

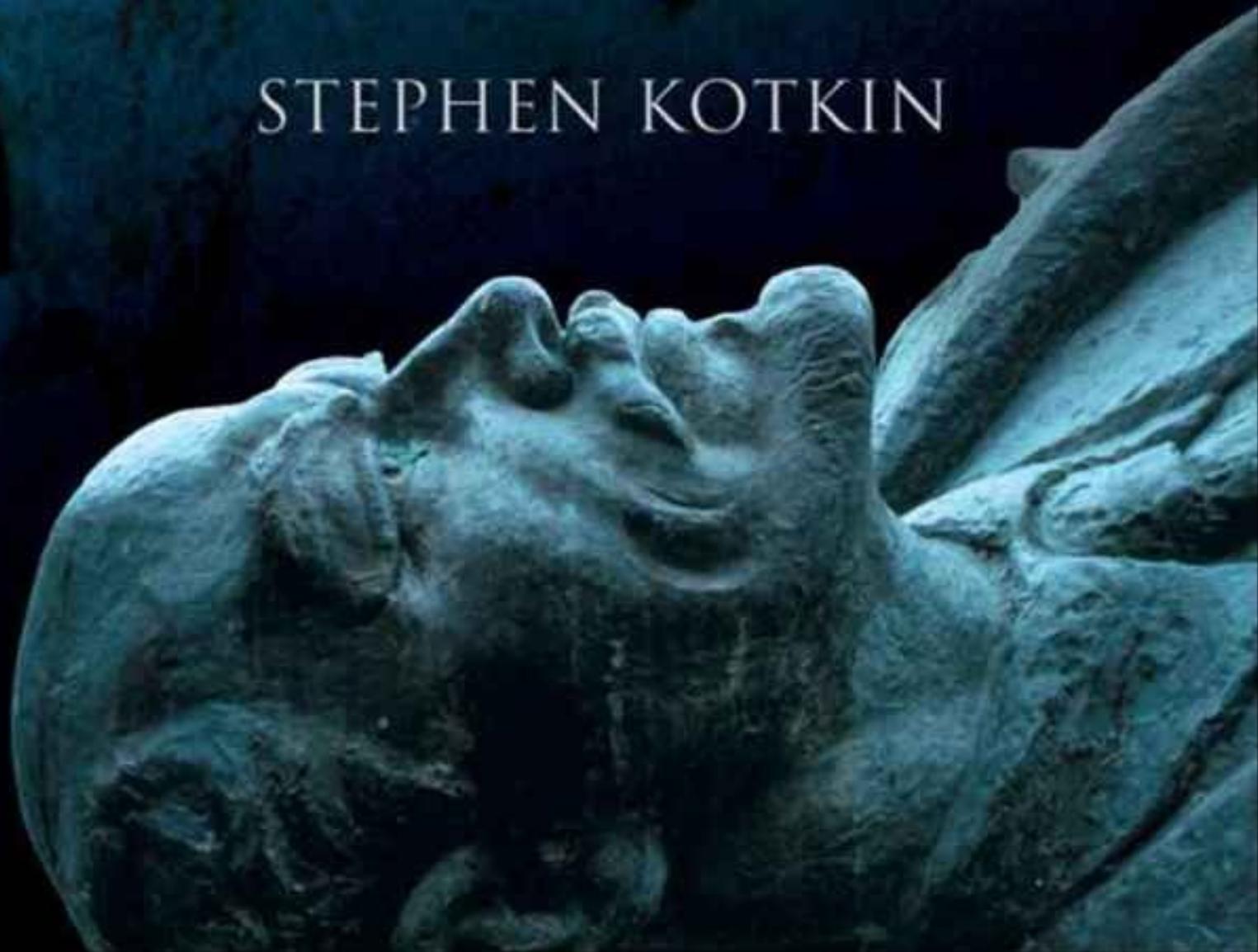
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—*The New Yorker*

ARMAGEDDON AVERTED

THE SOVIET COLLAPSE 1970–2000

UPDATED EDITION

STEPHEN KOTKIN



Armageddon Averted

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The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000

Updated Edition

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In memory of my great-grandfather
Michael Korolewicz
(1889–1969)

who had been a teacher in tsarist Poland and in America
built a chrome, silver, and gold plating business. He used
to take me to the park, beginning when I was in a stroller,
and talk history.

Preface

My first encounter with the Soviet bloc took place one summer in 1983. As a graduate student of Habsburg history, I made my way to Prague from northern California to advance my language skills in pursuit of a bygone empire. On the day of my arrival in the capital of Bohemia, I discovered a mass “socialist peace rally.” Surprised to hear a familiar voice booming over the loudspeakers, I pushed my way through the crowd to the front, and sure enough it was him: the then socialist mayor of Berkeley.

Socialism in the bloc turned out to be nothing like what I, as an American, had been led to believe. Rather than an ironclad dictatorship in a world completely unto itself, or an unremarkable system gradually converging with that of the West, it proved to be very different from the West yet increasingly penetrated by the West, and its highly rigid structures had to be constantly circumvented to make them function. It was full of incessant complaining but also thoroughgoing conformism, and had a relatively impoverished material culture but a richly engaging sociability. I made up my mind that, upon returning to the University of California, I would begin the study of Russian, and switch empires.

This was on the heels of Polish Solidarity and its underground “flying universities,” which were hailed as “civil society” triumphant, but one of my professors, a noted Frenchman, spent considerable effort urging me to use caution with the notion of “civil society,” which he called “the new ideology of the intellectual class.” Another professor, in French history, told me that civil society could not exist without private property. Two very fine professors of Russian history helped me get up to speed on a country I hardly knew. When perestroika suddenly broke in the Soviet Union, which of course did not have institutionalized private property, I was saved from what American intellectuals made their principal (mis)interpretation of Soviet, and then Russian, developments, and instead puzzled over the nature of the state and institutions, as well as Soviet categories of thought.

My first trip to the Soviet Union took place in the summer of 1984, the reign of Chernenko, for a Russian language program in Leningrad, with side trips to Ukraine and to the site of the Big Three meeting during the Second World War to decide the fate of Europe—Yalta, where I got sick and threw up. In the years following that initial foray, I have been able to undertake very extensive travels, sometimes living for extended periods in the Soviet and the post-Soviet world, doing research in or familiarizing myself with every Soviet republic, except for Turkmenistan, and most countries in Eastern Europe, before and after 1989–91, as well as China and Japan. Mainly, I spent the years of Soviet and then Russian “reform” researching and writing a two-volume, French-style “total history” of the past and present of a Soviet steel town. From that rust-belt vantage point, it could not have been any more obvious that reform was collapse, and that the collapse would not be overcome for quite some time to come.

Convinced before 1991 that the “conservatives” were right, that Soviet socialism and the Union were being (inadvertently) destroyed by Gorbachev’s perestroika, I had sought an audience and got it with the number two man in the Soviet hierarchy, Yegor

Ligachev, in his office at Party HQ on Old Square. To be inside the Central Committee complex, whose history and intrigues I knew from reading, had a surreal quality. Beyond attaining the forbidden, I wanted to figure out why neither Ligachev nor anyone else at the top had tried to remove Gorbachev and undo the reforms. This exchange turned out to be one of several long meetings we ended up having, the rest taking place in the exclusive dacha compound of the top Soviet leadership, others of whom I also met. Here, too, was collapse.

I shall never forget later escorting Ligachev around New York, demonstrating and explaining the vast universe of private small businesses and immigrant-run eateries for hours on end, only to have him ask over and over again who in the government was responsible for feeding the huge urban population. The world was as lucky in the pathetic, principled Ligachev as it was in the masterly, principled Gorbachev. Evicted, their place was taken by morally less promising people, who fought violently over the massive spoils of Communist-era offices, state dachas, apartment complexes, and vacation resorts. Making the rounds, I began to see that the best way to understand Russian politics was mostly to ignore the grand “reform” programs, which would soon be added to their predecessors already choking the archives, and instead closely to track prime real estate.

Before 1991, I had made a point of inspecting the premises of the once almighty State Planning Commission (Gosplan) and State Supply Commission (Gossnab), which together had planned an economy over one-sixth of the earth. After 1991, I would go back, to see the new (and old), or reshuffled, inhabitants. In the chaos of perestroika, I also gained easy access to party headquarters in the republic capitals and many provinces; after these edifices had been renamed, I went back to find many of the people I had known, usually with higher positions, though not a few had moved laterally, and the provincials had often been elevated to the capital. And so it emerged that, just as social constituencies, whether in the rust belt or state bureaucracy, provided the keys to understanding the inherent limits to any proposed political program, patterns of sociability afforded the keys to grasping the dynamics of power.

Friends I had made while an exchange student at Moscow State University in the 1980s were, by the 1990s, in the Russian government or Kremlin, and the chance to share in their life trajectories and perspectives has been extremely illuminating. Lower down the social hierarchy, in 2000–2001, I was equally privileged to carry out an eight-month investigation of an ambitious volunteer initiative called the Civic Education Project. In fifteen countries, from Hungary to Kazakhstan, Estonia to Azerbaijan, my task, as a consultant for the Open Society Institute, entailed interviewing scores of university administrators, hundreds of academics, and thousands of students. It was, with a few exceptions, a grim inventory of a world, ten years after the Soviet collapse, still undergoing involution. But everywhere the university students proved to be a remarkable lot, multi-talented and auspiciously responsive to educational opportunities.

Some of the material in this book first appeared in the *New Republic*, and I am extremely grateful to Leon Wieseltier for that opportunity. (A chapter prepared for the first edition on the new states besides Russia—excised for space reasons—appeared separately as “Trashcanistan,” *New Republic*, 15 April 2002.) For similar reasons I would also like to thank the *East European Constitutional Review* and its editor,

Stephen Holmes. Catherine Clarke of Oxford University Press commissioned the book and with Catherine Humphries and Hilary Walford guided the first edition to completion. Peter Ginna, then of OUP in New York, helped bring the first edition paperback into print. Leonard Benardo, Laura Engelstein, Geoffrey Hosking, Sara Mosle, Philip Nord, Steven Solnick, Amir Weiner, and William Wohlforth offered incisive commentary on drafts of the original edition. Special thanks also to Princeton University's Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination, directed by Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, and to the National Council for East European and Eurasian Research in Washington, DC, for support of research and writing. I love my wife, Soyoung Lee, so much I can barely say.

My new Oxford editor, Timothy Bent, made possible this revised edition, and I am very grateful to him as well as to Dayne Poshusta and Joellyn Ausanka of OUP. Helpful criticisms and suggestions were also made by Ekaterina Pravilova. The book's principal argument remains: academics used to debate whether the Soviet system could reform, but the substantive question should have been whether it could reform and be stabilized in the face of a capitalist West utterly transformed after World War II. In those specific circumstances, socialist reform entailed collapse. Perversely, however, it was the Communist fable of a Lenin supposedly gentler than Stalin—the myth of a possible socialism with a human face—that triggered the onset of a benign demise of Lenin's police state.

One key revision to the book involves abandonment of the claim about the early repeal of the Brezhnev doctrine, for which I acknowledge the criticisms of Mark Kramer. Additionally, more precision has been brought to the appraisal of Ronald Reagan's role, for which I benefited from debates with Jack Matlock. I have also corrected minor errors. Above all, I have added an epilogue covering 2000–2008, analyzing Russia's spectacular illiberal market-economy rise under Vladimir Putin, as well as Russia's presidential elections of 2008, which brought Dmitri Medvedev to the Kremlin. The Soviet collapse finally ended. But the tough part of achieving enduring prosperity was in many ways just beginning.

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Note on the Text

All translations from Russian sources are the author's. For transliteration of personal and place names, whether in the text or in discursive endnotes, common usage has been preferred (Yeltsin rather than El'tsin). But for authors' names and the titles of Russian-language books and articles in the endnotes, the U.S. Library of Congress system has been adopted (Evgenii rather than Yevgeny).

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1 Pentagon depiction of Soviet capabilities



2 Soviet and post-Soviet wars: Karabakh, Ajaria, Abkhazia, Ossetia, Ingushetia,

Chechnya (all in the Caucasus); Moldova (between Romania and Ukraine); Tajikistan (bordering Afghanistan).

Introduction

Reviewing the history of international relations in the modern era, which might be considered to extend from the middle of the seventeenth century to the present, I find it hard to think of any event more strange and startling, and at first glance more inexplicable, than the sudden and total disintegration and disappearance from the international scene . . . of the great power known successively as the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union.

(George F. Kennan, 1995)

The problems that the Soviet leaders have to solve simply have no solutions . . . However, the Soviet leaders are not going to commit political suicide.

(Vladimir Bukovsky, 1989)

Virtually everyone seems to think the Soviet Union was collapsing before 1985. They are wrong. Most people also think the Soviet collapse ended in 1991. Wrong again. These points become readily apparent when one examines the period 1970–2000 as an integrated whole, tracing the arc of Soviet economic and political institutions before and after 1991, and when one combines a view from deep inside the system with a sober sense of the precise role of the wider context. Forget about the dominant tropes of “neo-liberal reforms” and “Western aid” for describing post-Soviet Russia, let alone “emerging civil society” for characterizing the late Soviet period. What happened in the Soviet Union, and continued in Russia, was the sudden onset, and then inescapable prolongation, of the death agony of an entire world comprising non-market economics and anti-liberal institutions.

The monumental second world collapse, in the face of a more powerful first world wielding the market and liberal institutions, was triggered not by military pressure but by Communist ideology. The KGB and to a lesser extent the CIA secretly reported that, beginning in the 1970s, the Soviet Union was overcome by malaise. But even though Soviet socialism had clearly lost the competition with the West, it was lethargically stable and could have continued muddling on for quite some time. Or, it might have tried a Realpolitik retrenchment, cutting back on superpower ambitions, legalizing and then institutionalizing market economics to revive its fortunes, and holding tightly to central power by using political repression. Instead, the Soviet Union embarked on a quest to realize the dream of “socialism with a human face.”

This humanist vision of reform emerged in the post-Stalin years, under Nikita Khrushchev, and it stamped an entire generation—a generation, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, that lamented the crushing of the 1968 Prague Spring and that came to power in Moscow in 1985. They believed the planned economy could be reformed essentially without introducing full private property or market prices. They believed

relaxing censorship would increase the population's allegiance to socialism. They believed the Communist Party could be democratized. They were mistaken. Perestroika, unintentionally, destroyed the planned economy, the allegiance to Soviet socialism, and, in the end, the party, too. And the blow to the party unhinged the Union, which the party alone had held together.

That the man at the pinnacle of power in Moscow—a committed, true-believing Communist Party General Secretary—was engaged in a virtuoso, yet inadvertent liquidation of the Soviet system, made for high drama, which few appreciated for what it was. When crowds suddenly cracked the Berlin Wall in late 1989, and when Eastern Europe was allowed to break from the Soviet grip, dumb-founded analysts (myself included) began to wonder if the rest of the Kremlin's empire, the Union republics, might also separate. That made the years 1990–91 a time of still higher drama, because, although it had been destabilized by romantic idealism, the Soviet system still commanded a larger and more powerful military and repressive apparatus than any state in history. It had more than enough nuclear weapons to destroy or blackmail the world, and a vast storehouse of chemical and biological weapons, with all requisite delivery systems. The Soviet Union also had more than five million soldiers, deployed from Budapest to Vladivostok, and hundreds of thousands more troops in KGB and interior ministry battalions. It experienced almost no major mutinies in any of these forces. And yet, they were never fully used—not to save a collapsing empire, nor even to wreak havoc out of spite.

Of course, the Soviet breakup was accompanied by more than half a dozen civil wars—in Chechnya, Karabakh, Ingushetia, Ossetia, Abkhazia, Adjara (all in the Caucasus), Moldova (another mal-intentioned Stalin contrivance), and Tajikistan (bordering Afghanistan). These conflicts resulted in many thousands of deaths, several million refugees, and a number of internationally unrecognized statelets that de facto subdivided the fifteen successor states. Even Ukraine, which avoided a civil war, had in its far west a tiny self-declared “republic” of Sub-Carpathian Rus. But bear in mind that Ukraine's Russian population, at more than eleven million (20 percent), constituted the largest ethnic minority in Europe. Kazakhstan had another five million Russians (about 33 percent of its population). Overall, with seventy-one million former Soviet inhabitants (one of every four) suddenly living outside their nominal national homeland, if they had a national homeland at all, and with the horrid example of much smaller Yugoslavia's catastrophic break-up right next door, one shudders to think of the manipulative wars, indeed the nuclear, chemical, or biological Armageddon, that *could have* accompanied the Soviet collapse.

Who had anticipated that the Soviet Union would meekly dissolve itself? Those few analysts who did perceive the depth of Soviet problems, and the structural impediments to solving them, never imagined that such a police state would just let go, quietly. Of the twenty million members of the former USSR Communist Party, perhaps two to three million made up the higher elite—a formidable bastion of power that encompassed the party apparatus, state bureaucracy, military, and KGB. Even if suspicions abounded that many of these officials had become cynical about the official ideology, analysts remained convinced that collectively they would *never* permit the overthrow of the system, if only to protect their own interests. Thus, notwithstanding the profusion of autopsies on the Soviet collapse, a major riddle persists: beyond

Gorbachev, why did the immense Soviet elite, armed to the teeth with loyal internal forces and weapons, fail to defend either socialism or the Union with all its might?

This riddle becomes even more challenging when we note that once the dangers of dissolution had become evident to the whole world, elements of the most privileged groups in the USSR gave the shaken edifice a final shove over the edge. Could the elite of a great power really have permitted and then *facilitated* its country's dissolution *without* having suffered foreign occupation, insubordination among its massive military and police, or even sustained civil disobedience? Indeed it could. One of my main tasks in this short volume is to elucidate how and why the Soviet elite destroyed its own system, keeping in mind that the greatest surprise of the Soviet collapse was not that it happened—though that was shocking enough—but the absence of an all-consuming conflagration.

Now that it is gone, the Soviet Union has revealed itself—for those who still did not know—to have been much more than a dictatorship and military behemoth. It was also a comprehensive experiment in non-capitalist modernity or socialism and an improbable revival and transformation of the tsarist empire into a quasi-federation of states. The largest of those internal non-capitalist Soviet states was the Russian republic. A product of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited everything that had caused the Soviet collapse, as well as the collapse itself. In the 1990s, the collapse was still called “reform” (albeit “radical”), but the public battles for and against reform were accompanied by both continuation of the collapse and tectonic processes of institutional recombination. Herein lies another of the main tasks of this book: elucidating the importance for Russia of the Soviet inheritance.

Beyond the myriad surviving agencies and ministries—such as the State Procuracy and the KGB—one could see in newly founded institutions remnants of the Soviet era, from the Central Committee apparat (Presidential Administration) to the State Planning Commission (Economics Ministry). Indeed, all Soviet-era office buildings were still standing, and in some cases they were enlarged, to accommodate both former and additional cadres. The “new” people were not, of course, from Mars, but from elite Soviet schools and the Communist Youth League, members of the second and third echelons who rose more quickly in the chaos of dissolution, and who combined a mixture of new and old. In addition, the entire non-market Soviet economy, ten time zones of antiquated heavy industry and decaying infrastructure, was also still in place, providing the bedrock of communities as well as of social constituencies. These were the political and economic structures that had caused the Soviet Union to fall further and further behind the West starting in the 1970s, and they served as the building blocks of the new Russia, which fell even further behind.

The idea that the collapse suddenly ended in December 1991, and that a handful of new “democrats” or “radical reformers” had come to power, was silly. Yet, to most analysts, it proved irresistible, whether they cheered or jeered Russia's “transition.” What seemed to matter was not the makeup of society and the economy, or the working of state institutions, but only solemn pronouncements of intent and streams of presidential decrees, most of which went unimplemented. In the United States during the same decade, commentators properly scoffed at President Bill Clinton's plan to overhaul the U.S. health-care system. Remake one-seventh of the U.S. economy, against a vast array of entrenched, powerful interest groups! Yet many of these same

people assumed that Russia's ability to transform its *entire economy and social structure*—seven-sevenths—was merely a matter of “will power” on the part of “reformers” or even of a single man. Technocratic “reform” *in some other country* is the opiate of experts and pundits. Give any country some 15,000 rust-belt factories, perhaps two-thirds of them non-viable in market conditions, as well as several million brigands empowered to act in the name of the state, and see how quickly such a place achieves the “transition” to paradise.

Predictably, expectations of an immediate, total transformation gave way to profound disillusionment and an equally off-the-mark, and similarly widely shared view that Russia was a unique, reformer-induced disaster. By around the year 2000, however, the immense Soviet collapse had finally been halted. Russia was a mess, but it was a stable mess, and although written off, it was finally groping toward the very institutional reforms that people erroneously thought were taking place during the 1990s.

Too often Russia has been judged far more harshly than, or without reference to, the rest of the former Soviet Union, despite the fact that on most political and economic indicators Russia compared favorably with most other former Soviet republics except tiny Estonia. And, enmeshed as it was in a multigenerational slog to institutionalize a market economy, and something resembling a Russian version of a modern polity, it had already mastered many of the distinguishing attributes of another very large country that used to be its main rival: gross income disparities, contempt for the public interest, mass corporate tax evasion, pervasive recourse to political power in the market place, hyper-commercialized media, money-besotted elections, and demagoguery.

The following overview of the last two decades of the Soviet Union and the first decade of post-Soviet Russia is organized partly chronologically, and partly analytically. It does not focus on supposed cultural proclivities or deficiencies, imagined nationalism, evil oligarchs, or Western advice, whose significance (good and bad) has been grossly inflated. Rather, the analysis focuses on elites, and proceeds in terms of structural considerations: a Communist Party generation, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, profoundly shaped by socialist idealism, which emerged to the fore when the previous leadership finally died off; the worldview and hopes of 285 million people living within the socialist ideological space; the planned economy and its cost-unconscious, oppressively heavy-industrial physical plant; and, especially, the institutional dynamics of the Soviet state and of the Russian state. Since there is no history without contingency, the narrative also spotlights the attempts to articulate and implement policies, and their unexpected consequences. Ultimately, though, the Soviet collapse and post-Soviet Russia's contradictory first decade would remain inexplicable except as part of broad changes in the world during and after the Second World War. Mine is therefore both a historical and a geopolitical analysis.