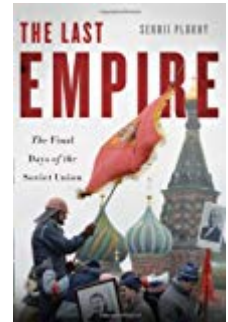


Serhii Plokhy. *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union*. New York: Basic Books, 2014. 520 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-05696-5.



Reviewed by Robert J. Smith

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Dr. Plokhy presents an intriguing and well-documented argument that the fall of the Soviet Union was less the destiny of a corrupt, mal-designed, or even untenable system that was unsustainable in the long term as it was the product of political choices made in the moment by individuals who found themselves with new opportunities. His narrative is an intriguing read and while not unique it is an outlier from the general understanding of the fall of the USSR in both popular and academic literature. Plokhy's distance from the action combined with access to key participants with such a variety of perspectives gives this work a more balanced outlook than works written by those closer to the events.

I found coverage of the different treatment of various regions both insightful and prescient. Explanation of how Soviet and then Russian officials viewed the actions toward independence of Baltic states (or republics, depending on time frame) Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia differently than Slavic states/republics like BeloRus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine, or the Central Asian

states/republics or even the Caucasus region, provides an valuable way to understand some of the actions taken under the Putin regime in the past decade. Soviet officials, Mikhail Gorbachev particularly, recognized that the Soviet Union would not, could not, remain without the full participation of the Slavic regions. Russian officials, Boris Yeltsin included, were sure that no confederation or organization of states could exist with Ukraine. Plokhy notes that on September 10, 1991, one of Gorbachev's advisors, Georgii Shakhnazarov, proposed an anti-independence campaign in Crimea and the Donbas. He said, "It should be stated plainly and clearly, without constraint, that those regions are historical parts of Russia, and it [Russia] does not intend to renounce them if Ukraine should wish to cease being part of the Union" (p. 259). Insights such as these clearly paint the background for the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in the conflict in Ukraine in the 2010s.

While I stated earlier that this work is more balanced than some of the first-person accounts

of events surrounding the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Russian Federation, it is not without some perspective bias. For much of the work the Bush administration's attempts to balance a desire for democratic processes and support of the elected Russian president Yeltsin with the need for continuation of the Soviet Union, and for Soviet president Gorbachev to support arms control and other international relations goals. Plokhy notes in several sections that the Bush administration seemed to side with the center and Gorbachev rather than the republics and independence most of the time (pp. xiv-xv, 204, 206-209, 404 for example) and thus should not receive credit for contributing to the fall of the USSR. At the same time he acknowledges that throughout the process the leaders of the Soviet republics regularly sought and competed for Bush's attention and approval. In the epilogue Plokhy says that "George Bush's policies contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union but they often did so irrespective of the desires of his administration, or even contrary to them" (p. 404). For a book with such a nuanced view about the interpersonal relationships between and among Soviet officials, this conclusion demonstrates a lack of understanding of the personal and professional relationships found in US institutions.

I would commend this book to anyone who wants to gain a greater appreciation for the importance of the individual in public policy, international and domestic. It would also be a great choice for a course that examines the importance of culture and cultural perspective in diplomacy and international relations.

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