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Book Review: Plokhy's 'The Last Empire' Is the Best Account of the Soviet Collapse Yet

By Stephen M. Norris

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Local youths wave a Soviet flag from a Soviet-era tank during celebrations to mark Victory Day in the eastern Ukrainian city of Luhansk on May 9.

Serhii Plokhy, The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union (NY: Basic Books, 2014).

The recent turmoil in Ukraine has led many Western analysts to accuse President Vladimir Putin of seeking to resurrect the "Soviet Empire." Indeed, Russia's justification for the annexation of Crimea largely stems from insistence that the Soviet transfer of Crimea to Ukraine was illegitimate, yet few understand the complex mechanics that determined the current borders of the post-Soviet states, and even fewer remember how the West tried to preserve the integrity of Soviet Union during its last days, fearing the onset of a Yugoslavia-type civil war.

Serhii Plokhy, the Mykhailo Hrushevsky professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University, has written the best account yet of the Soviet collapse. Focusing on the fateful months from July to December 1991, Plokhy's narrative challenges several prevailing interpretations about the U.S.S.R.'s demise. "The Last Empire" places events in Ukraine and other republics at the center of the drama. Plokhy's study is a must-read and at times a gripping page-turner, particularly when describing the August coup attempt against Gorbachev and the December events that brought an end to Soviet communism.

Using recently declassified documents, including those stored at the George Bush Presidential Library, as well as interviews with important personages, Plokhy makes no bones about one of the central interpretations he wants to change: the "triumphalist interpretation of the Soviet collapse as an American victory in the Cold War." Plokhy writes that this view is one that feeds "present-day Russian nationalist conspiracy theories, which present the collapse of the Soviet Union as the outcome of a CIA plot." As Plokhy carefully details, the White House tried to save Gorbachev and the union out of fear that a Yugoslavia-like civil war would break out. However, "The Last Empire" again and again shows that Bush and other U.S. leaders found themselves reacting to the rapid events unfolding in the U.S.S.R.

While Plokhy argued that the Soviet Union's fate was decided in high offices by a handful of men, he also persuasively demonstrates that the offices were not just in Moscow. The Soviet demise, he writes, came about because of the Union's imperial foundations, multiethnic composition, and pseudofederal structure. The Soviet Union, he concludes, "died the death of an empire, splitting along lines roughly defined by ethnic and linguistic territories." Even Russia rebelled against its own empire, Plokhy notes, but the decisive factor was played by Ukraine.

"The Last Empire" opens with the July 30 Moscow summit between Bush and Gorbachev. When the CIA prepared an intelligence estimate laying out possible scenarios, only one — "violent fragmentation" — even envisioned Ukraine breaking away. After his meetings in Moscow, Bush left on Aug. 1 for Kiev, becoming the second-ever U.S. president to visit the Ukrainian capital after Nixon in 1972. When Bush arrived, throngs of Ukrainians waving the blue and yellow flag welcomed him. In his speech delivered that day, the president took a cautious approach. He spoke of Ukrainian history as distinct, but he urged Ukrainians to stay the course with Gorbachev, noting that "freedom is not the same thing as independence." New York Times columnist William Safire soon dubbed the speech Bush's "chicken Kiev" talk, a moniker that stuck, even though, as Plokhy ironically notes, it was Safire who had written Nixon's speech that referred to the Ukrainian capital as "the mother of all Russian cities."

The speech may have captured Washington's view of the unfolding drama, but Plokhy demonstrates that events had already begun to move toward far-reaching consequences. The Ukrainian Communist leader Leonid Kravchuk, who in a summary prepared for Bush was described as "a dynamic-looking, silver-maned, tanned guy who looks a little like John Gotti" and "maybe the Newt Gingrich of the Ukraine," takes center stage. The failed August coup attempt initially led Kravchuk to urge restraint, yet he quickly jumped on Yeltsin's bandwagon. In order to prove that he was not just a political chameleon, Kravchuk allowed a draft declaration of independence to be read on Aug. 24. When 346 Ukrainian deputies voted in favor with only two against and five abstentions, the surprising vote triggered a response from both Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Plokhy rightly noted that the shock of Ukraine's declaration

was felt across the U.S.S.R., for the republic became "the first country with a communist-dominated legislature to make such a declaration." The next day, Belarus followed suit, followed by Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Ukraine's declaration meant that even Gorbachev and Yeltsin were reacting, not shaping, events.

The response from Moscow was a telling one. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin, locked as they were in a tight political fight, agreed that Ukraine had to stay. Alexander Rutskoi flew to Crimea on Aug. 28 with a plan from Gorbachev to "keep Ukraine within the union by raising the prospect of partitioning its territory." Pavel Voshchanov, Yeltsin's press secretary, drafted a statement that Russia could raise territorial claims if any union republic broke off relations. When asked what specifically his boss had in mind, Voshchanov listed the Crimean and Donetsk regions, Abkhazia in Georgia, and northern Kazakhstan. Gorbachev also used the ethnic card in a ploy proposed by Georgii Shakhnazarov that called "Crimea, the Donbass, and southern Ukraine" as "historical parts of Russia" that the U.S.S.R. was not prepared to give up. Ukraine, however, as Plokhy argues, "was not divided by ethnic strife or local separatism."

"The Last Empire's" tight timeline serves Plokhy's thesis well. Ukraine's Dec. 1 vote, a referendum that resulted from the failed August coup and subsequent attempts to badger Ukraine to stay in the union, prompted Yeltsin's Dec. 2 decision to recognize Ukrainian independence, which in turn led to the meeting between Yeltsin, Kravchuk, and Belarussian leader Stanislau Shushkevich at Belavezha. When the three agreed on an accord to set in motion the process of dismantling the union, they also agreed to hold a summit at Alma-Ata on Dec. 21. There, in the Soviet-era Palace of Friendship, the republic leaders formerly agree to a commonwealth. Kazakh leader Nursultan Nazarbayev declared that the union was no more and the CIS was now a fact.

Because events unfolded so quickly in the U.S.S.R. and its republics, Bush was unsure when Gorbachev would resign. When the Soviet leader went on television on Christmas Day to declare the U.S.S.R. dissolved, Bush had to rush. The president tapped Ed Hewitt, the chief Soviet expert at NSC, and his assistant Nick Burns, to draft a speech. As Burns later claimed "we felt exhilarated" and "there was no love lost for the Soviet Union," the primary reason for the triumphalist message Bush delivered that night. With his speech, Bush switched from declaring the end of the Cold War a joint process to one that the U.S. won single-handedly, an interpretation that continues to reverberate.

Plokhy's engrossing account concludes with some sobering present-day implications. In the U.S., Bush decided in the fall of 1991 to let two of his advisors — Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and his Undersecretary Paul Wolfowitz — to draft a doctrine for a new world, one that declared the Cold War had been won by the U.S. and that the geopolitical limits placed on America by that conflict no longer applied. In Russia, Putin's policies of aggressively integrating former republics into common institutions and resisting NATO/EU expansion harkens back to that time. As a result, Plokhy concludes that "today, as in 1991, the former republics most politically distant from Russia are the Baltic states, while the country on which prospects for the reintegration of post-Soviet space under Moscow's auspices most depend is Ukraine." Although he wrote these words before the current crisis, Plokhy provides both a profound reinterpretation of the Soviet collapse and a timely reminder of why understanding it better still matters.

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