

**Armageddon Averted:
The Soviet Collapse,
1970–2000**

STEPHEN KOTKIN

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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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.

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Preface to the paperback edition

Never will I forget coming back evenings to the Vyborg Hotel in Leningrad, in 1984, and seeing a hat or article of clothing afloat in the nearby Black Gulch (*Chernaia rechka*), indicating that another drunk had fallen in and drowned. Even today, some academics continue to debate whether the Soviet system could reform, but the substantive question was 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 (liberalization) entailed collapse. Perversely, it was the Communist fable of a Lenin supposedly gentler than Stalin—the myth of socialism with a human face—that triggered the benign demise of Lenin’s police state. The Black Gulch swallowed itself, but it left an immense residue. After 1991, the myths of ‘reform’ and of Western ‘aid’ helped deflect a full reckoning with the Communist era.

In the two years since this book was published (three since it was written), Russia has continued to offer encouragement, with undercurrents of disquiet. Besides an appreciable learning curve, the overriding influences on further development (or lack thereof) remain the Soviet inheritance: the oil and resource-dominated economy, the world context, and the growing urge to compete more

effectively in it. Russia's strategic setting astride Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East, its U.N. Security Council veto, and Soviet-era doomsday arsenal focus attention. But Russia's long-term prospects will be determined by the vicissitudes of internal transformation, especially of its unreconstructed military-security apparatus, its judiciary, and its regulatory agencies. Even many officials now recognize a need to enhance the conditions for small and medium businesses and average property owners and to reinvest liberally in the country's notable educational system. Pragmatic foreign policy pursuits include closer ties rooted in mutual interest with all neighbors, particularly with Europe but also the United States, belated admission into the World Trade Organization, and some day, a GDP to match Portugal's.

Thanks are due to my new editors at OUP New York, Peter Ginna and Linda Robbins, and to readers and reviewers who pointed out errors, which have been corrected. A chapter prepared for the hardback on the new states besides Russia—excised for space reasons—appeared separately as 'Trashcanistan,' *The New Republic*, 15 April 2002 (www.tnr.com).

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.

These were the days 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 programme 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 well 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’ programmes, 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 *pere-stroika*, 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 programme, 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 2000–1, 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 deep political and economic 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. 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 it to completion. Tyler Felgenhauer compiled the index. Leonard Benardo, Laura Engelstein, Geoffrey Hosking, Sara Mosle, Philip Nord, Steven Solnick, Amir Weiner, and William Wohlforth offered incisive commentary on drafts of the text. 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.

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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 US Library of Congress system has been adopted (Evgenii rather than Yevgeny).

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1. Mikhail Gorbachev and Yegor Ligachev, visiting Prague, 1969, one year after the crackdown against the Prague Spring. The two provincial party chieftains learned first hand that the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe was widely opposed as an occupation regime.



2a. Leonid Brezhnev, bedecked with medals and propped up by his bodyguard, Vadim Medvedev (right), October 1979. The Soviet leader had just delivered a speech in East Germany, whose party boss, Erich Honecker (left), outlived Brezhnev, but was swept away in 1989, right before East Germany disappeared.



2b. KGB chief Yuri Andropov (in white hat), on a rest cure in his native Stavropol province, teaming up in dominoes with the local party host, Mikhail Gorbachev (in worker's cap), 1970s.



3. Brezhnev-era politburo, November 1980, whose only relative youth was Gorbachev (centre rear). Far right, Andrei Gromyko. Third from right, Yuri Andropov. Fourth from right, Nikolai Tikhonov. Centre, Brezhnev. Third from left, Mikhail Suslov. Second from left, Viktor Grishin. Konstantin Chernenko is obscured.

Артур Кальтбаум

ЗВЕЗДЫ И ФИЛЬМЫ



4. Cover of *Stars and Films*, 1966, translated into Russian from Polish. Foreign films and Western mass culture invaded the Soviet bloc. Top row: Shirley MacLaine (US), Audrey Hepburn (US), Marcello Mastroianni (Italy), Monica Vitti (Italy); middle row: Leslie Caron (France), Larisa Luzhina (Estonia), Jean-Claude Brialy (France), Jacqueline Sassard (France); bottom: Inna Gulaya (Ukraine), Brigitte Bardot (France).



5a. KGB delegation in Gdansk, Poland, 1979, site of mass strikes that led to the formation of Solidarity in 1980. Second from right, head of Soviet espionage and later KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov. Third from right, Oleg Kalugin, who had worked in the Washington station and became the youngest person ever to reach general rank. Far right, Nikolai Leonov, who rose to become chief analyst.

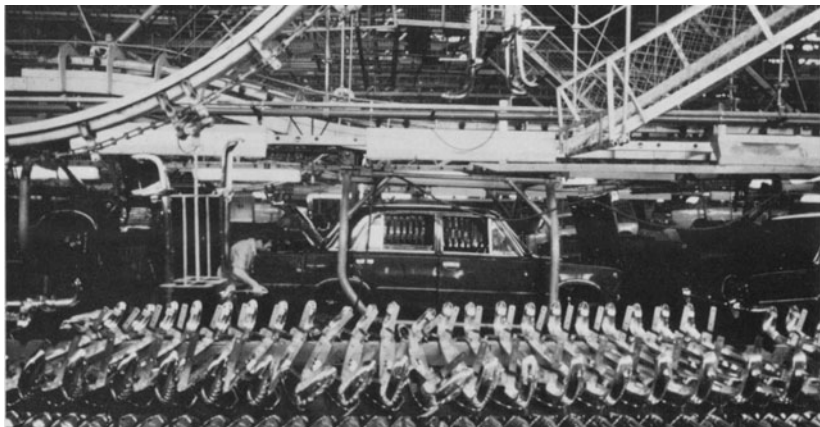


5b. General Secretary Andropov, half dead upon taking over for Brezhnev, 1983.



6a. Chernobyl, 1986. The exploded reactor, history's worst nuclear accident, radiated millions of people, including flimsily clad emergency crews, but helped transform the slogan of glasnost (openness) into a reality. Russia and other post-Soviet states continue to operate reactors identical in design to the one at Chernobyl.

6b. The AvtoVAZ car factory purchased from Fiat in the 1960s, and more modern than the bulk of Soviet manufacturing. AvtoVAZ made more cars than any other factory in the world, but required thirty times more man-hours to produce a car than did a US or Japanese factory, to say nothing of quality. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, AvtoVAZ was looted by management.





7. Mikhail Gorbachev, addressing the newly established Congress of People's Deputies, May 1989. The Congress shattered many taboos, not least of which was the fact that its proceedings were televised live.



8a. Suppression of a demonstration by the self-styled 'Democratic Union', Pushkin Square, Moscow, June 1989. Responding to glasnost by raising Russia's pre-Communist white, blue, and red flag and calling for restoration of the 'bourgeois order', the DU assembled fewer than a dozen protesters, who were hauled away in the mini-bus. Just over two years later, the tricolor would replace the hammer and sickle over the Kremlin.

8b. Yegor Ligachev, 1990. Ligachev commanded vast authority throughout the Soviet establishment, and everyone, especially the press, expected him to wield that power and bring a halt to the reforms. But he never did.





9a. The Soviet High Command, Red Square, 7 November 1989, just before the Berlin Wall was breached, and Eastern Europe was not prevented from breaking away. Only the commander of ground forces (second from left) would play an active role in the failed August 1991 putsch to 'save' the Union.

9b. Gorbachev with Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Stavropol, July 1990, when the Soviet leader voluntarily acceded to the unification of Germany with inclusion in NATO.





10. Boris Yeltsin, fist raised (centre). Having ridden to power atop mass popular sentiment, Yeltsin retreated into a secluded, depressed, ineffectual rule, surrounded by courtiers, including bodyguard Alexander Korzhakov (behind and to the left of Yeltsin, looking down on the media).