Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000

(Stephen Kotkin)

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All of history is littered with dead empires. Since the so-called Enlightenment, history is also littered with dead regimes—governments built around an ideology, which in time collapsed, entirely killing the ideology which birthed them or forcing it to mutate into something new. The Eastern European Communist regimes collapsed in 1989. Their hegemon regime, Soviet Communism, followed in 1991. Yet the Soviet regime did not use its power to preserve its Eastern European satrapies, nor did it act to preserve its own ideology, even though its elites still fervently believed in that ideology. Why? That is what Stephen Kotkin says he answers in *Armageddon Averted*. He doesn't, but the history he covers is its own reward.

Kotkin is one of the premiere scholars of the Soviet era. He is two volumes through a three-volume history of Joseph Stalin, and for decades he has traveled and researched in what was once the Soviet Union and its empire. In his 2010 book *Uncivil Society*, Kotkin demolished the myth that Eastern Europeans threw off the Communist yoke as a result of the work of dissidents who wanted more blue jeans and Westernization. Rather, in most of Eastern Europe (with the exception of Poland), so-called dissidents were totally irrelevant. There was no "counter-elite" which formed and then took action to overthrow Communist regimes. Instead, what ended Communism in Eastern Europe was the spontaneous uprising of average citizens, driven by nationalism and religion, who became willing to openly protest against the regimes which ruled them. In response, rather than cracking down, which they had the power to do, the regimes crumbled, nearly overnight—what Kotkin aptly calls a "political bank run." The reason was that they were fragile and exhausted, even if nobody in the West thought they were, and the Soviet Union refused to back its subordinate regimes with force, as it had in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland in 1981.

This book was first published in 2001, and revised a little in 2008. It ends with the rise of Vladimir Putin, and the stabilization of Russia after a decade of chaos. Kotkin tells us that the new generation of Soviet

regime leaders which took power under Mikhail Gorbachev, beginning in the mid-1980s, intended reform to strengthen Communism, nothing more. But "in the face of a capitalist West utterly transformed after World War II . . . socialist reform entailed collapse." This seems trivially obvious today, but it was not at the time. "Who had anticipated that the Soviet Union would meekly dissolve itself?" Nobody, that's who. "Those few analysts who did perceive the depth of Soviet problems, and the structural impediments to solving them, never imagined that such a police state would just let go, quietly." "[T]he greatest surprise of the Soviet collapse was not that it happened—though that was shocking enough—but the absence of an all-consuming conflagration."

We begin with the 1970s. The West, having expanded mightily for more than twenty years, took body blows from oil price shocks and an aging industrial base, but managed with the former, and worked effectively on remaking the latter (this was long before the great and destructive offshoring of the 2000s and 2010s, which enriched America's elites at the expense of normal Americans). The increased price of oil, however, was a windfall for the Soviet Union, which seemed to improve its relative position. Eighty percent of the hard currency flowing into the Soviet Union, which was a lot, came from sales of oil and gas. This paid both for military buildup and for cushioning the impact of rising energy prices on the USSR's Eastern European satrapies. Crucially, seventy percent of the Soviet economy was heavy industry, and cheap energy made its operation possible. But it also concealed from everyone, or allowed them to ignore, that all that heavy industry was very old and very inefficient, similar to the American Rust Belt, only worse. Thus, no remaking of Soviet industry occurred. It had been a long time since most of the industrial infrastructure had been built, mostly during the reign of Stalin (Kotkin's first book was a magisterial work on the Stalinist industrial city of Magnitogorsk, so he knows a lot about this topic), and Communism gave no incentives to advance or even keep the factories in good order. Under Communism, with its well-known myriad economic inefficiencies and insanities, there was simply no effective way to address this problem, which only grew over time, along with many other economic and social problems. Thus, despite oil money, the economic gap between the Soviet Union and the West continued to increase.

Even so, the Soviet system was stable and strong. There was no dissident movement. Patriotism was high, as was respect for the military. Everyone was employed, and the standard of living was "tolerable for most people." There was low foreign debt (unlike in Eastern Europe) and the USSR's credit rating was good. There was hunger for consumer goods—more for telephones and cars than blue jeans, but the citizens were aware that desirable consumer items were widely and cheaply available in the West (and to Soviet elites, through hard currency stores off-limits to normal citizens, something Kotkin does not mention, but which I know from personal experience loomed large in the average person's mind.)

But there were trade-offs that made it seem not so bad. In the Soviet Union, there was no unemployment, race rioting, or pervasive inequality (aside from that between the *nomenklatura* and the average citizen). Sure, some more religious and political freedom would have been nice, and the KGB lurked (especially around Christians, the only group persecuted with attention), but "most people simply wanted the Soviet regime to live up to its promises of inexpensive housing, health care, paid maternity leave, public education, and consumer goods." The elites were largely united, and united behind the socialist ideal, even if corruption (always a challenge for Russia) and a "self-indulgent elite" were increasing problems.

The Soviet regime began to change with the accession to power of Gorbachev, in 1985. Kotkin deftly sketches the life and career of Gorbachev, whom he notes was (like most Communist apparatchiks until the very end) a "true believer." Americans, especially today's Americans, mostly educated with lies and oppressed by the worst ruling class in history, tend to believe that Communism was a facade, window-dressing for corrupt oppression no different than many other kleptocratic ruling classes. This is false; Communism (like all branches of leftism) was birthed in the idea that Utopia was possible, right here, right now, and while that future always receded, the norm of all Communist leaders was belief in a utopian future. Gorbachev, born in 1931, was very much in this mold. From the mid-1950s until 1978, he worked his way up through regional Party administration, making the right friends. In 1978, he became a member of the ruling body of the state, the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and in 1985 became the General

Secretary, the de facto head of state (after three quick deaths of ancient men in the same office).

The primary response to Gorbachev's accession was relief that someone who was not half-dead was now in charge. Gorbachev was energetic and, most importantly, interested in "the reformist generation dilemma: how to bridge the gap between socialism's ideals and its disappointing realities, within the context of the superpower competition." Gorbachev concluded that what was needed was reform, *perestroika*—not because of internal problems, but because of international competition, and the eroding Soviet position in it. What he wanted was to "make socialism live up to its promises [and] to reinvigorate the party and return to the imagined ideals of October [1917]." "What proved to be the party's final mobilization, *perestroika*, was driven not by cold calculation about achieving an orderly retrenchment but by the pursuit of a romantic dream."

Gorbachev launched many programs, including industrial upgrade pushes and social changes such as a clampdown on alcohol use, within the frame of *perestroika*. None were successes. All were also done under the new policy of *glasnost*—openness, meaning more press freedom and more public accountability for regime apparatchiks, adopted not out of a spirit of liberalism, but in order to allow Communism to regain the initiative, or at least to stop falling behind. Some of this read to the West as efforts to "liberalize," to ape the apparent freedoms of the West, but that was simply error. Communism was deeply felt and shared among the elites; it was just a question of how best to preserve it. But *glasnost* "revealed, for those still unaware, that the revolution's ideals were embedded in institutions that made them not only unrealized but also unrealizable." This was not sustainable.

It seems inevitable in retrospect Gorbachev's efforts, all fundamentally economic, would fail. Economic life in the Soviet Union was entirely insane and irredeemable. Kotkin gives the example of how enormous quantities of steel went to waste because steel producers were rewarded by weight produced, so they produced thick pieces, even though end-users wanted thin pieces. The end-users then sheared down the thick pieces and threw the scrap away. It is not false that centrally-planned economies are useless, though many in the West took the wrong lesson from the twentieth century, that government intervention in the economy is always bad.

Gorbachev, no fool, saw his efforts were failing. Worse, and unexpectedly, though it should have been expected, *glasnost* had eroded the people's general satisfaction, both by creating rising expectations and by exposing citizens to more knowledge of how things were better economically in the West. (Creating rising expectations, then failing to deliver, is the proximate cause of the failure of most regimes.) This created a very difficult situation for Gorbachev, who was skilled at political maneuvering, but had to satisfy a powerful segment of the elite who had come to view the reforms as a mistake, while simultaneously accelerating those same reforms in the futile hope they would begin to yield fruit.

Increasingly desperate, Gorbachev tried to reduce centralization to increase efficiency, by eroding the power of the Central Committee of the Party, but he failed to see that the power of the Party across the entire Soviet Union came from being the necessary, central, unifying entity, and any devolution, especially to the supposedly federal republics, especially to Russia itself, would be fatal to Communist power. The Party was redundant to other state institutions, true, but it was essential for the Soviet Union to continue as it was. Yes, Gorbachev maintained sole control of the KGB and the military—but that was "no substitute for the Party," even if the Party's leadership had tried to use the secret police or military force to restrain the centripetal forces Gorbachev had released, which they did not. (As Malcolm Kyeyune has pointed out, the secret police in any regime are always feared, but they exist to inform the rulers, not to independently ensure the continuation of the rulers, and if the rulers lose their nerve, the secret police invariably disperse.)

The end began in Eastern Europe, in 1989. The hows and whys are covered in Kotkin's *Uncivil Society*, but from the Western perspective, the key question was why the snowballing process was not stopped by Soviet military force. In part, the Soviet military was simply not kept informed or involved, and thus in practice could do nothing. And internally, Gorbachev successfully sold the loss of Eastern Europe as necessary for the reform and continued supremacy of Soviet Communism. This may seem like an odd sale, giving up all the Soviet Union's hard-gotten gains of World War II in exchange for nothing very specific, but it worked because everyone agreed that things could not continue as they were. No surprise, the process very soon took on a life of its own.

All such efforts to reform dying regimes have the whiff of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, and this was no different. Gorbachev's frequent zigs and zags, as he reacted to events leaving him behind, made the process seem even less coherent than it was. Most dramatically of all, the devolution of authority meant that the Russian Republic got its own President, in the person of Boris Yeltsin, who began openly competing with Gorbachev for preeminence.

None of the Communist elite wanted to break up the Soviet Union. (Unlike in the fall of some regimes, here was neither a counter-elite nor a new elite that arose after fracture; there was only ever the Soviet elite, which for the most part retained power.) But in August of 1991, an incompetent group tried to end the process of *perestroika*, in a clownish attempt at a putsch. As with most coup attempts, there were too many chiefs (many of them drunk), and not enough Indians, along with a great deal of the rank incompetence that typically characterizes the leadership of dying regimes, and the coup rapidly failed. Gorbachev, carried along by the currents he had unleashed, simply continued to preside over the liquidation of the entire Soviet system.

Very soon it became a rout. It was always going to be this way, Kotkin says. Reform became repudiation because there was no limiting principle when the ideas of "popular consent and positive content" in Communism became more than what they had always been, mere lip service. The illusion that reform was possible made possible what was thought impossible—the "top-down, self-dismantling of the system." (Kotkin also heaps contempt on the idea that the West, whether Ronald Reagan or anybody else, had any relevance to, or part in causing, Soviet collapse.) Legally, the Soviet Union ended on Christmas Day, 1991, but even before that, the *nomenklatura* had begun to take actions to position themselves favorably.

In a system such as the Soviet one, which combined opacity with central control that effectively devolved great authority to those lower down, this meant looting, which began and continued on a grand scale. Politically, most of the apparatchiks shuffled offices and continued exercising power. Kotkin repeatedly criticizes the idea that Western neo-liberalism or "shock therapy" caused the terrible situation of the new Russia in the 1990s. Rather, a combination of this looting, and the miserable condition of the industrial infrastructure of the country, which

made up such a large percentage of production, made mass suffering inevitable. It had nothing to do with "democrats" or "radical reformers," nor with well- or ill-meaning advice from the West. "Technocratic 'reform' *in some other country* is the opiate of experts and pundits." Kotkin notes this was an actual collapse, rather than a "societal overhaul," as the end of Communist regimes was in Eastern Europe. The country spiraled into the toilet, on every measure from GDP to life expectancy.

Kotkin, surprisingly, never really answers his framing question, why Armageddon was averted. He's just glad it ended this way. He half-heartedly suggests it was "romanticism" on the part of Gorbachev and his generation. Maybe it was just dumb luck, and that those who could have resorted to violence were too old or too indecisive. After all, as we see all around us today, as a regime calcifies, those who have the most power often have the least competence, and it requires competence to execute a strategy to avoid defeat when it is staring you in the face. It was not that the elites saw their opportunity to profit by ending Communism and jumped to do so; they were all, or almost all, true believers, and the looting only began when it was clear that the gold rush was on. Nor did other horribles occur. No Russian scientist sold nuclear secrets, or nuclear material; I remember endless wailing about this possibility at the time. Maybe the world just got lucky. Maybe the Russian spirit, whatever exactly that is, prevented Armageddon. Maybe it was something else, some emergent property. Maybe God was watching over us. It is hard to say.

In the 1990s, a revolving door of Russian political leaders and their domestic economic advisors tried to put Russia back on a firm footing. Some steps forward were made, and at the same time new economic powers emerged in the form of those able to manipulate the rules of the new private enterprise and combine them with looting, creating the class of so-called oligarchs. It is often alleged that the oligarchs looted Russia in cooperation with, and to the benefit of, Western interests, and Putin's ending of this cozy rape of the average Russian is part of the reason for his enduring popularity. Kotkin, however, does not discuss this at length, except to note how Western banks eagerly helped move money out of Russia. (I suspect he is downplaying Western involvement in the events that led to Putin's rise, which other authors have covered in detail, though why, I have no idea.) Meanwhile, none of the promised

benefits of capitalism, many of which depended on institutions and reliable rules that did not exist, emerged.

When he sticks to facts, Kotkin's analysis is persuasive. But his analysis of the 1990s suffers from his inability to recognize the defects of so-called liberalism, a defect that also mars his *Uncivil Society*. He assumes that the goal of any polity should be to have more liberalism, a "liberal order," by which he means what is today generally called "liberal democracy." As Ryszard Legutko has ably demonstrated, what the West today calls liberal democracy is neither liberal nor democratic, and in fact is closely aligned to Communism, which is why former Eastern European Communists were so successful politically in the 1990s and 2000s. Worse, Kotkin actually directly and repeatedly states that "the liberal order [means] the rule of law." The rule of law has nothing to do with liberalism, or supposed democracy, and long predates the Enlightenment.

Russia in the 1990s definitely did not have the rule of law. Practically anything could be bought and sold. The KGB, for example, primarily became a freelance spying and extortion outfit. Kotkin calls this system "democratic but not liberal," but that is not the relevant dichotomy. It is rather "democratic without the rule of law," something Americans are increasingly experiencing firsthand, and the inevitable end state of all mass democracy. He furthermore says that liberalism means "not just representative government but effective government." You should not read this book for insights into political philosophy.

In any case, in the end, what Russia needed was not a different culture, but the right institutions. Which it ultimately got, at least some form of them. What Kotkin did not foresee, although he notes the stabilization of the Russian economy under Putin, is that Russia would gain ground economically against the entire West (and probably far more ground than is commonly granted, given that Western GDP statistics are based on fantasies, and the Russian economy is based on real production—although Russia does have many economic structural problems, still, among them low productivity, in part due to pervasive corruption). "Russians did not love Putin per se. They loved Putin's Russia. They loved being middle class. They loved planning for the future." Moreover, "[A]nalysts who continued to attribute Russia's boom to the dumb luck of sky-high oil prices needed to spend a weekend in Nigeria, where they should inquire about the middle-class bonanza." Ha ha. It is today largely

impossible to get any provably reliable English-language information on Russia, but it does seem evident these trends have increased. As a result, support for Putin continues to be very high, and has only increased since the inception of the Russo-Ukraine War, no doubt helped by the total failure of the sanctions the West has tried to impose on Russia, and the continuing restoration of Russian pride. Nor did Kotkin foresee the reemergence of Russia as a Great Power. How great we will see, but Russia's looming triumph in the war suggests greater than anyone would have thought a few years ago. But perhaps foreseeing any of these changes fifteen or twenty years ago would be too much to ask.

And what does this mean for us, who also live under a gerontocratic regime holding on by its fingertips, although our own regime ideology, Late-Stage Leftism, is much more intrusive and evil than was European Communism in its final stages? (Our Regime holds, for example, more political prisoners than did the Soviet Union at its end, and the powers of its secret police could only be dreamed of by the KGB.) With us, the possibility of "reform" is less obvious to all, because there is no obvious competition with a superior economic system, and we seem to be rich, even with a visibly fraying social fabric. We appear therefore to be at a dead end, with no turn possible to either side. True, we only seem rich, because our system is largely fake, supported by endless money-printing made possible by the dollar being the reserve currency of the world. But even if our elites saw the danger and tried to reform the system, they could not, any more than Gorbachev could.

But a static dead end when the road runs out is an illusion; we will get collapse of the Regime, whether or not there is any attempt at reform (which there won't be). I don't think the end of our Regime will lead to the same suffering Russia experienced. There is still tremendous American productivity and will, and although a huge percentage of jobs, especially in the email class, are purely parasitical, America has enough wherewithal to quickly put those people, and those who don't even pretend to have jobs, to productive work. On the other hand, our own elites see very clearly there is no way out, no exit ramp such as the Soviet elite took. When their power fails, they will not be forgiven. If they avoid prison and exile, or worse, they will likely have their wealth confiscated, and they will most definitely not be able to profit in the new order. This increases the chances they will, like Samson, try to pull

down the roof of the temple on the heads of all citizens, something the Soviet Union avoided. I'm betting, however, that they're too stupid and incompetent to do even that—though there may well be more immediate damage to America than during the fall of the Soviet Union. If so, that'll be too bad, but almost any price is not too high a price to pay to destroy the Regime which now rules the West, so that we can get our civilization back, or begin a new civilization, having wiped clean the errors of the old.