



## *The End of the Cold War, 1985–1991* by Robert Service.

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In just six years, the Soviet Union went from an acknowledged superpower to a bankrupt state that disintegrated into its component republics. Mikhail Gorbachev, the sincere Marxist who labored to reform the USSR and end the threat of nuclear war, ultimately presided over the death of Marxist regimes not only in his own country, but in most of its former allies. This process led directly to the current world situation, as relations between Washington and Moscow first improved markedly and then soured, while various regional conflicts, long suppressed by the bipolarity of the Cold War, re-emerged in full force.

Robert Service, professor of Russian history at Oxford University, has excellent credentials to reassess the diplomatic and political aspects of this change. Among a vast parade of characters, he concentrates on what he calls “the Big Four”—Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, Secretary of State George Shultz, and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. To this group, one must add George H.W. Bush and James Baker, who succeeded Reagan and Shultz in the final stages of this story; indeed, Service attributes the demise of the USSR chiefly to the priorities and personalities of the President George H.W. Bush administration.

Service concludes that the Kremlin did, in fact, understand the weakness of its economic position well before Gorbachev came to power in 1985. The pressing need to radically restructure the Soviet economy and especially its military-industrial complex made Gorbachev’s reforms both necessary and possible. Unfortunately, Soviet leaders hesitated to abandon the centralized economy that was the only system they understood.

Two factors made this reluctance fatal for the Soviet regime. First, Reagan and Bush and their administrations demanded so much change so fast vis-à-vis nuclear weapons, human rights, and coercive government that they invalidated the basic justifications for the existence of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact. Second, Gorbachev and his fellow reformers believed too deeply in the system that had raised them up. American diplomat Dick Combs has perceptively observed<sup>1</sup> that most Soviet officials genuinely believed in their own ideology, while many citizens of the USSR and its satellites only paid lip service to it.

By a kind of Soviet exceptionalism, Gorbachev and others like him thought their system was so essentially desirable and popular that they could eliminate the coercive aspects of the Soviet system without destroying its basic fabric. Thus, Service portrays Gorbachev as unaware of the universal Polish hatred of strongman Wojciech Jaruzelski (316) and limited by “the thought-curbing premise that it was only right and proper that Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia should remain as Soviet republics” (452). Some of Gorbachev’s colleagues flatly denied that the Baltic States had been forced to join the union. The ethnic Georgian Shevardnadze understood the republics’ aspirations for national independence and democracy, but could not convince Gorbachev of those realities. Nor, given his blind

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1. *Inside the Soviet Alternate Universe: The Cold War’s End and the Soviet Union’s Fall Reappraised* (University Park: Penn State U Pr, 2008) 51–53.

faith in the rectitude of the Soviet system, could Gorbachev grasp that Western leaders saw his disarmament proposals as an elaborate ruse.

This collective self-delusion was exacerbated by Soviet leaders' reliance on their own obviously distorted published figures concerning defense and the economy. Thus, the number of nuclear warheads and the size of the military budget were understated even in internal memoranda, causing considerable confusion:

Even [Chief of the General Staff Marshal Sergei] Akhromeev, no enthusiast for the end of secrecy, admitted that something was wrong: "Well, you understand that any Supreme Soviet deputy can ask our General Secretary how we with so small a military budget can stand up to the USA with so huge a military budget. And here's us saying that we do everything on the basis of parity [with the Americans]. Who's going to believe us?" ... Years of obfuscation had to be surmounted. It transpired that the traditional budget specified only expenditure on military personnel. Research and production were hidden under misleading headings. [Central Committee Secretary] Vadim Medvedev [not to be confused with D.A. Medvedev, currently prime minister] was to recall that four or five individuals alone received data on the true costs. As the reform of account-keeping proceeded it emerged the armed forces cost not five but at least sixteen per cent of the state's financial burden—and Medvedev guessed that the real figure was around twenty-five per cent. (281–82)

Such confusion, together with each side's misperceptions of its counterparts, made negotiating arms reduction and an end to confrontation nearly impossible. The author portrays the defense ministers and generals on both sides as resisting the process, remaining suspicious of their adversaries and bound by traditional definitions of national security. Reagan's defense secretary, Caspar Weinberger, appears as more consistent and influential than his Soviet counterparts. Just prior to the 1985 Geneva summit meeting, Weinberger allegedly leaked a memorandum on his reasons for opposing arms reductions. Although that gambit failed, Service writes that Reagan was torn between the respective positions of his secretaries of state and defense, which delayed acceptance of Gorbachev's offers. Still, he concludes, Weinberger's determination to deploy the fruits of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) helped Shevardnadze convince Gorbachev to be more flexible, thereby furthering the arms control negotiations.

By contrast, Soviet military leaders were obligated by their system to bow to their leader's wishes. When Marshal Akhromeev resisted exposing the weakness of Soviet Army units to western inspections, Gorbachev ordered him to travel to Stockholm and speak in favor of the inspections. After Akhromeev retired due to ill health, he continued as a military advisor to the reformers. As the system shriveled in 1990, Akhromeev lamented that, after seventy years of effort, the Americans had succeeded in destroying the Soviet Union. Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh astutely replied, "It's not they who have destroyed it but we ourselves" (437).

Service is a sure-footed guide to the convoluted workings of the Soviet system. Though he tries to describe the role of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, he concludes that Britain, like other US allies, had little influence on the Soviet-American strategic negotiations. West German chancellor Helmut Kohl was a partial exception. Most historians acknowledge Kohl's shrewd performance in negotiating the peaceful reunification of his nation, albeit at the heavy cost of accepting the 1945 Oder-Neisse boundary. In Service's account, however, Kohl appears as the only Westerner willing to provide financial credits to a floundering Gorbachev, sweetening the bitter pill of having to withdraw Soviet forces from a reunified Germany. This at a time when President Bush was consistently refusing to help the Soviet leader, even at the risk of losing him as a negotiating partner. "At the moment of its reunification, Germany had ceased to be the Kremlin's supplicant and become its lender of last resort" (451). The price of this aid, however, was accepting a reunited but limited Germany, which removed

the major security concern of Gorbachev's Eastern European partners and made the Warsaw Pact superfluous.

In such a monumental work of synthesis, it is no surprise that a few, very minor, errors appear. For example, Lt. Gen. William Odom,<sup>2</sup> the US Army's brilliant Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence and later director of the National Security Agency, is misidentified as working for the CIA (26). Service also says too little about certain pertinent military topics, for instance Gorbachev's failed 1987 plan to respond to the American SDI by authorizing an attempt to orbit the Polyus battle station.<sup>3</sup> But such matters, strictly speaking, lie outside the author's central concerns.

*The End of the Cold War* is a marvel of tightly reasoned elucidation of the political and diplomatic events that transpired between Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in 1985 and his resignation on 31 December 1991. Robert Service's excellent, highly readable book now constitutes the best single account of the epochal transformation of the twentieth-century world order.

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2. Author of *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1998).

3. See Mike Gruntman, *Intercept 1961: The Birth of Soviet Missile Defense* (Reston, VA: American Inst of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 2015) 7–8, 248–49.