# COLLAPSE

FALL

OF

SOVIET

UNION

Vladislav M. Zubok

"A deeply researched, gripping account of the final Soviet unravelling."

William Taubman

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**ABALKIN, Leonid (1930–2011):** deputy head of the Soviet government, August 1989–December 1990

**ADAMISHIN, Anatoly (1934–):** Soviet ambassador to Italy, 1990–91

**AFANASYEV, Yuri (1934–2015):** deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR; a leader of Democratic Russia

**AGANBEGYAN, Abel (1932–):** Soviet economist; architect of economic reforms in 1987–88 and September–October 1990

**AKHROMEYEV, Sergey (1923–91):** Marshal of the Soviet Union; Gorbachev's military advisor, December 1988–August 1991; member of the Emergency Committee, August 1991

**BAKATIN, Vadim (1937–):** Minister of the Interior of the Soviet Union, October 1988–December 1990; ran for the Russian presidency in 1991; the last head of the KGB, August–December 1991

**BAKLANOV, Oleg (1932–):** Party Secretary for Defense, 1988–August 1991; member of the Emergency Committee, August 1991

**BERNSTAM, Mikhail (1940–):** American economist; advisor to the RSFSR government, March—December 1991

**BESSMERTNYKH, Alexander (1933–):** Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, January–August 1991

**BOCHAROV, Mikhail (1941–2020):** head of the Higher Economic Council of the RSFSR government, June 1990–September 1991

**BOLDIN, Valery (1935–2006):** Gorbachev's personal assistant, 1981–87; Gorbachev's chief of staff, 1987–91; member of the Emergency Committee, August 1991

**BONNER**, Yelena (1923–2011): dissident and wife of Andrei Sakharov; leading voice of the opposition and Democratic Russia

BRAITHWAITE, Rodric (1932–): British ambassador to Moscow, 1988–92

**BURBULIS, Gennady (1945–):** advisor to Yeltsin; organizer of Yeltsin's presidential campaign, April–June 1991; State Secretary of the Russian government, June–December 1991

CHERNYAEV, Anatoly (1921–2017): Gorbachev's aide for foreign policy, January 1986–December 1991

**FOKIN, Vitold (1932–):** Prime Minister of the Ukrainian Republic, November 1990–December 1991

**GAIDAR, Yegor (1956–2009):** economist; author of program of market reforms for the RSFSR; deputy head of the Russian government, 15 November 1991–December 1992

**GERASHCHENKO, Viktor (1937–):** Chairman of the State Bank of the USSR, July 1989–December 1991

**IVANENKO**, **Viktor** (1950–): Major-General of the KGB; head of KGB RSFSR, 5 August–26 November 1991; backed Yeltsin during the Emergency Committee rule in August 1991

**KARIMOV, Islam (1938–2016):** First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, 1989–91; "elected" by the Republic's Supreme Soviet as President of Uzbekistan in November 1990

**KEBICH, Vyacheslav (1936–2020):** Prime Minister of Belorussia, then sovereign Belarus, 1990–94

**KHASBULATOV, Ruslan (1942–):** Yeltsin's deputy in the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, June 1990–June 1991; head of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, June 1991–October 1993

**KORZHAKOV, Alexander (1950–):** personal bodyguard and then head of Yeltsin's Presidential Security Service, 1989–96

**KOZYREV, Andrei (1951–):** Foreign Minister of the RSFSR, October 1990–December 1991

**KRAVCHUK, Leonid (1934–):** Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine, July 1990–December 1991; first President of independent Ukraine, December 1991–19 July 1994

**KRUCHINA**, **Nikolai** (1928–91): chief administrator for economic affairs, central Party apparatus, 1983–91

**KRYUCHKOV, Vladimir (1924–2007):** Chairman of the KGB, October 1988–August 1991; ringleader of the Emergency Committee in August 1991

**LANDSBERGIS, Vytautas (1932–):** head of *Sajudis* (the Reform Movement of Lithuania) and the Parliament of Lithuania, 1989–August 1991

**LIGACHEV, Yegor (1920–2021):** Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, December 1983–July 1990; Politburo member, April 1985–July 1990

**LUKIN, Vladimir (1937–):** Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR; head of its Committee on International Affairs, June 1990–December 1991

**LUKYANOV, Anatoly (1930–2019):** Politburo member, September 1988–July 1990; Speaker of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, March 1990–August 1991; collaborated with the Emergency Committee in August 1991

**MASLIUKOV, Yuri (1937–2010):** top economic planner in the Soviet government, 1982–November 1991; Chairman of Gosplan, 1988–November 1991

MATLOCK, Jack (1929–): US ambassador to the Soviet Union, 1987–August 1991

MEDVEDEV, Vadim (1929–): Politburo member, September 1988–July 1990

**MOISEYEV, Mikhail (1939–):** head of the General Staff of the USSR, December 1988–August 1991; briefly Minister of Defense, August 1991

**MURASHOV, Arkady (1957–):** Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR; organizer of Democratic Russia, January 1990–September 1991

**NAZARBAYEV, Nursultan (1940–):** Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh SSR, February–April 1990; elected as President of Kazakhstan by the Republic's Supreme Soviet, April 1990

**PALAZHCHENKO, Pavel (1949–):** interpreter for Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, July 1985–December 1990; interpreter for Mikhail Gorbachev, December 1985–December 1991

**PANKIN, Boris (1931–):** Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union, August–November 1991

**PAVLOV, Valentin (1937–2003):** Minister of Finance of the USSR, July 1989–January 1991; head of the Cabinet of Ministers of the USSR, January–August 1991; member of the Emergency Committee, August 1991

**PETRAKOV, Nikolai (1937–2014):** Gorbachev's economic advisor, December 1989–December 1990; author of a program of radical market transition

POLOZKOV, Ivan (1935–): head of the Russian Communist Party, June 1990–August 1991

**POPOV, Gavriil (1936–):** economist; organizer of Democratic Russia; head of the City Council and then Mayor of Moscow, June 1990–December 1991

**PRIMAKOV, Yevgeny (1929–2015):** Gorbachev's advisor, March 1990–August 1991; head of the KGB's First Directorate (foreign intelligence), September–December 1991

**PUGO, Boris (1937–1991):** Minister of the Interior of the USSR, December 1990–August 1991; member of the Emergency Committee; committed suicide after the failure of the junta

**RUTSKOY, Alexander (1947–):** Major-General of Aviation, 1991; Vice-President of the RSFSR, June 1991–October 1993

**RYZHKOV, Nikolai (1929–):** Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, September 1985–December 1990; architect of Gorbachev's early economic reforms

**SABUROV, Yevgeny (1946–2009):** Minister of the Economy of the RSFSR, 15 August–15 November 1991

**SAKHAROV, Andrei (1921–89):** physicist, designer of nuclear weapons, dissident; winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, 1975; member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and opposition leader, May–December 1989

**SAVISAAR, Edgar (1950–):** co-founder of the Popular Front of Estonia, July 1988; Prime Minister of Estonia, August 1991–January 1992

**SHAKHNAZAROV, Georgy (1924–2001):** philosopher and sociologist; Gorbachev's aide, 1988–December 1991

**SHAKHRAI, Sergey (1956–):** Yeltsin's legal advisor; drafted the documents on the dissolution of the USSR on 7–8 December 1991

**SHAPOSHNIKOV, Yevgeny (1942–2020):** commander of the Soviet Air Force; Minister of Defense of the USSR, August–December 1991

**SHATALIN, Stanislav (1934–97):** economist; member of Gorbachev's Presidential Council, May 1990–January 1991

**SHEBARSHIN, Leonid (1935–2012):** head of the KGB's First Directorate (foreign intelligence), October 1988–August 1991; head of the KGB after the junta's fall in August 1991

**SHEVARDNADZE, Eduard (1928–2014):** Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union, July 1985–December 1990 and November–December 1991

**SHUSHKEVICH, Stanislav (1934–):** Chairman of Belorussia's Supreme Soviet, August–December 1991; signed the documents to dissolve the Soviet Union on 8 December 1991

**SOBCHAK, Anatoly (1937–2000):** Mayor of St Petersburg, July–December 1991

**STANKEVICH, Sergey (1954–):** member of the democratic opposition, 1989–91; deputy head of the Moscow municipal government and advisor to Yeltsin, 1990–91

**STAROVOITOVA, Galina (1946–98):** Russian ethnographer; deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, May 1989–September 1991; deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, June 1990–93; advisor to Yeltsin, 1990–91

**STEPANOV-MAMALADZE, Teimuraz (1934–99):** aide and speechwriter to Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, July 1985–December 1990

**VARENNIKOV, Valentin (1923–2009):** commander of Soviet ground forces and Deputy Minister of Defense, 1989–August 1991; active in the Emergency Committee, August 1991

**VOROTNIKOV, Vitaly (1926–2012):** member of the Politburo, December 1983–July 1990; head of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, October 1988–May 1990

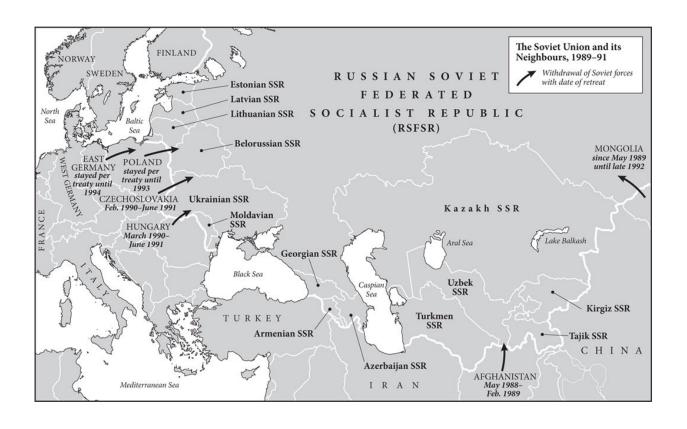
**VOSHCHANOV, Pavel (1948–):** journalist; President Yeltsin's press secretary, July 1991–February 1992

**YAKOVLEV, Alexander (1923–2005):** member of the Politburo, 1985–July 1990; close associate of Gorbachev, July–December 1990 and September–December 1991

**YAKOVLEV, Yegor (1930–2005):** editor of *Moscow News*, 1986–91; head of Soviet television, August–December 1991

YAVLINSKY, Grigory (1952–): Soviet economist; author of the "400 Days of Confidence" program (which became "500 Days"), June–September 1990; author of the Grand Bargain, May–August 1991

**ZASLAVSKY, Ilya** (1960–): member of the parliamentary opposition and coordinator of Democratic Russia





## INTRODUCTION

### A Puzzle

"They've finally got rid of him, that windbag." I heard this comment from fellow passengers on board an Aeroflot flight from Moscow to New York, which had just made a stop at Shannon, Ireland. It was the morning of 19 August 1991, and it took me a few minutes to realize that these people were alluding to the removal of Mikhail Gorbachev from power. They had learned the news from CNN during the refueling stop, and they clearly approved of what they heard. The plane was full of Russians: some of them were flying to conferences and diplomatic assignments; most were going on private business, to see émigré relatives, and for other reasons. I was flying to the United States with several projects in mind. A few months earlier I had begun working as a Russian aide for the journalist Strobe Talbott and historian Michael Beschloss, who were writing a book about the end of the Cold War. In my bag, I was carrying tapes recording my interviews with Soviet officials. I had also decided to write my own book about the Soviet experience of the Cold War. The prestigious Amherst College in

Massachusetts had offered me a fellowship to start my project, far from the turmoil of Moscow where I was born and had lived all my life up to that point.

The news about Gorbachev's arrest was completely unexpected. As a young Moscow-based academic intellectual, I had been rooting for his reforms and liberalization in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev had evoked big expectations, yet since 1990, together with my friends, I had switched my allegiance to Boris Yeltsin, who sought a radical break with the old order. Nobody among the people I knew had any doubt that the old system, the Communist Party, centralized economic management, and the "socialist choice" were doomed. Still, no one wanted to storm the Kremlin and tear down the structures of the state; everyone hoped for reform, not revolution. With my friends, I took part in democratic rallies, avidly read the work of economists who discussed how to return from a command economy to a market economy, and supported independence movements in Lithuania and Georgia. After my plane arrived at New York's JFK airport, I bought a hefty copy of *The New York Times*. The newspaper informed me that Mikhail Gorbachev had apparently been ousted from power by the military and the KGB while on vacation in distant Crimea.

During the fall of 1991, I worked in the library and archives of Amherst College, but spent more time reading and watching the news from home. The immense relief when the coup failed and Gorbachev returned to the Kremlin quickly gave way to anxiety about the future. The Soviet economy was in free fall. Ukraine and other republics intended to leave the Union. My mind was exploding in cognitive dissonance: I found myself a citizen of a state that was collapsing and I could not share the excitement of American

colleagues who joked that the USSR was now "the Union of Fewer and Fewer Republics." Fortunately, my wife and son were staying with me in Amherst. Life went on, and at the end of September my second son was born in a hospital in Northampton, Massachusetts. Yet a gnawing thought persisted: what sort of country would we be returning to?

We never got back to the USSR. On a return flight, my plane landed at Sheremetyevo, Moscow, on 31 December 1991, but by that time the leaders of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, and other republics had dissolved the Soviet Union. Gorbachev had resigned. The dimly lit Sheremetyevo airport was empty: nobody to refuel the plane, nobody to operate a jet bridge, no customs officers, nobody even to check the passports and visas of arriving passengers. The new Russian state was the country of unprotected borders, without customs, with devalued currency, and empty stores. The immutable state structures seemed to have evaporated. The country that I had left just a few months ago in August had suddenly vanished.

For many years I wanted to write about the end of the Soviet Union. Yet I believed more time should pass before more dispassionate attitudes to this epic event could be formed. I waited in vain. As memories of 1991 faded, opinions and myths acquired a life of their own. What was a provisional insight became an established view, immutable just like the Soviet statehood had been before 1991. In the West, the Soviet collapse came to be universally accepted as predetermined and inevitable, something too self-evident to require further study. When in 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin called the Soviet collapse "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," most Western observers ridiculed him for his reactionary

nostalgia. It was the time of Western liberal triumphalism and the enlargement of NATO to the East. This mood changed after Russia's war with Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Western commentators began saying that Russia wanted to restore its "lost empire." In 2019, the Polish head of the European Council, Donald Tusk, said that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was a blessing" for Central and Eastern Europe, for Georgians, Poles, and Ukrainians.<sup>2</sup> Only a few in the West recalled that the Russian Federation had been a leading actor in the Soviet dissolution. Mikhail Gorbachev remained the lonely hero in the West, since everyone acknowledged that he had set inevitable historical developments in motion. When Gorbachev supported Russia's annexation of Crimea, it was dismissed as an atypical pronouncement. In Russia, reactions to the Soviet collapse remain polarized. Liberal-minded people believe that the Soviet Union could not be reformed, and that even to write about its "autopsy" was a waste of time. Good riddance to the empire that could not give its people even "bread and entertainment"! Others feel nostalgia for Soviet greatness and think that Stalin was a great leader, while Gorbachev had sold out to the West. Some of them were not even born when the Soviet Union collapsed.

Scholars who studied the end of the Soviet Union identified several causes of the state's demise. Their conclusions can be summarized as follows. First, the superiority of the United States and its policies in the Cold War had made the USSR retreat and surrender. Second, Gorbachev's glasnost had discredited both communist ideology and doomed the Soviet system to failure. Third, the Soviet Union had died because its economy imploded. Fourth, the movements for national independence had led to the

implosion of "the last empire." Finally, the most powerful Soviet elites had opposed Gorbachev's reforms and thereby inadvertently caused the demise of the USSR. In this book, I argue that none of those causes, when taken separately, could have destroyed the Soviet Union. And it took me some time to understand how all those threads had converged in a kind of a perfect storm, unleashed by the rule of Mikhail Gorbachev.

The literature about external Cold War pressures argues that the Soviet Union collapsed because it was overstretched: it lost the war in Afghanistan, carried the unbearable burden of military expenditures, and subsidized its clients around the world. The Soviet superpower, some scholars contend, could no longer compete, militarily and technologically, with the United States and its Western allies. Yet recently, scholars have concluded that US pressures had little to do with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. And, at least since 1987, Western governments were surprised and dismayed by the Soviet Union's destabilization, and then disintegration.<sup>3</sup> Recently, more nuanced studies of the Western, especially American, factor in the Soviet collapse have appeared.<sup>4</sup> This book explores the external factors as secondary to the internal causes. International factors became crucial for shaping the behavior of the Soviet elites and counter-elites, but only after the Soviet Union had entered its terminal crisis.

Glasnost (Gorbachev's policy of openness and transparency) and the media's attack on the communist past and ideology greatly contributed to the rise of anti-communist and nationalist movements. Yet it is not entirely clear what role ideological breakdown played in the disintegration of the Soviet statehood. For the Soviet elites, especially in Moscow, Stalin's

crimes and repressions had long been known. And the majority of those in the Party ranks, especially younger cohorts, had long been imitating socialist rhetoric, while acting on their real interests in a parallel universe of coveted foreign goods, travel, Western rock music, and mass culture.<sup>5</sup> The Party's ideological legitimacy had long been eroded, yet this was not the main reason why the Party had ceded its economic and political levers of power in 1990–91. That was Gorbachev's decision, a voluntary and unprecedented devolution of power.

The Soviet economic crisis played a central and often underestimated role in the last three years of Soviet history. In conjunction with revelations of past communist crimes, it contributed to mass discontent and mobilization against the central authority. It is axiomatic that the Soviet economic system was wasteful, ruinous, and could not deliver goods to people. What happened to the Soviet economy, however, remains a bone of contention. The oft-repeated explanations about the resistance of the Party, the military-industrial complex, and other "lobbies," are not convincing. Scholars who studied the Soviet economy concluded that the Soviet economic system was destroyed not by its structural faults, but by Gorbachev-era reforms. The purposeful as well as unintended destruction of the Soviet economy, along with its finances, may be considered the best candidate as a principal cause of Soviet disintegration. This book is the first study of the Soviet collapse that pays closest attention to the economic and financial factors within a larger historical narrative.

Some scholars wrote that the Soviet Union was "the last empire" bound to collapse along its multi-national seams, just like other empires did. One authoritative study explains that nationalist movements began in Soviet borderlands, but then created enough resonance to mobilize the Russians in the core of "the empire"; the idea of secession from the Soviet Union became imaginable, and then began to appear inevitable. Mark Beissinger concludes that "the multiple waves of nationalist revolt and inter-ethnic violence" overwhelmed the capacity of the Soviet state to defend itself.<sup>7</sup> The break-up of the Soviet Union into fifteen independent states, along the borders of its republics, made this explanation self-evident, yet deceptively circular. The paradigm of "empire" can be challenged: it exaggerates the role of the nationalist movements, especially in the Baltics and Ukraine, in the Soviet collapse. It also underplays the most crucial and amazing factor: the repeated failure of the central state to defend itself. And it gives a superficial explanation to the defection of the Russian Federation, the core of the Soviet Union.8 This book offers a more comprehensive look, distanced from the imperial paradigm, at why so many Russians in Moscow wished away so fervently the Soviet statehood that in many ways had been their form of existence for decades.

Finally, there is the role played by the Soviet elites. Some scholars had already begun to question the old explanations of the "reactionary" and "hard-line" nomenklatura (the system whereby influential posts in industry and government were filled by Party appointees) that had allegedly opposed Gorbachev and obstructed his reforms. In fact, evidence shows that Soviet bureaucrats and officials were amazingly adaptive. Some scholars have written about "capitalist revolution" where Soviet nomenklatura abdicated the "socialist project" in order to grab national property for themselves. Others write about "uncivil society" and the crumbling of the centralized pyramid of patronage lines, crucial for state functioning. The attitudes of

people in Soviet bureaucracies in fact varied from reactionary to liberal-democratic.<sup>9</sup> This book explores the changing outlook of the key Soviet elites in rapidly altering circumstances in a more fine-grained way than before. Above all, it dwells on their reactions to a failing economy, political anarchy, and ethno-national conflicts.

Many threads in the analysis of the Soviet collapse overlapped and created a widespread feeling of doom—with the result that ultimately the event became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet for a historian, this collapse presents a puzzle that does not quite click together. This puzzle became the main subject of this book.

Gorbachev lies at the center of this puzzle. The personality and leadership of the last Soviet leader helps to bring together many pieces in the story of Soviet dissolution. Scholars who sympathize with Gorbachev usually foreground his international policies and give short shrift to his domestic problems and failures, ascribing the latter to intractable historical and other factors, as well as to the resistance and treason of his enemies. This approach has been consistent in the books of Archie Brown, perhaps the most influential Western interpreter of Gorbachev's policies. William Taubman, in his excellent biography of Gorbachev, finds faults in his hero, yet also refuses to call his reforms a failure. On the contrary, Taubman believes that Gorbachev "laid the groundwork for democracy" in the Soviet Union. "It is more the fault of the raw material that he worked with than of his own shortcomings and mistakes that Russian democracy will take much longer to build than he thought." A leading Cold War historian, Odd Arne Westad, seems to agree. "The final drama of the Cold War became a purely

Soviet tragedy," he concludes. Gorbachev could have preserved the country by force, but he "would rather see the union disappear . . ."12

The story of Gorbachev's best intentions and policies, however, begs for a realistic reassessment, with a more balanced exploration of social and economic dilemmas. After all, as wise people say, "foreign policy begins at home," and one cannot claim a foreign triumph against the background of domestic chaos. Was Gorbachev a world visionary who was too good for his own country? This book draws international and domestic processes that affected the fate of the Soviet Union into one narrative.

The book rethinks the inevitability of the Soviet collapse. It addresses questions: Which other policy options were available to the Kremlin? Could a smart use of coercion and incentives, resolute actions and a bit of luck, have made a difference? Were there other much earlier choices and contingencies that, in the light of new evidence, constituted the points of no return? Many skeptics, when they heard me raising these questions, reproached me: the Soviet Union was doomed, they said, so one should celebrate its collapse, not interrogate it. Those arguments reminded me of what one scholar wrote about the Soviet collapse in 1993: "We tend to confer the mantle of inevitability on accomplished facts, and arguing that what happened did not have to happen is likely to be dismissed as inventing excuses for the losing side."13 My book is not an exercise in "how the evil empire could have been preserved." Rather it is an attempt to be intellectually honest about what happened. History is never a sequence of inevitabilities, and the Soviet demise was no exception: it was full of contingencies. Unpredictability and uncertainty are fundamental features of human, state, and world affairs. Social movements and ideological currents

are not rational, and political wills propel history in unexpected directions. Finally, there are accidents that have huge consequences. This last point resonated with me especially as I was finishing this book during the pandemic.

The American diplomat George Kennan, author of the doctrine of containment, told his students at the National War College, Washington, in 1946 that the Soviet threat to the West could be removed by a "gradual mellowing of Soviet policy under influence of firm and calm resistance abroad." Yet this mellowing, he warned, would be "slow and never complete." Another, more radical option, Kennan wrote, was "internal dissension which would temporarily weaken Soviet potential & lead to [a] situation similar to that of 1919–20." Kennan did not consider this option likely, yet it describes quite well what happened to the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>14</sup> Nobody, including the most sagacious observers, could predict that the Soviet Union, which had survived the epic assault of Hitler's armies, would be defeated from within, by its internal crises and conflict. During the three decades that followed World War II, the power of the USSR had grown immensely and seemed to prove its resilience. Western leaders and opinion-makers spoke about "a Soviet superpower," a rival of the United States in both economic and military potential. The CIA and many Western economists even forecast that the USSR would outpace the United States. In fact, the Soviet Union had always suffered from its economic and financial inferiority relative to the US. Its access to superpower status was enabled by a system that allowed the state's phenomenal concentration of resources to achieve a global projection of military might. This worked, however, only as long as the military power could be backed by a

convincing ideological message and/or economic capacities. In the 1980s, when severe internal problems at the heart of the Soviet economy, its ideology, and society became apparent, Western observers feared that the Soviet Union might get a second wind. It did not. Yet even in 1990, the majority of observers, in Moscow and elsewhere, did not assume that the Soviet Union was doomed. Gorbachev and even his critics admit that, without the "coup" of August 1991, the Soviet state would not have collapsed so quickly and thoroughly.<sup>15</sup>

In this book, I try to break free from the straitjacket of the dominant narrative that the Soviet collapse was inevitable—the narrative created in the West and within anti-communist circles inside the Soviet Union. That narrative is still in demand, but thirty years after the Soviet collapse, the audience has changed fundamentally: there are now as many people born after 1991 as those who had experienced and can remember the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Both audiences will find much that is new in this book. The history of the Soviet collapse was never a script, known in advance. It was a drama of human ideals, fears, passions, and unanticipated developments. In these pages the reader will find many "fly-on-the-wall" episodes, when Gorbachev and others in the Kremlin debated reforms, agonized over what to do with ethnic conflicts and seceding republics, and contested responsibility and power. To make the texture of the historical narrative authentic, I give preference to instantaneous reactions, rumors, and fears, rare moments of optimism and frequent fits of despair, that characterized those times.

The book, without de-centering Gorbachev, introduces more Soviet actors, voices, and initiatives. I argue that, taken together, they were much

more than "the Greek chorus" to "a purely Soviet tragedy" hinging on Gorbachev's choices. Throughout the book, the cast of characters keeps widening and diversifying. As Gorbachev delegated central powers and replaced the old Soviet power hierarchy with an "all power to the Soviets" system, many people began to feel that they were not passive onlookers, but had become participants in history, if not its makers. And late Soviet politics was not just a duel between Gorbachev and his fateful rival Yeltsin. The book presents a broad array of Party stalwarts, reformers, economists, diplomats, parliamentary deputies, KGB officials, the military, captains of military-industrial corporations, budding entrepreneurs, journalists, the Baltic nationalists, the Ukrainian politicians, and many others.

The book also reflects on the trajectory of the Western, and in particular the American, impact on the Soviet collapse, with government, nongovernmental actors, and media playing an outsized role in Soviet imagination and politics. British and American sources, especially diaries and official dispatches, help to fill gaps and correct numerous imprecisions in Soviet records. Foreigners, just like at the outset of the Soviet regime, became both chroniclers of and participants in Soviet history. In 1990–91, administration, Congress, media, the US and non-governmental organizations became, willingly or unwillingly, participants in the radicalizing Soviet politics. The American factor loomed larger in the perceptions of those within the Soviet Union than Americans themselves ever suspected at the time. American soft power in the Soviet Union in 1990–91 was equal if not greater to what the United States had in Europe, when it introduced the Marshall Plan of 1947. This "American phenomenon" in Soviet politics was far more complex than political meddling or interference. Those in Russia who continue to speculate about an "American conspiracy to destroy the USSR" do not know what they are talking about. Many in the Soviet Union welcomed and invited the Americans to come and help transform Soviet society. It is remarkable how narrow-minded and unimaginative, albeit prudent, the American leadership was in wielding their enormous "soft power."

The sources for this book have been collected over at least three decades. They include personal observations, many conversations with senior Soviet politicians, diplomats, military, KGB officers, officials from the military-industrial complex, and people from diverse walks of Soviet life, the state, and society. Archives and libraries in Russia and other countries provided me with what individual memories could not. Contrary to common perceptions in the West, Russian sources on the end of the Soviet Union are extraordinarily open, rich, and widely available through a number of electronic databases. Particularly valuable for history are numerous stenographic records of what happened in the institutions of Soviet power, on parliamentary floors, at the meetings of the radical opposition, at numerous conferences of experts and pundits. There is also a tapestry of personal records, minutes, letters, and diaries that often allow one to reconstruct events with remarkable precision and sense the spontaneity of the moment. The second biggest treasure trove for this book were sources and interviews in the United States. They were often more insightful and analytically profound than Soviet accounts: after all, no one entity observed unfolding events in the Soviet Union more attentively than its superpower rival.

As I collected this evidence, I adjusted some of my pre-existing certainties and assumptions. I still believe, just like thirty years ago, that the central economy and Gorbachev's "socialist choice" were doomed, but I no longer have the same sense of inevitability about the Party's demise. In general, I was surprised how clearly many people saw the separate strands of the approaching crisis, yet could not imagine that the whole state construction would fall apart. It was also surprising to see how many historical actors radically changed their views within a few years, influenced by political passions, fears, ideological illusions or delusions, and personal ambitions. Those changes provided an unmistakable sign of revolutionary times.

Even well-known evidence looks different from a greater distance. The role of ideologies in the final phase of Soviet history looms larger to me now than when I was a witness to and participant in, the events. When I was young, I dismissed Gorbachev's neo-Leninist proclamations as mere rhetoric; the evidence reveals that it was absolutely genuine and heartfelt. Equally striking for me today is the explosive spread of ideological anticommunism and American-style liberalism, especially in economics. At the time, it looked "natural" and a "return to common sense." I also became stuck by the utopian nature of the home-grown projects and ideas of reforms that sprang from the democratic-minded intelligentsia in Moscow and elsewhere. What looked like "having no alternative" then, now appears to me as fanciful, naïve, and a prognosis of catastrophe. This is not to criticize the actors of history with the wisdom of hindsight, but to historicize their motives and passions. My biggest surprise, however, came from my realization of the decisive and implacable role of money in the

Soviet demise—something, given my Soviet background of economic ignorance, that I completely missed.

At first, I wanted to start my account of the Soviet collapse in January 1991 and stay focused on month-by-month developments. Soon I realized, however, how crucial it was to explain to the reader, particularly the younger reader, the previous years of reforms, high hopes, mobilization of nationalism, impatience, and radicalization—before they gave way to the frustration, fears, and resignation of 1991. My narrative now begins with Yuri Andropov in 1983, when the ex-KGB leader and General Secretary of the Communist Party (1982–84) had tacitly revived the idea of reforms from above. The first part of the book, chapters 1-6, explains how Gorbachev and his reform-minded entourage transformed the conservative reforms from above into a revolutionary gamble and ultimately removed the critical props on which the Soviet system and state were resting. In this part I demonstrate how anti-systemic energy, accumulated by many years of Soviet one-party rule, had been magnified by Gorbachev's unsuccessful reforms, and released into the domain of public politics. The second part of the book, chapters 7–15, covers the collapse itself. The book revisits familiar aspects of this story, but adds much new information that will be unfamiliar to the reader.

I have completed this book with a conviction that the puzzle of the Soviet collapse is not a purely academic problem. In almost any conversation with Russians or Westerners alike in the years since 1991, they have reacted to my topic vividly and with curiosity. Why had Gorbachev, a prophet of change abroad, some asked, become an epitome of failure and ineffectiveness at home? Was there back then really a threat of a new

dictatorship? Did Gorbachev's project of a new voluntary union of democratic states stand a chance of success? Was the new Russia that emerged in 1991 doomed to return to authoritarianism or was there a missed opportunity? I hope this book will satisfy this curiosity and arm the reader with a much better understanding of a great geopolitical and economic upheaval, one that gave birth to a new world.