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'Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union'

Vladislav Zubok's monumental book is shortlisted for the Pushkin House Book Prize.

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In 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin famously labeled the collapse of the Soviet Union "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." Years later, analysts, pundits and casual observers have repeatedly returned to the phrase to find a possible explanation for the Kremlin's geopolitical moves from the 2008 war in Georgia to the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. But how much do we actually know about the event that dramatically altered the global geopolitical landscape and ended the nearly half-a-century-long Cold War?

While some may know much more than others, everyone — newbies and seasoned observers alike — will find new answers and food for thought in Vladislav Zubok's Pushkin Prize-nominated "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union."

Zubok, one of the world's leading experts on the history of the Cold War and the Soviet Union, is a professor of international history at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

This comprehensive, wide-ranging work, which tracks the years of Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership in the 1980s and early 1990s, is an encyclopedia of the Soviet demise. But the rich factual material is carefully interwoven with first-hand accounts of the events — derived, in part, from personal diaries provided to Zubok by the participants — resulting in a captivating, emotionally-charged read.

In "Collapse," Zubok refutes the notion that the fall of the Soviet empire was pre-determined. Instead, he argues that the country that is no more "fell victim to a perfect storm and a hapless captain" —Gorbachev himself.

Though Gorbachev is often pictured as a hero in the collective Western imagination, Zubok doesn't shy away from exposing the faults and character flaws of the last Soviet leader that ensured his instrumental role in the process of destroying the Union. In contrast to the many flattering biographical accounts and several autobiographies written by Gorbachev himself, Zubok's Gorby is a man blinded by his idealism, striving for recognition by the liberal West and inability to acknowledge his own failures. These are the traits that made him an ideal fit for the role of a destroyer of the Soviet project.

Zubok, however, doesn't attribute the end of the Soviet project solely to one personality. The economic collapse and role of the West are also explored in great detail.

Though "Collapse" explores events that took place more than a quarter of a century ago, it is difficult to shake off an ominous feeling when reading it against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine.

As the former Soviet imperial core and its neighbors once again face a turbulent, uncertain future — that, as some argue, could even bring about the collapse of Russia itself — it's difficult not to draw parallels with the events of the 80s and seek answers for the questions about the present in Zubok's book. The author, however, firmly cautions the reader against searching for remedies to present problems in the distant past.

"The economic calamity and social traumas of the Soviet collapse do not explain, even less justify, what happened many years later," Zubok writes.

"What they point to, however, is the possibility of great reversals and historic surprises...down the road."

From Chapter Three: Revolutions

History Accelerates

In the spring and summer of 1989, another dramatic development occurred within the Soviet political elites: the Iron Curtain that prevented them from going abroad suddenly parted. This had revolutionary implications for Soviet politics, especially for the educated Moscow-centered intelligentsia. Since Stalin's times, the West had been the forbidden fruit and the object of intense curiosity for Soviet citizens. The post-Stalin intelligentsia held an "imagined West" as a vital part of their identity, dreams, and cultural self-validation. Several educated cohorts had grown up with a veritable obsession with and idealization of Western culture and music, first jazz, then rock. Many of those people who learned to despise the Soviet system under Brezhnev felt uncritical admiration for all things Western.

In Leonid Brezhnev's household, the General Secretary and his wife had watched Soviet news and entertainment. Their grandchildren instead watched Western movies and cartoons on a large Sony TV screen with a video-cassette recorder (VCR). By 1989, VCRs, along with personal computers, became the most coveted object of social status, as well as an informational tool. Hundreds of new "cooperatives" began to import and sell them in great numbers on the Soviet market, a trade more lucrative than still illegal currency exchange. Yet nothing could be a substitute for the experience of crossing borders. "Trips to the West were the most important status symbol," wrote the Russian scholar Dmitry Furman. "See Paris, and die," was a popular joke, but also a dream for many in the Soviet Union. Scientists, artists, dancers, symphony orchestras, and many Soviet Jews lived in fear that they would not obtain clearance from "competent organs" to cross the Soviet borders— for no apparent reason other than that somebody higher up the pyramid of power questioned their loyalty or someone close to them informed on them. Memoirs from the post-Soviet period are replete with anger and drama regarding the abrogation of that clearance.

In early 1989, the Soviet rules for foreign travel were radically relaxed. It was no longer necessary to grovel and conform to Soviet authorities, including the Party and the KGB, in order to obtain permission for a private trip abroad. During the first half of 1989, the number of approved applications for exit visas reached 1.8 million, three times more than two years earlier. During the same period about 200,000 people received official permission to emigrate, mostly to Israel and the United States. 36 The majority, however, applied for a foreign Soviet passport and a permit to leave the USSR and return— for the first time in their life. Bureaucrats and officials, directors of enterprises, cooperative managers, academic scholars, scientists, artists and actors rushed under the rising curtain. Performers went to perform, artists sold their art, intellectuals delivered talks. The glasnost journalists, academic scholars, government officials, especially those who knew some English and other foreign languages, were in high demand abroad. Western universities, the United States Information Agency (USIA), think tanks, fellowship programs, foundations all used their funds to invite Soviet visitors. Intellectuals were invited by Western foundations.

Scholars have studied this phenomenon exclusively as a factor in bringing the Cold War to an end. Yet, it also delegitimized the Soviet system. Most Soviet diplomats, KGB officials, and military representatives abroad had become habituated to navigation between the West and their homeland; they lived in a kind of controlled schizophrenia. Gorbachev traveled abroad several times in the late 1960s and 1970s, and began to see a humiliating gap between the abundance in Western stores and a dearth of goods in Soviet ones. Yet this was nothing compared with the shock that thousands of Soviet people experienced when they crossed Soviet borders and visited Western countries from early 1989 onwards— many of them for the first time. In May of that year, Shevardnadze's aide and speechwriter Teimuraz Stepanov wrote in his diary about West Germany: "The Devil took us to this Federal Republic, so groomed, preened, accurate, and caressed, where it is particularly painful to think about my beloved country— dirty and exhausted from futile efforts to overcome the utmost ugliness created by the most inhumane regime in the world." A few days later in Irkutsk, on the way to the Sino-Soviet summit, he wrote with even more bitterness: "Who said that my Motherland is less beautiful than the German Heimat . . .? It is, however, gutted [by the apparatchiks] armed with Party directives and a never-ending Marxist-Leninist world view."

For first-time Soviet travelers to the West a visit to a supermarket produced the biggest effect. The contrast between half-empty, gloomy Soviet food stores and glittering Western palaces with an abundant selection of food was mind-boggling. Not a single Soviet visitor was prepared for the sight of pyramids of oranges, pineapples, tomatoes, bananas; endless varieties of fresh fish and meat, in lieu of a butcher cutting chunks from bluish hulks from a freezer; efficient cashiers with a smiling attitude, instead of rude saleswomen doling out greasy cans and jars to a long line of desperately hungry customers. And then actually to be allowed to touch, to smell, to savor! A severe aftershock awaited Soviet visitors upon their subsequent return to the Soviet Union, and to scenes of misery. This experience changed Soviet travelers forever. Western standards, unimaginable before, immediately became the new norm. Soviet realities, part of everyday habit, suddenly became "abnormal" and therefore revolting, unbearable.

Most of the newly elected deputies of the Supreme Soviet traveled to the West in March–August 1989 for the first time at the invitation of Western parliamentarians, universities, non-governmental institutions, and émigré friends and relatives. Gennady Burbulis, elected to the Congress of People's Deputies, had grown up as an admirer of Lenin and joined the Party on his centennial in 1970. Because of his security clearance (he had served in strategic rocket forces during his obligatory draft), he never had a chance to travel outside the Soviet Union. In June 1989, however, he joined the MDG opposition [*Inter-regional Deputies Group-MT*] in the Supreme Soviet and traveled with a group of other deputies to Stockholm for a seminar on "Swedish socialism." Many years later he still recalled the shock from visiting a giant fish supermarket: a mile of stands and aquariums filled with fresh fish, oysters, calimari, shrimp, and other sea creatures. Equally amazing for Burbulis was the absence of long lines of customers. Burbulis left Stockholm as an enthusiast of "Swedish socialism" and an even more bitter enemy of the Soviet Party system. Another member of this group, Nikolai Travkin, a construction worker and Soviet patriot, joined the MDG as a fan of "democratic socialism." His Soviet identity also crumbled in Stockholm. He returned to Moscow an angry man, convinced that the communists had been fooling Soviet people all along. In March 1990 he quit the Party and launched the Democratic Party of Russia in an attempt to seize power from the nomenklatura.

The most consequential eye-opening experience occurred to Boris Yeltsin. In June 1989, he asked the American ambassador Jack Matlock to help him visit the United States. The idea came from Yeltsin's aides Lev Sukhanov and Pavel Voshchanov, who wanted to raise his international profile. Matlock's attempt to contact US Congressmen and their staff did not produce results; then Yeltsin's people discovered Gennady Alferenko, a remarkable cultural entrepreneur, founder of one of the first cultural NGOs of Gorbachev's era. Alferenko specialized in East-West public diplomacy and operated under KGB supervision. He contacted Jim Garrison from the Esalen Institute, an esoteric cultural center in Big Sur, California. The two worked out a ten-day lecture tour for Yeltsin across the United States; the proud Russian wanted to pay for all his expenses abroad. The tour began in New York on 9 September 1989 and covered eleven cities in nine states. This visit was more intense than Khrushchev's “discovery of America” in 1959. And it was to have even more impact on the fate of the Soviet Union. Available accounts of Yeltsin’s journey vary from stories of drinking bouts, scandals, and gaffes to descriptions of his eye-opening experiences. All of them were true. Yeltsin’s political agenda was still to build a “democratic socialism,” but without the Party monopoly on power. This was what he wanted to tell Americans and their leaders. He relished attacking Gorbachev on every occasion and in every interview. At the top of Yeltsin’s list of engagements was a meeting with President George Bush. Jim Garrison knew Condoleezza Rice, who worked at the National Security Council on Soviet affairs, and contacted her. Ultimately, Yeltsin met instead Bush’s National Security Advisor, General Brent Scowcroft. President Bush “dropped by” for a chat during that visit. The Russian and his aides left the White House in a triumphant mood. Sukhanov recalled: “Yeltsin was the first among the high-placed Soviet leaders who broke ‘the seal’ on the White House during the rule of Bush. Not Gorbachev, but Yeltsin.” The United States was the first country that Yeltsin had ever visited outside the Soviet Union on his own rather than as part of an official Soviet delegation. He was feted and dined by wealthy Americans, flown by private jets, and stayed in the houses of American millionaires. Although he expected the lifestyle of the super-rich to be a never-ending feast, the real shock for him was his impromptu visit to Randalls discount supermarket, on the way to Houston Airport. As a regional party secretary, Yeltsin had spent years battling with lack of food supplies in his Sverdlovsk region. His greatest achievement had been to establish a system of poultry farms near Sverdlovsk that supplemented the meagre diet of workers in the industrial plants and factories. Randalls supermarket amazed him. This was an average place where the poorest American could buy what even the top Soviet nomenklatura could not back home. In the sweltering Texan desert Yeltsin and his entourage entered an air-conditioned paradise. The aides saw Yeltsin brooding, as if he was thinking: “Does this cornucopia exist every day for everyone? Incredible!”

Yeltsin realized how stupid he must have appeared in the eyes of his American hosts when he repeated the slogans of “democratic socialism.” He said to his aides: “What did they do to our poor people? Throughout our lives, they told us fairy tales, tried to invent the wheel. And the wheel already exists .⊠. ⊠. yet not for us.” An aide wrote that “the last prop of Yeltsin’s Bolshevist mentality decomposed” at this moment. After returning from his American trip, while speaking to journalists and his MDG colleagues, Yeltsin regaled them with details of his supermarket visit. He waxed lyrical about the “madness of colors, boxes, packs, sausages, cheeses,” and rhapsodized that the average American family spent one-tenth or less of their salaries on food, while a Soviet family spent over half of their salaries on food, and more. Yeltsin decided that his mission now was to bring the “American dream” to the Russian people.

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