshall Plan for the ailing economies of the region but still received assurances that nuclear weapons would remain under Moscow’s central control. All Gorbachev could do was announce his resignation on CNN as president of the Soviet Union on Christmas day. The Russian blue, white, and red flag went up on the Kremlin with the hammer and sickle coming down. The end of an era had arrived. As historian Carole K. Fink put it in her history of the Cold War: “Fifty-eight years of US-Soviet relations—begun by Roosevelt in 1933 and destroyed by the implosion of the USSR—were over, leaving even triumphant Americans uncertain of the global and regional consequences.”[1]

Plokhys’ *The Last Empire* is grand historical narrative at its best. The contingency of a very complex sequence of events unfolds in often gripping detail.[2] Ukraine is as much at the center of his analysis as is Russia. The story is told through the interaction of a cast of compelling historical actors: the bold yet devious Yeltsin, the tragic Gorbachev fighting for his survival to the last minute, the smooth schemer Kravchuk, and the ever-cau-

tious *cunctator* President Bush. The book is based on Plokhy's superb linguistic skills and deep research in primary sources in Russia, Ukraine, and the United States, even though some important collections in Moscow, like RGANI (Russian State Archive for Contemporary History) and the Gorbachev Foundation in Moscow, were not consulted. The current crisis unfolding in eastern Ukraine is trying to resolve the border issues silenced in 1991. Every policymaker making decisions and every journalist commenting on the crisis should be forced to read this book to understand the deeper historical roots of the crisis. The post-succession border conflicts expected after the breakup of the Soviet Union are now flaring up almost a quarter century later. The blood not shed over borders in 1991 is being spilled on the streets of eastern Ukraine now. What happened in Yugoslavia in 1991 could have happened in Ukraine, had the Russians questioned Ukraine's borders then. As the deputy mayor of Leningrad/St. Petersburg, a younger Vladimir Putin was close to the center-periphery conflicts at the time and is now dealing with the legacy of those unresolved issues.

#### Notes

[1]. Carole K. Fink, *Cold War: An International History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014), 252.

[2]. A good starting point for understanding these events is still Mark Kramer's "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union," pts. 1-3, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 3-42; 6, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 3-64; and 7, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 3-96. See also Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 303-335.

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