

# "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union" by Vladislav Zubok

*William Ari*

BSc Economics and Economic History, LSE

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## Book Review

**Zubok, V.** Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2022.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has garnered renewed interest. However, what makes Zubok's aptly-titled book, "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union," so unique is how it rejects many prevailing narratives that view the collapse of the Soviet Union as both "predetermined and inevitable." This is because, in Zubok's view, such narratives inadequately explain the dramatic (and, for many, unforeseen) unravelling of a geopolitical entity that had withstood a Nazi onslaught. Instead, by lucidly portraying the transformation of Mikhail Gorbachev from the fresh face of Soviet leadership in 1985 to an embittered man by 1991, Zubok's striking narrative places Gorbachev at the beating heart of events that, at his own making, set into motion increasingly irreversible dynamics that brought the Soviet Union to an end. In other words, by meticulously parsing through both firsthand accounts of the event's key players and now-declassified archival materials, Zubok's valuable contribution to the post-revisionist historiography of the Soviet Union's collapse argues that Gorbachev alone was responsible for the "fall of the Soviet Union."

Key to understanding the collapse of the Soviet Union is appreciating the distinction between the collapse of the Soviet Union's economy and the collapse of the Soviet Union as a political entity. Part 1 of Zubok's book (Chapters 1 to 6) primarily deals with the latter, though it efficaciously foreshadows the looming political crisis that Gorbachev's socio-economic liberalization would ultimately induce. Driven by his starry-eyed neo-Leninist views, his unshakable belief in radical change, and with the support of trusted acolytes like Ligachev and Ryzhkov, Gorbachev instituted a wave of reforms shortly after his accession as General Secretary. At first, reforms took the form of an Anti-Alcohol Campaign and accelerating the Soviet Union's scientific and industrial progress, *uskoreniye*; however, after 1987, Gorbachev moved forward with more wholesale economic restructuring, *perestroika*. Here, Zubok identifies Gorbachev's crucial error of "misguided decentralization," in which, by delegating power away from the Politburo and local Communist Party groups, Gorbachev inadvertently unleashed the "demons of...chaos." On the foreign policy front, to buttress his domestic reforms by reversing decades of profligate military spending on an arms race, Gorbachev opted for *détente*, which, as explored in Chapters 3 and 4, led to his growing endearment in the West following his conciliatory actions surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification. However, with no signs of a positive course correction in the Soviet economy, Part 1 ends with Gorbachev turning his attention to the critical issue of a New Union Treaty.

To undercut the notion that the Soviet Union's collapse was preordained given its highly inefficient economy, Zubok is quick to tout the success of the Soviet Military Industrial Complex (MIC) in Chapters 1 and 2. After all, how could the Soviet economy be intrinsically inefficient if it could develop a simultaneously cost-efficient and world-leading MIC? A better question to ask, however, would be why other Soviet industries could not replicate the MIC's achievements. Zubok's analysis leaves such questions largely unanswered, but to many economists, the answer is self-evident. Paraphrasing Richard E. Ericson, though command economies tend to perform well when channeling resources to achieve simple and measurable objectives (like building nuclear weapons), as economic complexity rises with greater economic development, the entrenched inefficiencies of command economic systems begin to take root as effective planning and monitoring become an increasingly Sisyphean task.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the latter point is best illustrated in Chapter 3 with the anecdote of Boris Yeltsin's visit to a Randalls discount supermarket on a trip to Houston, Texas, in which an impressed Yeltsin discovers how even "the poorest American could buy what even the top Soviet *nomenklatura* could not back home." It is also worth mentioning that Zubok's discussion of the role of inflation in contributing to the Soviet economic collapse is generally lacking. For example, in the book's conclusion, rather than mentioning repressed inflation, Zubok prefers to focus on other things like the wave of rent-seeking *perestroika* unleashed as profiteers began exploiting new arbitrage opportunities.

In Part 2 (Chapters 7 to 15), as Gorbachev's economic reforms begin to flounder, Zubok meticulously explains how the Soviet Union begins to unravel. Zubok lays the foundations for Gorbachev's fall by first taking readers through Yeltsin's meteoric rise and Gorbachev's inability to extract more aid from the West (Chapters 7 to 9). However, Gorbachev's situation swiftly worsened following a failed August Coup by military hardliners (Chapters 10 to 11) — which was then succeeded by the inability of key Republican players like Kravchuck, Shushkevich, and Yeltsin to agree on a New Union Treaty — thus ending the Soviet Union as "a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality" (Chapters 12 to 15). By the end of Part 2, Zubok brilliantly answers many of the questions that have long perplexed Western observers about why the Soviet Union ended the way it did. For instance, why were Yeltsin and other Russian nationalists so willing to abandon centuries of expansionist instincts in trying to create a functioning *cordon sanitaire* around Russia proper? In this regard, Zubok elucidates how *perestroika* and *glasnost* had induced so much chaos that leaders of the Soviet Union's constituent Republics became increasingly uninterested in Soviet affairs as they focused on addressing the concerns and grievances of their domestic audience.

Also noteworthy is that, by rethinking the "inevitability of the Soviet collapse," Zubok asks several counterfactuals. For instance, would Andropov's approach to reforms, that being gradual economic liberalization with repression have worked (Chapter 1)? Alternatively, could the combination of instituting Petrakov's market reforms plus rolling back Republican rights in the 1990s have saved the Soviet Union from collapse (Conclusion)? Zubok makes clear that he asks these aforementioned questions in "an attempt to be intellectually honest about what happened." However, an arguably better (and certainly more interesting) question to ask would be whether the Soviet Union was worth saving in the first place. Though such a question is beyond Zubok's book, it is a question worth asking as one reads "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union."

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<sup>1</sup> Richard E Ericson, "The Classical Soviet-Type Economy: Nature of the System and Implications for Reform," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5, no. 4 (January 1991): pp. 11-27, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.5.4.11>.

## Bibliography

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