

BOOK REVIEWS

Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union, by Vladislav M. Zubok, Yale University Press, 2021, 576 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780300268171, \$25.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780300257304.

They are nearly all gone now – the leading figures in the drama of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Not only Mikhail Gorbachev and his nemesis Boris Yeltsin, but also independent Ukraine’s first president Leonid Kravchuk, Gorbachev’s foreign minister and post-Soviet president of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze, Yegor Gaidar the economist who converted to neoliberalism and persuaded Yeltsin to adopt his program of shock therapy in 1991, Stanislav Shushkevich the Belorussian leader who hosted Yeltsin and Kravchuk in the Belovezh forest where the three of them declared the Soviet Union dead, and many, many others. One of the chief virtues of Vladislav Zubok’s gripping account of the last eight years of the Soviet Union’s existence is to make these people come alive again with their hopes, fears, plans, and rationalizations on full display.

Some studies of the Soviet Union’s end emphasize *breakdown* – loss of the Center’s control over economic activities following the reforms of 1987–1988, the plummeting of oil prices depriving the Treasury of hard currency, panic buying leading to empty store shelves, the grinding to a halt of the country’s integrative functions. Others stress *breakup* – nationalist movements tearing the fabric of the country apart, first in the Baltics, then the Caucasus, followed by Ukraine and Russia itself. While not ignoring the fissiparous effects of these nationalisms, Zubok keeps the focus on the Center and above all, Gorbachev. Rather than any structural weakness, he argues, it was Gorbachev’s “misguided reforms,” his indecisiveness and temporizing, his denial of political realities, and his “hubris” that wrecked the Soviet ship of state.

Surrounding Gorbachev were a vast range of characters within the country – advisors and aides, colleagues, rivals and enemies, self-fashioned democrats, and nationalists – plus the presidents and prime ministers, Washington Consensus economists, and members of the diplomatic corps who weighed in with their assessments and predictions. The book moves chronologically through fifteen chapters, each with single-word titles. It starts with “Perestroika”; by chapter 5, it reaches a “Crossroads,” then arrives at a “Standoff” (chapter 7), followed not long thereafter by “Conspiracy” (10), “Junta” (11), “Demise” (12), and finally, “Independence” (14), and “Liquidation” (15). The writing is taut and engaging throughout, and the research is prodigious. Zubok draws on the assessments by journalists, political scientists, economists, and historians, as well as the diaries and memoirs of leading and secondary actors. He deploys interviews he conducted, e-mails he exchanged, and conversations he recorded, cites minutes of meetings and speech transcripts he found in various electronic archives and also relies on material from state and academic archives in Russia, Ukraine, the UK, and the United States. The reader thus is familiarized not only with events as they unfolded but also with the reflections of those who participated in or witnessed those events, and even reactions to what others thought about them. This, in other words, is a particularly well-grounded and well-rounded example of contemporary history.

What it is not is a social history. The masses who gathered in the squares of republic capitals to protest or celebrate, formed independent unions and civic associations, and voted in various referenda or with their feet when conditions became too precarious get but passing mention. They remain anonymous and reactive. One such instance of particular interest to readers of this journal is the passage about the Ukrainian referendum on independence of December 1, 1991 (393). It mentions Kravchuk’s “efforts to present the referendum as an existential choice between Soviet misery and future prosperity,” cites the leak by “representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora” in the US that the Bush administration was preparing to recognize Ukraine’s independence, and quotes


Serhii Plokhly to the effect that the myth of Ukraine as an “economic superpower ... was ‘ingrained in the minds of the country’s inhabitants.’” What goes unregistered is the view among Donbas miner-activists that they could get a better deal from Kyiv than from Moscow, a strategic calculation that overcame ethno-linguistic ambivalence.

Zubok’s contention that Gorbachev “identified with Lenin,” “modeled himself on” the great revolutionary, and “was the last true Leninist believer” (21, 269) occupies an important place in the narrative. When learning of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, Gorbachev “re-enacted Lenin” by using the crisis “to jump to sweeping conclusions” that “the entire old system was deeply sick and contaminated” (26). His introduction in 1987 of the Law on Socialist Enterprises combining “socialism’ with a state-regulated market” (27) was reminiscent of NEP. When pondering the proposed plan for conversion to a market economy (“the 500 Days”) in July 1990, he “continued to read Lenin in search of clues” (135). He even, according to his aide Anatoly Chernyaev, “began to impersonate Lenin, mimicking his style and gestures, his accent and favorite words” (67). Alas, this late twentieth-century “Lenin” continually went hat in hand to Western leaders begging for relief from Soviet indebtedness. And so “overwhelmed by everyday troubles” had Soviet citizens become that “had a real Lenin appeared by magic in downtown Moscow in December 1991, nobody would have paid attention to him” (422).

Recent events give added piquancy to *Collapse*, which was first published in 2021. In 1991, as the book makes clear, it was Yugoslavia that served as the primary negative example of what could happen when a supra-national state implodes. But plenty of alarm bells sounded as well about the two most populous Slavic-speaking countries – from the newspaper *Sovetskaia Rossiia* experimenting in 1988 “with a new language of Russian conservative nationalism” (156) to the influence that Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s rabidly nationalistic pamphlet “How to Rebuild Russia?” exerted on Yeltsin, the latter’s declaration in the wake of the failed coup in August 1991 that the Russian Federation “reserves the right to raise the question of the revision of boundaries,” (324) and his warning later in the year that “if Ukraine had its own Army, currency, and state borders, ‘there would be no peace between Russia and Ukraine’” (408).

Indeed, there are other warnings as well – about what happens when democracy is used as a weapon against political enemies instead of becoming institutionalized as a practice; about the effects of unfettered access by global capital to domestic economies; and about the unexpected consequences of fulfilling the ambition of doing away with America’s principal transcontinental rival. Readers take note!

In the final analysis, the collapse presented in *Collapse* is more contingent, and less indicative of sustained social malaise than in other interpretations. Despite its intimidating length, the book is highly accessible and could work well in political science as well as history classes even at the undergraduate level.

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Pure and True: The Everyday Politics of Ethnicity for China’s Hui Muslims, by David R. Stroup, University of Washington Press, 2022, 268 pp., \$105.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780295749822, \$32.00 (paperback) ISBN 9780295749839.

David Stroup’s *Pure and True* is a political ethnography of the Hui, the largest of ten Muslim “minority nationalities” (*shaoshu minzu*) in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The material in the book is drawn primarily from a year of field research Stroup conducted in 2015 and 2016 in four