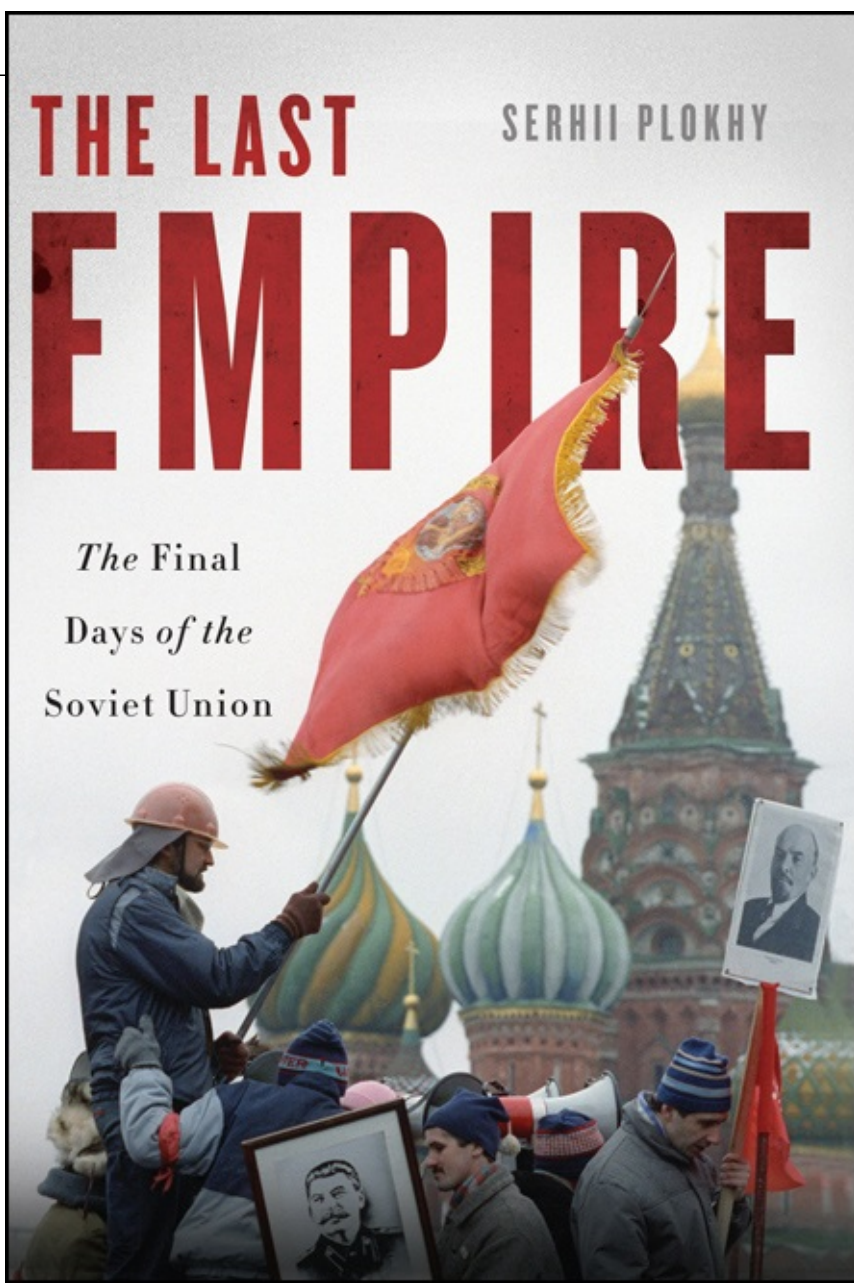


THE LAST

SERHII PLOKHY

EMPIRE

*The Final
Days of the
Soviet Union*



THE LAST EMPIRE

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of the Soviet Union*

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To the children of empires who set themselves free

Maps

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IT WAS A CHRISTMAS GIFT that few expected to receive. Against the dark evening sky, over the heads of tourists on Red Square in Moscow, above the rifles of the honor guard marching toward Lenin's mausoleum, and behind the brick walls of the Kremlin, the red banner of the Soviet Union was run down the flagpole of the Senate Building, the seat of the Soviet government and until recently the symbol of world communism. Tens of millions of television viewers all around the world who watched the scene on Christmas Day 1991 could hardly believe their eyes. On the same day, CNN presented a live broadcast of the resignation speech of the first and last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev. The Soviet Union was no more.

What had just happened? The first to give an answer to that question was the president of the United States, George H. W. Bush. On the evening of December 25, soon after CNN and other networks broadcast Gorbachev's speech and the image of the red banner being lowered at the Kremlin, Bush went on television to explain to his compatriots the meaning of the picture they had seen, the news they had heard, and the gift they had received. He interpreted Mikhail Gorbachev's resignation and the lowering of the Soviet flag as a victory in the war that America had fought against communism for more than forty years. Furthermore, Bush associated the collapse of communism with the end of the Cold War and congratulated the American people on the victory of their values. He used the word "victory" three times in three consecutive sentences. A few weeks later, in his State of the Union address, Bush referred to the implosion of the Soviet Union in a year that had seen "changes almost biblical proportions," declared that "by the grace of God, America won the Cold War," and announced the dawning of a new world order. "A world once divided into two armed camps," Bush told the joint session of the US Senate and House of Representatives, "now recognizes one sole and preeminent power, the United States of America." The audience exploded in applause.¹

For more than forty years, the United States and the Soviet Union had indeed been locked in a global struggle that by sheer chance did not end in a nuclear holocaust. Generations of Americans were born into a world that seemed permanently divided into two warring camps, one symbolized by the red banner atop the Kremlin and the other by the Stars and Stripes over the Capitol. Those who went to school in the 1950s still remembered the nuclear alarm drills and the advice to hide under their desks in case of a nuclear explosion. Hundreds of thousands of Americans fought and tens of thousands died in wars that were supposed to stop the advance of communism, first in the mountains of Korea and then in the jungles of Vietnam. Generations of intellectuals were divided over the issue of whether Alger Hiss spied for the Soviets, and Hollywood remained traumatized for decades by the witch hunt for communists unleashed by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Only a few years before the Soviet collapse, the streets of New York and other major American cities were rocked by demonstrations staged by proponents of nuclear disarmament that divided fathers and sons, pitting the young political activist Ron Reagan against his father, President Ronald Reagan. Americans and their Western allies fought numerous battles at home and abroad in a war that seemed to have no end. Now an adversary armed to the teeth, never having lost a single battle, lowered its flag and disintegrated into a dozen smaller states without so much as a shot being fired.

There was good reason to celebrate, but there was also something confusing, if not disturbing, about the president's readiness to claim victory in the Cold War on the day when Mikhail Gorbachev, Bush's and Ronald Reagan's principal ally in ending that war, submitted his resignation. Gorbachev

action put a symbolic if not legal end to the USSR (it had been formally dissolved by its constituent members four days earlier, on December 21), but the Cold War was never about the dismemberment of the USSR. Besides, President Bush's speech to the nation on December 25, 1991, and his State of the Union address in January 1992 contradicted the administration's earlier statements about the Cold War having ended not in confrontation with Gorbachev but in cooperation with him. The earliest such pronouncement was made at the summit of the two leaders on Malta in December 1989. The most recent one was the statement released by the White House a few hours before Bush's Christmas speech. It praised Gorbachev's cooperation: "Working with President Reagan, myself, and other allied leaders, President Gorbachev acted boldly and decisively to end the bitter divisions of the Cold War and contributed to the remaking of a Europe whole and free."²

Bush's Christmas address was a major departure from the way in which the president himself and the members of his administration had treated their erstwhile Soviet partner and assessed their ability to affect developments in the Soviet Union. Whereas Bush and his national security adviser, General Brent Scowcroft, had insisted publicly for most of 1991 that their influence was limited, they were now suddenly taking credit for the most dramatic development in Soviet domestic politics. This new interpretation, born in the midst of Bush's reelection campaign, gave rise to an influential, if not dominant, public narrative of the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the United States as the sole world superpower. That largely mythical narrative closely linked the end of the Cold War with the collapse of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. More important, it treated those developments as direct outcomes of US policies and, indeed, as major American victories.³

This book challenges the triumphalist interpretation of the Soviet collapse as an American victory in the Cold War. It does so in part on the basis of recently declassified documents from the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, including memoranda from his advisers and formerly secret transcripts of the president's telephone conversations with world leaders. These newly available documents show with unprecedented clarity that the president himself and many of his White House advisers did much to prolong the life of the Soviet Union, worried about the rise of the future Russian president Boris Yeltsin and the drives for independence by leaders of other Soviet republics, and, once the Soviet Union was gone, wanted Russia to become the sole owner of the Soviet nuclear arsenals and maintain its influence in the post-Soviet space, especially in the Central Asian republics.

Why did the leadership of a country allegedly locked in combat with a Cold War adversary adopt such a policy? The White House documents, combined with other types of sources, provide answers to this and many other relevant questions posed in this book. They show how Cold War-era political rhetoric clashed with realpolitik as the White House tried to save Gorbachev, whom it regarded as its main partner on the world stage. The White House was prepared to tolerate the continued existence of the Communist Party and the Soviet empire in order to achieve that goal. Its main concern was not victory in the Cold War, which was already effectively over, but the possibility of civil war in the Soviet Union. That would have threatened to turn the former tsarist empire into a "Yugoslavia with nukes," to use a term coined by newspaper reporters at the time. The nuclear age had changed the nature of great-power rivalry and the definition of victory and defeat, but not the rhetoric of the warrior's ethos or the thinking of the masses. The Bush administration had to square the circle by reconciling the language and thinking of the Cold War era with the geopolitical realities of its immediate aftermath. It did its best in that regard, but its actions far outshone its inconsistent rhetoric.

It is easy to understand (and sympathize with) the excitement of those involved in the events of late 1991 as they saw the red banner going down the Kremlin flagpole and recalled the sacrifices associated with American participation in the global rivalry with the Soviet Union. But it is no less

important today, almost a quarter of a century after those events, to take a more dispassionate look at what actually happened. The declaration of the fall of the USSR as an American victory in the Cold War helped create an exaggerated perception of the extent of American global power at the time when such perception mattered most, during the decade leading up to the 9/11 attacks and the start of the nine-year-long Iraq War. Inflated accounts of the American role in the collapse of the Soviet Union feed present-day Russian nationalist conspiracy theories, which present the collapse of the Soviet Union as the outcome of a CIA plot. Such interpretations not only appear in extremist Internet publications but also are voiced on major Russian television channels.⁴

My narrative provides a much more complex and potentially controversial picture of what actually occurred in the months leading up to the Soviet collapse than the popular image that exists today on both sides of the former Cold War divide. It also claims that the American world, which replaced the Cold War–era division of the globe into two rival camps, came into existence as much by chance as by design. It is important to revisit the origins of that world and the perceptions and actions of its creators, both deliberate and inadvertent, on both sides of the Atlantic if we are to understand what has gone wrong with it over the last decade and a half.

THIS BOOK LIFTS THE CURTAIN OF TIME on the dramatic events leading up to the lowering of the Soviet flag and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The concept of empire, which I include in the title of the book, is vital to my interpretation of the dramatic events of 1991. I join those political scientists and historians who argue that while the lost arms race, economic decline, democratic resurgence, and bankruptcy of communist ideals all contributed to the Soviet implosion, they did not predetermine the disintegration of the Soviet Union. That was caused by the imperial foundations, multiethnic composition, and pseudofederal structure of the Soviet state, features whose importance was fully recognized neither by American policy makers in Washington nor by Gorbachev's advisers in Moscow.

Although the Soviet Union was often called “Russia,” it was in fact a conglomerate of nationalities that Moscow secured through a combination of brute force and cultural concessions and ruled with an iron fist for most of the Soviet period. The Russians were de jure in charge of the largest republic by far, the Russian Federation, but there were fourteen others. Numbering close to 150 million, the Russians constituted only 51 percent of the total Soviet population. The Ukrainians were the second largest group, with more than 50 million people, accounting for close to 20 percent of the country's population.

The victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution allowed them to salvage the Russian Empire by turning it into a quasi-federal polity, at least with regard to its constitutional structure. This expedient prolonged the imperial history of Russia but did not allow it to escape the fate of other empires in the long run. By 1990 most of the Soviet republics had their own presidents, foreign ministers, and more or less democratically elected parliaments. Not until 1991 did the world finally comprehend that the Soviet Union was not Russia.⁵

I put the collapse of the USSR into the same category as the twentieth-century collapse of the world's major empires, including the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, British, French, and Portuguese. I call the Soviet Union the last empire not because I believe that there will be no empires in the future but because it was the last state that carried on the legacies of the “classical” European and Eurasian empires of the modern era. I approach the history of the Soviet collapse with the basic premise that imperial rule is incompatible with electoral democracy and that the conflict between them led to the fall of the world's last empire. Once Gorbachev introduced elements of electoral democracy in

Soviet politics in 1989, the newly elected politicians in Russia were suddenly empowered to say whether they were willing to continue bearing the burdens of empire, while the politicians in the non-Russian republics faced the question of whether they wanted to remain under imperial rule. Eventually, both groups answered in the negative.

The first to use the opportunity to say no were politicians in the Baltic states and western Ukraine—the parts of the Soviet Union forcibly incorporated into the USSR on the basis of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. The next were their counterparts in Russia and eastern Ukraine, which had belonged to the USSR before World War II. In the Baltics, Georgia, and Armenia, new democratic leaders pushed for independence. In the rest of the republics, the old elites hung to power, but with Gorbachev withdrawing the center's support from its regional viceroys and making their political survival dependent on democratic election, they began making deals with rising democratic forces—development that eventually led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union along the borders established for its fifteen republics.⁶

My narrative focuses on five months—late July to late December of 1991—that literally changed the world as critical decisions were made on the fate of the USSR. It was in late July, a few days before George H. W. Bush's visit to Moscow to sign a historic arms reduction treaty with Gorbachev, that the Soviet president reached a fateful agreement with Boris Yeltsin on reforming the Soviet Union—an agreement that would trigger the August coup of 1991. In late December, Gorbachev's resignation as president made the Soviet collapse final. While many academic and nonacademic writers have covered the history of the Soviet collapse, they have all but ignored the crucial period between the August coup and Gorbachev's resignation in December. Some of these authors subscribe, consciously or implicitly, to the proposition that the elimination of the Communist Party after the coup automatically meant the end of the Soviet Union—a misleading assumption, as I show in this book. By the time of the August coup, the party could hold nothing together, including itself. The Soviet Union was wounded during the coup and its aftermath but continued to exist for another few months. It is the period analyzed in this book—the fall and early winter of 1991—that determined what would happen to its constituent parts and, no less important, to its nuclear arsenals.⁷

In his insightful studies of the Soviet collapse and the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe, Stephen Kotkin focuses attention on “uncivil society”—the communist elites that ruled the inner and outer Soviet empires before deciding to abandon the communist experiment. It has been argued that the Soviet Union, like the Romanov empire before it, collapsed from the top and that the disintegration of the Soviet state was initiated and carried out by the elites, both in the center and the regions. Indeed, there were no angry crowds in the streets demanding the dissolution of the USSR. The collapse of the former superpower also turned out to be surprisingly peaceful, especially in the four nuclear republics—Russia, Ukraine, Belarus (Belorussia), and Kazakhstan—which played a decisive role in the disintegration of the USSR. The fate of the USSR was decided, in the last analysis, in high offices. It was decided in the midst of a political struggle that involved major political figures in both East and West—a battle of nerves and a test of diplomatic skills. The stakes were enormous, involving the political and, in some cases, even physical survival of those involved.⁸

At the center of the events of 1991 were several individuals whom I consider most responsible for that dramatic but also peaceful turn in the history of the world. My narrative is not unipolar, as the world became after 1991, or even bipolar, as it was during the Cold War, but rather multipolar, as the world has been for most of its history and is probably becoming again, with the rise of China and the development of political and economic problems in the United States. I take note of decisions made

not only in Washington and Moscow but also in Kyiv, Almaty (previously Alma-Ata, renamed in 1993), and capitals of other Soviet republics that would soon become independent. My main characters are four political leaders who arguably had the greatest impact on what happened to the Soviet Union and, following its collapse, on the world at large.

I tell my story by following the actions and trying to uncover the motivations of President George H. W. Bush of the United States, the cautious and often humble leader of the Western world, whose backing of Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev and insistence on the security of the nuclear arsenal prolonged the existence of the empire but also ensured its peaceful demise; Boris Yeltsin, the boorish and rebellious leader of Russia, who almost singlehandedly defeated the coup and then refused to take the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević's route of saving the crumbling empire or revising existing Russian borders; Leonid Kravchuk, the shrewd leader of Ukraine, whose insistence on his country's independence doomed the Union; and, last but not least, Mikhail Gorbachev, the man at the center of events who had the most to gain or lose from the way they turned out. He lost it all—prestige, power, and country. Gorbachev's personal drama—the story of a leader who dragged his country out of its totalitarian past, opened it to the world, introduced democratic procedures, and initiated economic reform, changing his homeland and the world around him to such an extent that there was no place left for him—is at the center of my narrative.

My main argument is closely linked to the idea that the fate of the Soviet Union was decided in the last four months of its existence, between the coup that began on August 19 and the meeting of the leaders of the Soviet republics in Almaty on December 21, 1991. I argue that the most important factor in deciding the future of the last world empire was not the policy of the United States, the conflict between the Union center and Russia (respectively represented by Gorbachev and Yeltsin), or tensions between the Union center and other republics, but rather the relationship between the two largest Soviet republics, Russia and Ukraine. It was the unwillingness of their political elites to find a modus vivendi within one state structure that drove the final nail into the coffin of the Soviet Union.

On December 8, in a hunting lodge in the Belarusian forest of Belavezha, having failed to reach an agreement on the basis of Gorbachev's proposed template for the creation of a new Union, Yeltsin and Kravchuk decided to dissolve the USSR and opt instead for the creation of a Commonwealth of Independent States. The Belarusian leaders who played host to the two presidents in Belavezha did not imagine the Union without Russia. Neither did the presidents of the Central Asian republics, who had no choice but to follow suit. A Gorbachev-led Union without Russia or Ukraine did not appeal to anyone. George H. W. Bush contributed to the dissolution of the world's last empire mainly by helping to ensure that the process occurred without major conflict or proliferation of nuclear arms.

In the two decades that have passed since the fall of the Soviet Union, many of the principals in my story have published their memoirs. These include books by George H. W. Bush, Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and Leonid Kravchuk, as well as the recollections of their advisers and other participants. While the stories told by eyewitnesses and participants in the events contain a wealth of information and some make for interesting reading, they often fail to present the big picture and explain the full meaning of the events they describe. Journalistic accounts, which are indispensable for grasping the mood of the time and the feelings of the main actors and people in the street, appeared at a time when confidential documents were still unavailable to the public and participants at the highest levels were reluctant to talk. I have overcome these limitations of many of my predecessors by supplementing their accounts with material drawn from interviews with participants in the events and, most important, with archival documents, which have become available only recently.

As noted above, this book takes advantage of recently declassified American documents made available to scholars through the George Bush Presidential Library. These include National Security Council files, the correspondence of White House officials responsible for the president's travels abroad, and transcripts of meetings and telephone conversations conducted by President Bush, some of which I acquired through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Combined with other primary sources from the National Archives in Washington, the James A. Baker Papers at Princeton, and the Gorbachev Foundation in Moscow, these new materials allow me to tell the story of the Soviet collapse with a degree of detail unmatched by earlier writers. I was fortunate enough to interview some of the individuals involved personally, including Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine and Stanislav Shushkevich of Belarus.

The historical sources that I consulted in writing this book helped answer many "how" questions and quite a few "why" questions. My answers to the second set of queries generally began with an attempt to grasp the ideological, cultural, and personal motives of the leaders at the center of the narrative and learn the information that informed their decisions. I hope that my discussion of both sets of questions will not only shed light on the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union but also help explain the chronic difficulties of the two principal stakeholders in the Union, Russia and Ukraine, in finding a *modus vivendi* after 1991. I also hope that this book will prove useful to readers trying to understand the involvement of the United States in the Soviet collapse and the role that America should play in a world still largely shaped by decisions made back in 1991. Misunderstanding the reasons for the fall of a rival empire may very well result not only in imperial hubris but also in the decline of one's own empire, whether it uses that name as a self-description or not.

I.

THE LAST SUMMIT

MEETING IN MOSCOW

A SUMMIT IS THE TOP OF A MOUNTAIN. The word has also been used to denote a supreme achievement, but it was not until 1953 that it entered the vocabulary of diplomacy. That year, after two brave mountain climbers finally conquered Everest, Winston Churchill spoke in the British parliament of a will to peace “at the summit of the nations.” Two years later, when the word was applied to the meeting of Soviet and Western leaders in Geneva, it gained popularity. The world of international politics badly needed a new term for diplomatic meetings at the highest level, which had become an important feature of international relations since the 1930s. “Summit” fit the bill. Although rulers had met to discuss mutual relations since time immemorial, such meetings were quite rare before the age of air travel. The airplane not only revolutionized warfare but also had the same effect on diplomacy, which aimed to prevent war. And so diplomacy took to the skies.

Modern summitry was born in September 1938, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of Britain flew to Germany to try to convince Adolf Hitler not to attack Czechoslovakia. In the course of World War II, Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin gave a new boost to the practice of personal diplomacy, which did not yet have a proper name. Summitry reached its peak during the Cold War, as meetings between Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy, and then Leonid Brezhnev and Richard Nixon, captured the attention of the world media, but it was not until the very end of the conflict that the Soviets adopted the Western term for their own use. In the summer of 1991, in a dramatic shift symptomatic of larger political and ideological changes in Moscow and around the world, Soviet newspapers dropped their preferred term, “a meeting at the highest level” and replaced it with the English “summit.” This was a pyrrhic victory for a term that would virtually disappear from international relations within the next decade.¹

The “meeting at the highest level” for which the Soviets had changed their diplomatic terminology was scheduled to take place on July 30 and 31, 1991, between the forty-first president of the United States, George Herbert Walker Bush, and the first president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev. The summit was long in preparation, but its final date was decided a few short weeks before the event. Until the very end, Soviet and American experts found it difficult to iron out every last detail of the historic treaty that the two presidents were going to sign in Moscow. Bush wanted to do so as soon as possible. No one knew how long Gorbachev would remain in the Kremlin and how long the opportunity to reach agreement would last.

The Bush-Gorbachev meeting in Moscow was presented by the White House to the media as the first post-Cold War summit. What George H. W. Bush was going to sign with Mikhail Gorbachev was a treaty that was supposed to launch the two superpowers into a new era of mutual trust and cooperation, starting with issues as sensitive as nuclear weapons. START I, or the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which was finally ready for signature after nine years of negotiations, called for the reduction of overall nuclear arsenals by roughly 30 percent and of Soviet intercontinental missiles largely aimed at the United States, by up to 50 percent. In the forty-seven-page treaty, accompanied by

seven hundred pages of protocols, the two presidents would agree not just to curb the arms race but also to begin reversing it.²

The confrontation between the world's two most powerful countries, which began soon after World War II and had brought the planet to the brink of nuclear Armageddon, was now all but over. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, German reunification under way, and Mikhail Gorbachev adopting the "Sinatra doctrine," which allowed Moscow's East European clients to "do their way" and eventually leave the Kremlin's embrace, the conflict at the core of the Cold War was resolved. Soviet troops began to leave East Germany and other countries of the region. But the nuclear arsenals were virtually unaffected by these changes in the political climate. The famous Russian playwright Anton Chekhov once remarked that if there was a gun onstage in the first act of a play, it would be fired in the next. The two superpowers had placed plenty of nuclear arms on the world stage. Sooner or later there would be a second act involving different actors who might want to fire them.

Nuclear arms were an integral element of the Cold War, responsible both for its most dangerous turns and for the fact that the two superpowers, the first to possess atomic weapons, never entered into a direct, open conflict—the risk of nuclear annihilation was too great. With a divided Germany at the center of the Cold War geopolitical contest, the United States, which acquired the atomic bomb in the summer of 1945, felt safe in the face of the overwhelming preponderance of Soviet conventional forces in Central and Eastern Europe, occupied and then subjected to communist rule by Joseph Stalin. But if the Americans felt safe, the Soviets did not. They intensified their efforts to acquire an atomic bomb, and in 1949, with the help of technological secrets stolen from the United States, they succeeded in producing their own nuclear weapon.

The world now had two nuclear powers, and, if the Korean War was an indication of things to come, they were on a collision course. They tried to outdo each other by developing a new generation of nuclear arms. In the 1950s both countries acquired the hydrogen bomb, far more powerful and much more difficult to control than the atomic bomb. When the Soviets put Sputnik into orbit in the fall of 1957, demonstrating that they had missiles capable of delivering bombs to the United States, the world entered a new and significantly more dangerous stage of rivalry between the two superpowers. After Stalin's death in 1953, his successors were more open to the possibility of dialogue with the West, but, riding high on recent Soviet successes in missile technology (they were the first to put an unmanned satellite and then a manned one into orbit), they were often unpredictable and thus even more dangerous than their predecessor.

Under Khrushchev and Kennedy, the two powers found themselves on the brink of nuclear war over the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba in October 1962. By that time, Soviet-American competition extended around the globe. It had begun over the fate of Eastern Europe, captured and never released by the Soviets, and spread to Asia when China went communist in 1949 and Korea was permanently divided a few years later. The crumbling of the British and French empires in the 1950s opened the rest of Asia and Africa to great-power competition, and once Cuba under Fidel Castro turned to the Soviet Union for military assistance and ideological inspiration, Latin America also became a battleground.

The Cuban crisis of October 1962 was resolved by compromise—the Soviets agreed to remove their missiles from Cuba and the Americans theirs from Turkey—but both Kennedy and Khrushchev were shaken by the experience. Something had to be done to reduce tensions and the danger of nuclear war. In 1963 the two leaders signed the first accord to bring the nuclear arms race under control—the Limited Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty. It had taken eight years to negotiate such a document, and the beginning was modest indeed, but it was a step in the right direction. From then on, while continuing

to compete globally and fighting proxy wars throughout the world, from Vietnam to Angola, the two superpowers kept negotiating to reduce their nuclear arsenals, finding solace in the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD), according to which both countries had enough weapons to wipe each other off the face of the earth and were thus obliged to negotiate in order to survive.

Nixon flew to Moscow in May 1972 to sign SALT I—the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty—with Brezhnev, and President Jimmy Carter flew to Vienna in 1979 to sign SALT II with the same leader. Both treaties placed caps on the production of nuclear weapons. But SALT II was quickly followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the American boycott of the Moscow Summer Olympic Games a year later. The next American president, Ronald Reagan, wanted to restore the spirits and international standing of the United States after the Vietnam debacle. In the Soviet Union, the death of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982 unleashed a succession crisis in the Kremlin. International tensions rose, threatening for the first time since the early 1960s to turn the Cold War into a hot one.

On September 1, 1983, near Sakhalin Island, the Soviets shot down a South Korean airliner with 269 people aboard, including a sitting member of the US Congress. They then awaited American retaliation. Later that month, Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov of the Soviet Air Defense Force Command near Moscow saw a blip on his radar screen indicating a missile headed toward the USSR. Then he saw what appeared to be four more missiles headed in the same direction. Suspecting computer malfunction, he did not report the image to his superiors. Had he done so, nuclear war between the two powers might well have become a reality. It turned out that a rare alignment of sunlight and clouds had caused a glitch in the Soviet early-warning system. Petrov was later celebrated as a hero. However, what impelled him to help save the world from nuclear war was not belief that the Americans would not strike first but his conviction that an American assault would start with hundreds of missiles, not one or four. After what became known as the Petrov incident, the Soviets continued to await an American attack.⁴

In November of the same year, the Soviets mistook the Able Archer NATO exercises in Europe for preparations leading up to nuclear war. All their spy stations abroad were placed on high alert to detect signs of the coming Armageddon. That same month, 100 million Americans watched the premiere of *The Day After*, a made-for-TV film in which the inhabitants of Lawrence, Kansas, cope with a nuclear attack. Many credited the film with changing the tone of President Reagan's rhetoric toward the Soviet Union. Whereas in March 1983 he had referred to the USSR as an "evil empire," in January 1984 he made his famous "Ivan and Anya" speech, talking about the desire of the Soviet and American peoples to live in peace. "Just suppose with me for a moment," Reagan told a surprised nation in January 1984, "that an Ivan and an Anya could find themselves, say, in a waiting room, or sharing a shelter from the rain or a storm with a Jim and Sally, and there was no language barrier to keep them from getting acquainted. Would they then debate the differences between their respective governments? Or would they find themselves comparing notes about their children and what each other did for a living?"⁵

IT TOOK MORE THAN A CHANGE OF RHETORIC to switch the focus of Soviet-American relations from the interests of the superpowers to those of ordinary people. George H. W. Bush knew that better than anyone else. For a good part of the Cold War he had helped make American policy toward the Soviet Union, often holding positions of the utmost responsibility. Born in June 1924 to the family of a US senator in the American Northeast, the young Bush joined the US Navy on hearing the news about Pearl Harbor, postponing his studies at Yale. At the age of nineteen, he became the youngest naval aviator in the American forces and flew fifty-eight combat missions in the course of the war. I

January 1945, while on leave from his duties in the Pacific, he married the nineteen-year-old Barbara Pierce, who became the mother of his six children. Their first child, the future US president George Walker Bush, was born in 1946, while George senior was studying economics at Yale. After completing the four-year program in two and a half years, the elder Bush, unexpectedly for a man of his origins and upbringing, moved his family to Texas to start a career in the oil business. By the time he turned to politics in the mid-1960s, he was already the millionaire president of an oil company specializing in offshore drilling.

George Bush's international career began at the dawn of détente in Soviet-American relations. In 1971, President Nixon appointed the forty-five-year-old former Republican congressman from Houston to serve as US representative to the United Nations. With his patron out of office in the wake of the Watergate scandal, Bush found himself in the role of chief architect of the US-Chinese rapprochement initiated by Nixon. He spent fourteen months as head of the US liaison office in Beijing, helping to build an alliance then aimed primarily against the USSR. In 1976, Bush returned to Washington to head the Central Intelligence Agency, where he presided over US covert operations in Angola directed against the Cuban-backed government of Angola's first president, Agostinho Neto. As director of the Council on Foreign Relations between 1977 and 1979, Bush witnessed from the front row the deterioration of Soviet-American relations during the last years of Jimmy Carter's administration.

In 1981, George H. W. Bush became the forty-third vice president of his country. The man at the top of his ticket, Ronald Reagan, dramatically raised the level of anti-Soviet rhetoric in Washington. He built up American military capability and boosted the nation's morale in the wake of the Vietnam debacle and the economic crisis of the late 1970s. But Reagan was also looking for a Soviet leader with whom he could negotiate the reduction of both sides' nuclear arsenals. It was a frustrating search as the Soviet leaders kept dying on him. Soon after Reagan came up with his START initiative, Leonid Brezhnev died in November 1982. His successor, the former KGB chief Yuri Andropov, followed suit in February 1984. Finally, Andropov's successor, Konstantin Chernenko, passed away in March 1985. Representing his country at the funerals of the Soviet leaders, George Bush became a frequent guest in Moscow in the 1980s. At home he became known as a man with a motto: "You die, I fly." It was at Chernenko's funeral, in March 1985, that Bush first met and greeted a new Soviet leader, the fifty-four-year-old Mikhail Gorbachev.⁶

In July 1991 Bush came to Moscow as chief executive for the first time—he had won the presidency in 1988. He came not to attend another funeral but to negotiate with a vital and energetic Soviet counterpart. Much had changed in the USSR in the intervening period. "Since my last visit in 1985, we've witnessed the opening of Europe and the end of a world polarized by suspicion," read a speech prepared by the president's staff for the signing of a new treaty to reduce nuclear arsenals. "That year, Mikhail Gorbachev assumed leadership of the Soviet Union, put many monumental changes into motion. He began instituting reforms that basically changed the world. And in the United States, everyone now knows at least two Russian words: glasnost and perestroika. And here everyone appreciates the English word: democracy."⁷

George Bush was accompanied on his trip to Moscow by his wife, Barbara, a sixty-six-year-old woman with silver-gray hair, and members of his staff. As is always the case with eastward transatlantic flights, passengers lose both sleep and time: Moscow time is eight hours ahead of Washington. On the flight over, Bush tried to catch up on time if not sleep by reading the papers his staff had prepared for him in the days leading up to the summit. Landing at Sheremetevo International airport on the warm Moscow evening of July 29, George and Barbara Bush were greeted by Mikhail Gorbachev's new

appointed vice president, Gennadii Yanaev. This was Bush and Yanaev's first meeting, and in the course of his brief three-day visit to the USSR, the president grew to like his modest and unpretentious host, whose performance of ceremonial duties and exclusion from policy making probably reminded Bush of his lonely years as the number two man in the Reagan White House. By the time the president's motorcade approached Moscow, darkness was falling. "A few people waved, and we turned on the parade lights of the car (which illuminate the interior and let people see clearly who is inside)," recalled Bush. "It was hard to see out and we waved at lampposts a few times, giving us a good laugh."⁸

The procession through the dark streets of Moscow was a perfect metaphor for the upcoming summit. The bright parade lights of American foreign policy were turned on, and expectations were high, but it was difficult to see clearly in the twilight of the Soviet Union's existence. After a period of wavering and hesitation, Gorbachev appeared to be solidly on the side of continuing reform and Soviet-American cooperation. He seemed increasingly persistent about requesting American financial assistance. Some of Gorbachev's closest advisers, including Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov and the head of the KGB, Vladimir Kriuchkov, were opposed to asking for American help and clearly tending toward authoritarian rule, away from the democratic achievements of Gorbachev's reforms. There was also the military, which believed that Gorbachev was going too far in reducing Soviet military might in return for little or nothing from the American side.

Finally, there were the increasingly self-confident leaders of the Soviet republics—the constituent parts of the USSR. One of them, the flamboyant leader of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, would meet with Bush in Moscow. The US president would then fly to Kyiv to see another rising star, the leader of Ukraine, the second-largest Soviet republic. Soviet power was no longer concentrated in the hands of one person and was not wielded in Moscow alone. It was becoming increasingly dispersed, and the program of the summit, which included meetings with republican leaders, underlined that reality. Bush would have to try to look past the Potemkin villages of the new Soviet political edifice to see the future. The president had had many opportunities to discuss these questions with his advisers. It was now time to judge the new Soviet reality for himself. His immediate question was how to help Gorbachev stay in power and continue the honeymoon in Soviet-American relations.

MIKHAIL GORBACHEV HAD HIGH HOPES for the Moscow summit. This would be his third meeting with Bush in slightly more than a year. In late May and early June 1990 he had visited the American president in Washington, and in mid-July 1991 they negotiated at the meeting of the Group of Seven (G-7), the world's richest nations, in London. Each time, Gorbachev asked Bush for American economic assistance. But it was not only money that interested the Soviet leader. He badly needed a boost to his flagging popularity at home, and the only place he could get one was in the international arena. The summit was supposed to remind Soviet citizens of Gorbachev's role as a world leader.

Born in March 1931 and thus seven years younger than Bush, Mikhail Gorbachev was the first Soviet leader to be born and raised after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Like Bush, Gorbachev was a "southerner"—he came from the Stavropol region of the USSR, next to the volatile North Caucasus. Like Bush, he received an elite education, obtaining a law degree from the prestigious Moscow University, and made his initial career outside the capital. But there the parallels ended. Bush came from the ranks of the American political aristocracy, whereas Gorbachev was born to a peasant family of settlers from Russia and Ukraine. He never mastered proper Russian pronunciation, speaking a heavily accented southern Russian dialect strongly influenced by Ukrainian—a characteristic that allowed his critics in the Moscow intellectual elite to dismiss him as a provincial upstart. In Moscow

the young Mikhail married Raisa Titarenko, a fellow student and another product of the Soviet promoted friendship of peoples: her father was a railway worker from Ukraine and her mother a Russian peasant from Siberia, where Raisa was born and grew up. Unlike the Bushes, who had several children, the Gorbachevs had one daughter, Irina.

After graduating from Moscow University, Gorbachev returned to his native Stavropol region where he made a spectacular career in the Communist Party apparatus. According to a concise biography of Gorbachev included in Bush's Moscow briefing book, "Gorbachev's early career included Komsomol [[Young Communist League]] and party posts in Stavropol. He became first secretary of the Stavropol regional party committee in 1970, when only 39, and held this post till his appointment to the CPSU Secretariat." In Stavropol Gorbachev attracted the attention and made allies of two powerful members of Brezhnev's ruling elite who had direct links with Stavropol. One of them was the Soviet ideological watchdog Mikhail Suslov, while the other was the KGB chief and future general secretary of the party, Yuri Andropov. The two allies made possible Gorbachev's move to Moscow in the waning years of the Brezhnev regime.⁹

Until his arrival in Moscow in 1979 as Central Committee secretary in charge of agriculture, Gorbachev had had little exposure to foreign relations of any kind, aside from infrequent travel abroad in low- and mid-level party delegations. However, once he received a more prominent government position during Andropov's brief tenure and then was elected to the country's highest office, general secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee, in March 1985, he turned out to be a quick learner. Liberal policy advisers in Moscow finally found in him a man at the top prepared to listen and take risks in an effort to change the status quo both at home and abroad. Many of them longed for the relatively liberal times of Nikita Khrushchev and the détente policies of the early Brezhnev years. They were also secret admirers of the Prague Spring of 1968—the attempt of Czech communists (crushed by Soviet military force) to create socialism "with a human face." Gorbachev, who was influenced by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's terror in the mid-1950s (both of his grandfathers had been arrested by Stalin's police), and who shared a room at Moscow University with Zdeněk Mlynář, one of the architects of the Prague Spring, was a good listener and, more important, a doer.

In domestic policy Gorbachev initiated perestroika (literally, "restructuring"), which loosened party control over the centralized economy and introduced elements of the market. He also began the policy of glasnost (openness), a term borrowed from the arsenal of the Soviet dissidents, which reduced party control over the media and made some allowance for ideological pluralism. Abroad Gorbachev returned to ideas reminiscent of Brezhnev's détente policy while eventually abandoning the "Brezhnev Doctrine" of political and military intervention in Eastern Europe. In Gorbachev's time, Reagan and Bush had finally found a Soviet leader who not only would not die on them but also would be prepared to talk nuclear disarmament. Less than a month after taking office, Gorbachev suspended the deployment of Soviet medium-range missiles in Eastern Europe; a few months later, he invited the United States to cut the Soviet and American strategic nuclear arsenals in half.

In November 1986, at a summit in Reykjavik, Iceland, Reagan and Gorbachev all but agreed—the horror of their advisers—to liquidate nuclear arms entirely. What stood in the way of the deal was Reagan's insistence on continuing to develop his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a missile defense program. Gorbachev believed that SDI, if ever implemented by the Americans, would put the Soviets at a disadvantage. The summit ended in a deadlock, and the world seemed to be returning to the darkest days of the Cold War. But the dialogue was eventually resumed. Andrei Sakharov, the father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb and a prominent political dissident, helped convince Gorbachev that SDI was little more than a figment of Reagan's imagination. The Soviet leader flew to Washington in 1988

to sign an agreement limiting the US and Soviet nuclear arsenals and dismantling intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe. Now, in July 1991, Gorbachev and Bush were about to use pens made from “Euromissiles” to sign a new treaty cutting the number of long-range nuclear weapons that targeted Washington, New York, and Boston on one side of the Atlantic and Moscow, Leningrad, and Kyiv on the other.¹⁰

In the months leading up to the Moscow summit, the Soviet leader had been struggling for his political survival. While the Soviet president and his advisers and well-wishers at home and abroad firmly believed that reform of the Soviet system was impossible without a democratic transformation of society, in practice economic reform and democracy did not work very well together. Perestroika broke up the old economic structure before market mechanisms could be put in place and produced mixed results. Glasnost angered the party apparatus by ending its monopoly control of the media and unleashing public criticism for the first time since 1917. As economic difficulties increased and living conditions declined drastically, Gorbachev came under attack both from the party apparatchiks and from the reformers who called for radical transformation of the economy and society on the model of Poland and other former East European satellites of the Soviet Union.

The advance report for Western journalists arriving in Moscow for the Bush-Gorbachev summit prepared by Gene Gibbons of Reuters, pointed to a growing gap between the Kremlin and the people on the Moscow streets. “Fort Apache, says a sign over an entranceway of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, aptly capturing the flavor of a Soviet capital in the throes of economic disintegration,” read the report. “As George Bush motorcades through this city of 8.8 million, he will see long shopping lines, empty store windows, broken-down cars along the roadsides and dozens of idle construction cranes. At the Kremlin he will see the other extreme—glittering gold and crystal chandeliers, fabulous paintings, exquisite inlaid wood floors and enough marble to build thousands of monuments.”¹¹

Deteriorating living standards for average Soviet citizens—they were increasingly unhappy not only with their own situation but also with the privileges of the ruling elite—were making Gorbachev unpopular among the people he wanted to set free. Reporting from Moscow during the summit, Peter Jennings, one of America’s “big three” news anchors, told ABC network viewers that Gorbachev’s approval rating had dropped to a precarious 20 percent (Bush’s approval rating at that time, soon after the American victory in the Gulf War, was in excess of 70 percent). Talking to Western correspondents, however, Gorbachev showed optimism and humor. Pointing to the friendly crowds at the Kremlin, he told Jennings, “See, some people like me.” He added, “I am the man who began all this. If anyone’s writing off Gorbachev, this is a superficial judgment.” For the first time in months Gorbachev felt that he was finally getting the situation under control by reining in the conservative opposition, and he was eager to use the summit to secure international support for his domestic agenda.¹²

THE FIRST OFFICIAL MEETING of the Moscow summit took place at noon on July 30, 1991, in St. Catherine’s Hall of the Grand Kremlin Palace. “Gorbachev was marvelous,” wrote George Bush recalling his impressions of the first summit session, “and how he could stand up to all the pressure against him I simply did not know.” The Soviet leader was in a very tight spot indeed, and the composition of the delegation he brought along to meet Bush indicated his diminished stature in Soviet politics. Gorbachev was accompanied to the meeting by one of the republican leaders Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan. Another republican leader, Boris Yeltsin of Russia, was invited but refused to attend—he was expecting Bush to come to his office later that day. Finally, the minister of defense, Marshal Dmitrii Yazov, was also absent, having sent his deputy to represent him.¹³

Gorbachev's road to the summit was anything but easy. What he saw as a moment of triumph for his new foreign policy was regarded by some of the most powerful members of the ruling elite as a sellout of Soviet interests. While the Soviet military brass had always grumbled about budget reductions, Gorbachev was more out of tune with his military-industrial complex than any of his predecessors, including Nikita Khrushchev, who was still remembered with hatred by the military for his huge reduction of conventional forces in the early 1960s. But it was not only the Soviet military who believed that the Americans had gotten their way on almost every major issue pertaining to the nuclear arms treaty. The same sentiment was expressed by Strobe Talbott, one of the leading American commentators on foreign affairs and, in the second half of the 1990s, the principal architect of State Department policy toward Russia.

In a signed article that appeared in *Time* magazine immediately after the Moscow summit, Talbott wrote, "On almost every major question in START, the U.S. demanded, and got, its own way. . . . In the START treaty Gorbachev is tacitly accepting a position of overall inferiority, at least in the near term, since he is giving up right away much of the U.S.S.R.'s principal strength, which is in land-based ballistic missiles, while allowing the U.S. to keep its own advantages in bombers, cruise missiles and submarine weapons." Talbott had called a spade a spade. But why was Gorbachev prepared to sign a treaty so unbalanced as to not only upset his minister of defense but also raise questions among American political commentators? Talbott offered an answer: "The U.S.S.R. had conceded so much and the U.S. reciprocated so little for a simple reason: the Gorbachev revolution was history's greatest fire sale. In such transactions, prices are always very low."¹⁴

Gorbachev had charged his defense minister with the difficult if not impossible task of convincing the General Staff and the military-industrial complex to accept treaty conditions that cut the number of missiles on both sides but excluded aviation, giving the Americans clear superiority in means of delivering nuclear warheads—they indeed had a preponderance of heavy bombers. The Soviet military eventually gave its consent.¹⁵

The last sticky issue of the treaty was resolved less than two weeks before the start of the Moscow summit. It concerned the American right to monitor a flight test of the Soviet SS-25 missile. The first Soviet mobile intercontinental ballistic missile, the SS-25, known to the Soviets as "Poplar" and to the Americans as "Sickle," was the latest addition to the Soviet nuclear arsenals. Its firing tests were fully completed in December 1987, and by July 1991 the Soviet Union had 288 Poplars deployed against the United States, which lacked comparable mobile ballistic missiles. The Poplars were "sausages" 1.5 meters wide and 20.5 meters long, mounted on fourteen-wheel transporter-launchers that gave them unique mobility and chances of avoiding detection compared with other weapons in their class. The three-stage rocket was armed with a nuclear warhead up to 1,000 kilograms in size with a blast yield of 550 kilotons, approximately equivalent to forty Hiroshima-size bombs.

A post-Cold War study assessing the possible impact of a 550-kiloton blast on New York City claimed that it would result in more than 5 million deaths, burying half the population of midtown Manhattan under the debris of collapsing buildings and exposing the rest to fatal doses of radiation. Massive fires would devastate everything within a four-mile radius of ground zero, and the fallout plume would extend across Long Island. The American negotiators were not daunted by the SS-25 or its devastating power, since they had more than enough weapons in their arsenal to match it. The main concern was that the Poplars were powerful enough to carry more than one warhead, which would dramatically change all calculations. To find out whether the Poplars had such a capability, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft—who characteristically focused on capabilities rather than intentions—and his team wanted the right to monitor a test firing of the Poplar at a range of elevations.

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