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# Collapse from Inside-Out or Outside-In?

MARK R. BEISSINGER

Vladislav M. Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*. xv + 576 pp., illus., maps. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. ISBN-13 978-0300257304, \$35.00 (cloth). ISBN-13 978-0300268171, \$25 (paper).

You know you are old when the events that you lived through and wrote about in your youth become the domain of historians. The collapse of the Soviet Union has now entered that realm, and Vladislav Zubok's monumental tome is the most detailed study yet of elite politics during the Soviet collapse. It is a major contribution to our understanding of the subject.

Let me start by noting that there is a fundamental difference between writing a political history, as Zubok has done, and writing a historically sensitive social scientific inquiry, as I aspired to do in my own study two decades ago.<sup>1</sup> My purpose was not to provide a full-fledged historical interpretation of the politics of the time. Rather, I sought to shed light on previously unaccentuated aspects of the collapse: to explicate the enormous transformations in identities that occurred, how those transformations related to one another, the ways that they affected Russians, the relationship between what happened on the street and what took place in government offices, and how the seemingly impossible in 1987 (the breakup of the USSR) could become the seemingly inevitable by 1991. I did this with purposes of theory building in mind, not as an encompassing historical explanation. In the social sciences, we do not have the luxury of talking about “perfect storms,” as Zubok does in this book; we are tasked instead with analyzing the dynamics of storms in general—how they function and how they behave.

Since the publication of my study, a trove of new information has become available. Zubok has been indefatigable in tracking these down and

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<sup>1</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

deserves much credit for doing so. He has scoured the archives, delved into diaries and memoirs, and interviewed many of the key decision makers and their aides (including their US counterparts). I am in awe of the sheer volume of material he has digested, and indeed Zubok treats us to a cornucopia of new details on what occurred behind the scenes. We learn, for instance, of the opulence of Mikhail Gorbachev's villa, how much George Bush's judgments flowed from his personal attachment to Gorbachev, how Dmitrii Iazov thought he could fix the "Lithuanian problem" in less than a week, the details of the back-and-forth over economic reform in 1990, the intense bickering and relentless tug-of-war for control between Boris Yeltsin and Gorbachev, Yeltsin's ubiquitous drinking (hardly a surprise), the frustrations of Gorbachev's aides and ministers over his constant prevarication, and many other insights. We even discover that Yeltsin learned of the August 1991 coup while watching television in his underwear—though what the relevance of that detail is (and who else learned about the coup in their underwear), I cannot say.

The book aims to rethink the inevitability of Soviet collapse. I could not agree more with that aim. It was the central theme of my own work.<sup>2</sup> The language of the "perfect storm" aside, Zubok does put forward an argument about the collapse: it was not nationalism that broke the Soviet Union into national pieces but personalities, the dismantlement of the party apparatus, and ill-advised economic reforms. The collapse occurred from the inside-out. My differences with Zubok are differences of interpretation, emphasis, and perspective: his ascription of the collapse primarily to personalities; his predominant focus on change from the inside-out rather than appreciating the key role also played by change from the outside-in; his excessive attention to 1991 rather than to what preceded it; and his overemphasis, in my opinion, on the economic determinants of collapse. These are issues about which reasonable scholars can disagree.

What Zubok substitutes for structural determination is near-complete indeterminacy. The collapse, as he describes it, was largely dependent on the whims and follies of two personalities: Gorbachev and Yeltsin. The structure-agency problem that animates so much social scientific thinking

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Zubok caricatures my position as somehow asserting that the Soviet Union collapsed because it was an empire (4). That is precisely what I argued against. Rather, I argued that the Soviet Union's ambiguous imperial quality—its dual persona as multinational state and multinational empire—was ever-present across its history (and at most times, submerged) but came starkly to the fore as a result of glasnost and the multiple waves of nationalist mobilization it unleashed. I deal extensively with the eventful and contingent character of these changes.

is reduced simply to an agency problem—or as he puts it at one point, “Where’s there’s a will, there’s a way” (142). I cannot disagree more strongly.

The book begins in 1983 with the aborted efforts of Iurii Andropov to jump-start Soviet central planning through modest reforms. The deeper history that conditioned the collapse receives scant attention (something I found strange for a work by a historian). Almost three-fifths of the study is devoted to the year 1991, when the Soviet system was already in its death throes, and when, at the beginning of the year, most of the elite and a quarter of the population had already come to believe that it could not be salvaged.<sup>3</sup> Even the origins of glasnost (openness)—the key policy that ripped the Soviet Union apart—receives short shrift, as do most of the developments that flowed from it that transformed mass consciousness at the time. Rather, dismantlement of the party apparatus and ill-conceived economic reforms are said to have destroyed the Soviet system from within.

I agree that personalities matter in history; one does not need to adhere to a “great man” theory of history, as Zubok seems to do, to accept this. Gorbachev’s commitment to glasnost and reticence to crack down on protests played a large role in the collapse. Was this weakness and cowardice (as Zubok frequently insinuates), or was it a value choice aimed at moving beyond the repressions of the past (as he less often suggests)? There is a texture of sympathy throughout Zubok’s narrative with Kremlin hardliners, those who mourned the dismantlement of the party apparatus, and those who wanted to hold the union together by force. Yet, as Zubok points out (and as I argued in my own study), most of the Soviet elite lacked the stomach for the kind of force that would have been necessary to put glasnost back in the bottle. They were not Stalinists but Brezhnevian bureaucrats. By the summer of 1989, with multiple revolts raging throughout the Soviet Union, it was evident that it was becoming exceedingly difficult to crack down within the norms of Brezhnevian bureaucracy. Once waves of revolt grew institutionalized through the 1990 republican elections, a crackdown became harder still. It is easy to carp that Gorbachev should have done this or should have done that. The actual doing was a good bit harder—in large part because of the context that glasnost had created.

That context is what I found missing in the book. In his introduction, Zubok writes that it was “surprising to see how many historical actors radically changed their views within a few years” (9). Yet the book does not really tell that story. The extraordinary excitement as barrier after barrier of political constraint dissipated, the passions and anger that motivated

<sup>3</sup> Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 386.

millions of people to take to the streets, the exhilaration of voting for the first time in one's life in a competitive election, the dangerous and contingent confrontations between crowds and the police—all these largely fall by the wayside in Zubok's account. This is where I found the book a bit sterile from the point of view of someone who studies revolutions, both in the Russian and Eurasian region and comparatively: can one really narrate the history of a revolution based almost exclusively on the conversations and thoughts of those in power? To be sure, those thoughts and conversations are critical for understanding why particular decisions were or were not adopted. But the broader context shaping those decisions (or that should have shaped those decisions) is equally important—and to me, often seemed to be absent from the story.

Zubok rightfully focuses on the Russian declaration about state sovereignty as a critical tipping point in the collapse (one of many tipping points during this period, but probably the most important). It is inexplicable without reference to the tremendous changes that took place in public attitudes and beliefs as a result of glasnost and the waves of mobilization that glasnost evoked. In 1987, the idea of Russian sovereignty vis-à-vis the Soviet state was impossible to imagine. By mid-1990, it was universally accepted by actors across the political spectrum (and adopted by the Russian legislature by a margin of 907 to 13). Most of what happened in 1991 (the bulk of Zubok's book) was playing out the logic of the new structural situation created by the parade of sovereignties and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe—that is, the disintegration of inner and outer empires. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova were openly headed for the exit. Azerbaijan would have joined them had it not been for the bloody crackdown and occupation of January 1990. From November 1990 on, Ukraine too, under the influence of the power of example, was increasingly claiming attributes of independent statehood, including its own currency and army. Zubok dismisses the idea of a national awakening in Ukraine, but the record is more complex. Over the course of 1990, national consciousness spread from western to central Ukraine, with mass mobilization tipping control from the Moscow-oriented wing of the Ukrainian nomenklatura to its pro-sovereignty wing. The East European revolutions were the key pivot animating this process. By contrast, the southern and eastern regions were more motivated by aversion to Moscow and the disorder it had wrought than by attraction to Kyiv. Even so, numerous studies have shown that people in these areas understood themselves primarily in local rather than in Soviet terms.

Given all this, the odds against holding the union together in 1991 were overwhelming. The elite had no appetite for the massive violence that would have been necessary, the army was angry due to its repeated use as a police force, a federal arrangement was rejected by all, and a confederation was a utopian and unstable solution. (There are no examples, anywhere in the world, of stable confederations, with member states as the ultimate authority. Americans should know this from their own history.) As events took on a momentum of their own, members of the elite increasingly began to jump ship. To be sure, Yeltsin was an unsavory character, and his personal conflicts with Gorbachev were the vehicle through which this dynamic played itself out. But by early 1991, the USSR could not have been pieced back together; by then, the only remaining questions were when and how far it would fall apart.

Zubok maintains that the principal cause of the collapse was the unwitting destruction of the Soviet economic system by Gorbachev and his ill-conceived economic reforms—in particular, the financial crisis that they set in motion. He devotes a great deal of attention to these policies. Multiple counterfactuals are offered: if only Andropov's aborted plans to modernize the economy had been adopted, the country would have been saved; if only Nikolai Petrakov's plan in early 1990 had been put in place, the USSR would have survived; if only Grigorii Iavlinskii's plan had been embraced, the tide of dissolution could have been averted. The evidence offered in support of these counterfactuals is scant.<sup>4</sup> None of these plans in 1990 would have been possible to implement without resolving the issue of sovereignty first. Moreover, we do not know what would have happened had they been followed, or even whether they would have been implemented properly. We do know that there was no such thing as an easy exit from central planning. All countries that made the transition to the market experienced enormous societal disruptions, though the depth and length of the pain varied.<sup>5</sup> Without freeing prices and ending government subsidies, which would have brought major inflation and unemployment, none of these plans would have been

<sup>4</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of what makes a convincing counterfactual, see Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> The Chinese transition to the market is sometimes held up as an alternative that could have been followed. But Chinese circumstances were starkly different. China benefited from weakened bureaucratic impediments to reform due to the Cultural Revolution. It had its heritage of family farming and a predominantly rural population (80 percent) that played the central role in the initial transition. It also benefited from high levels of private foreign capital in search of cheap labor. None of those advantages were available in Andropov's or Gorbachev's USSR.

effective. One can only imagine what the disruptive effects would have been in 1990. This is without even engaging the vast issues of corruption that penetrated deeply into the logic of the Soviet party-state of the 1980s.

Debt crises are not uncommon. Of 69 countries studied by Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff (widely considered the best study of financial crises), 46 percent experienced at least one sovereign debt crisis over the 1900–2011 period (including the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom), 72 percent experienced a domestic debt crisis, and 94 percent saw a period of runaway inflation.<sup>6</sup> Yet the number of cases in which these conditions flowed over into serious political instability (a coup attempt or mass revolt)—let alone the breakup of the country into national pieces—was small (less than 7 percent).

One cannot explain why the USSR broke up into national pieces by economics alone. There is a mistaken view, oft repeated by Gorbachev and many others at the time, that nationalities would ultimately not secede from the USSR because it was not in their economic interest. They simply needed to be reminded of this. Zubok formulates this slightly differently: if only the Soviet Union had engaged in timely economic reforms, its ethno-national problems would have dissipated. This purely instrumentalist view of nationalism—long discredited among scholars working in this field—misunderstands the issues that lay at the basis of nationalist conflicts. It is an illusion to think that the fundamental issues of nationalism that broke the Soviet Union into pieces could have been resolved through economic reform, or even that the benefits of economic reform in the short term would have outweighed the pain involved.

My comments should not overshadow what I truly admire in this book: the wide-ranging scope of its inquiry; the amazing array of sources probed; the new insights into elite decision making gleaned; and the level of detail provided. All that places this book on a pedestal for historical inquiry and sets the bar for further work on the Soviet collapse. But I do take issue with a number of Zubok's interpretations for reasons I have outlined.

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<sup>6</sup> Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff, *This Time It's Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).