



Down with Big Brother: The Fall of the Soviet Empire

Michael Dobbs

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"One of the great stories of our time . . . a wonderful anecdotal history of a great drama."

--San Francisco Chronicle Book Review

As Washington Post correspondent in Moscow, Warsaw, and Yugoslavia in the final decade of the Soviet empire, Michael Dobbs had a ringside seat to the extraordinary events that led to the unraveling of the Bolshevik Revolution. From Tito's funeral to the birth of Solidarity in the Gdańsk shipyard, from the tragedy of Tiananmen Square to Boris Yeltsin standing on a tank in the center of Moscow, Dobbs saw it all.

The fall of communism was one of the great human dramas of our century, as great a drama as the original Bolshevik revolution. Dobbs met almost all of the principal actors, including Mikhail Gorbachev, Lech Walesa, Václav Havel, and Andrei Sakharov. With a sweeping command of the subject and the passion and verve of an eyewitness, he paints an unforgettable portrait of the decade in which the familiar and seemingly petrified Cold War world--the world of Checkpoint Charlie and Dr. Strangelove--vanished forever.

"Down with Big Brother ranks very high among the plethora of books about the fall of the Soviet Union and the death throes of Communism. It is possibly the most vividly written of the lot."

-- Adam B. Ulam, Washington Post Book World

Down with Big Brother: The Fall of the Soviet Empire Details

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Jeff says

Another excellent book by Michael Dobbs. Difficult for me to keep track of all the principle players with their slavic names, although the main people were well known. I felt that each chapter ended with a cliff hanger, which didn't seem necessary. The chapters were very short also, perhaps because it's a complicated topic and this was Dobbs' way of keeping the text moving. Excellent use made of his own interviews at the time, classified Soviet documents not readily available in the West, biographies, and analysis by recognized authorities.

Richard Lim says

Down With Big Brother is an entertaining and ambitious account that seeks to chronicle the entire fall of the Soviet Union in one volume. The author, Michael Dobbs, was present for many of the critical events (Solidarity in 1980, Tiananmen in 1989, and Moscow in 1991), giving the book a pseudo-memoir feel. The result is an fast-paced, action packed account that makes it a perfect first draft of history. Dobbs zigzags across the geopolitical landscape of the 1980s, taking the reader from Afghanistan, to Warsaw, Poland, Chernobyl, and Washington, DC. With the skill of a journalist, he introduces the major figures on a personal level, as we learn the influences that impacted their decisions. The 1980s were an era rich in critical figures who reformed the political landscape, such as Gorbachev, Reagan, Walesa, Yeltsin, John Paul II, Jaruzelski, and Vaclav Havel. He also shows us the experiences of the strikers in Poland, the power plant workers in Chernobyl, and the leaders of the Soviet Politburo giving a human face to an era of great political upheaval. Dobbs' work is an important snapshot of the early assessments of the fall of the Soviet Union and is successful at covering a great mass of history.

Matthew Dupree says

A compelling, informative, comprehensive narrative of the downfall of the Soviet Union.

Maciek says

During the thousand years of her history, Russia had seen many great things. During the Soviet period the country had seen global military victories, vast construction sites, whole new cities, dams across the Dnieper and the Volga, canals joining different seas. The country had seen mighty tractors and skyscrapers... There was only one thing Russia had not seen during this thousand years: Freedom.

- Vasily Grossman, *Everything Flows*

Where the Russian flag has once been hoisted, it cannot be lowered.

- Nicholas I of Russia in 1850

If you don't like us, don't accept our invitations, and don't invite us to come to see you. Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you.

- Nikita Khrushchev to Western diplomats on November 18, 1956

The story of the Soviet Union - its formation, expansion of influence and might and eventual dissolution - is one of the greatest sagas of contemporary history. Born of a great Bolshevik revolution which dethroned the Tsar, it was carved through a bloody civil war which burned through his disintegrating empire. Under the leadership of a charismatic individual devoted to the cause - known as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin - the Bolsheviks created the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1917, a new state which consisted of most of former Imperial Russia. The word soviet (Rus. ?????) is Russian for council, and the Bolsheviks established Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies which were aimed to give voice to the mass population of the country. The Soviet type of government advocated by the Bolsheviks was claimed to be a higher type of democracy, where the masses would make their own history and create a new society without being oppressed by the bourgeoisie. Many groups in the territories of the former Russian Empire opposed the Bolsheviks, and a bloody conflict between the newly established Red Army, the "Reds" (Bolsheviks) and the "Whites" (various anti-Bolsheviks groups, such as monarchists and nationalists) emerged.

Vladimir Lenin addressing an assembly of the Red Army troops bound for the Polish front on May 5, 1920. The Polish-Soviet conflict was part of the Russian Civil War, and ended with an unexpected but decisive Polish victory during the Battle of Warsaw. Polish troops, on the verge of total defeat, suddenly rebounded and attacked the invading Red Army, forcing the Soviets to back down and ultimately sue for peace - an event often heralded as the Miracle at the Vistula.

Lenin's policy towards the Germans was especially unpopular - with the treaty of Brest-Litovsk the newly established Soviet Russia has signed a peace accord with the German Empire and effectively exited from the World War I, but in exchange had to renounce its claim on much of its western territory. Despite the controversy and unpopularity of this decision, the strategy proved doubly beneficial for Lenin: World War ended just 8 months after it was signed, and Soviet Russia declared it invalid and claimed that it was forced to sign it. Because its army did not have to fight in the war, the Reds were able to focus their full effort on the home front and help local communists in seizing power. The conflict lasted for four years, and a number of pro-independence movements emerged victorious - Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland and Estonia all won battles with the Reds and established themselves as sovereign states. The Red Army was victorious across the rest of the former empire's territory, effectively transforming it into new Soviet republics. In 1922 the civil war finally ended, and the newly formed Soviet republics federated into a vast, multinational state - the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. More than a million people lost their lives in the war.

Following Lenin's death in 1923, a young Georgian named Joseph Stalin took over the power and became a leader of the country. Stalin ditched Lenin's New Economic Policy - a more capitalist oriented policy of a mixed economy, intended to raise the economy of the country after the war by allowing private individuals to own small enterprises - and introduced a highly centralized planned economy and collectivization, consolidating individual land into collective farms (commonly known as *Kolkhozy*) in hopes that collective farming would immediately increase the food supply for the general population. The country proceeded to work according to Five Year Plans - the Soviet economy was managed by the state planning commission, which managed all enterprises and defined the necessary economic input and a schedule of completion,

along with the wholesale and retail prices of the final product. These plans were initially designed to rapidly industrialize the USSR, and most of the focus was duly put on heavy industry. Stalin feared that the advanced countries would crush the economically backward Soviet Union; he was also a terrible tyrant who deported millions of Soviet citizens to remote and isolated areas of the country, imprisoned millions more in the infamous Soviet gulags, and implemented agricultural reforms which disrupted food production and caused approximately 7 million people to die from either hunger or related birth defects. Stalin achieved his goal - the five year plans greatly deteriorated the quality of life of standard Soviet citizens, but transformed what once was a backward, feudal and largely agrarian nation into a leading industrial power in what for history is no more than a blink of an eye.

Stalin led the Soviet Union through the second World War, secretly entering into a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939, which divided northern and eastern Europe into Nazi and Soviet spheres of influence. German invasion of Poland began just days after signing the treaty, officially beginning the war on September 1st. After the Soviets eliminated threats from Japan in the Soviet Far East, the USSR officially entered Polish territories on September 17th, claiming that it did so to protect Soviet minorities which were living in eastern Poland. Both powers were hostile to sovereign Poland and aimed to destroy her people, culture and legacy, and divide the land between themselves along with the rest of Europe. Despite officially declaring war on the Nazis after the invasion, Britain and France did not launch any significant land offensive against the Germans - even though both formed military alliances with Poland which obliged them to do exactly that. The lack of French and British military support allowed the Wehrmacht and the Red Army to defeat the Polish army on two fronts, letting the Germans and Soviets divide and annex the country to their respective territories, effectively partitioning it for the fourth time in its long and troubled history. All that the Royal Air Force did was drop many propaganda leaflets over German territory, in what was described as "Pamphlet raids" in the British press.

(Polish resistance was fierce. To the end of the invasion the Third Reich was not able to transfer any military contingent through the Polish front. It was also the only time when the allied forces outnumbered and had a strategical advantage over the Wehrmacht on the Western Front. This period was totally and completely wasted - the allies did not act and Poland was lost to the invaders. It's also the reason why the Nazis were able to defeat the allies and conquer France and the Low Countries in 1940 so easily - the Third Reich could focus all its efforts on the Western Front, and fully employ its air superiority and armed mobility. But in the first days of September the French forces had a great advantage over the German forces - German war minister Wilhelm Keitel and military commander Alfred Jodl both testified this at the Nuremberg Trials. Keitel testified that the German leadership saw the lack of British and French military involvement as a sign of their acceptance of the Nazi conquest of Poland, with their indifference being a sign that both nations did not consider helping Poland in any serious way. Jodl testified that the Wehrmacht, which was successful against both Poland and France separately, would not be able to fight against the allied forces on two fronts at the same time, and that the only reason why the Reich did not fall in 1939 was the fact that British and French armies remained idle and did not actively intervene. **These testimonies are heartbreaking.** Can you imagine what would have happened if the Reich did fall in 1939 after a combined allied attack? How much suffering and how many years of horrific torment could have been avoided?)

The Germans did not intend to keep their pact with Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, in Operation *Barbarossa*. Hitler desired to conquer Soviet territories as he desired to spread Nazism across central and eastern Europe as well, providing for *Lebensraum* across the continent - ethnically cleansing it from people of inferior races to provide space for the Aryans. Operation *Barbarossa* marks the start of the largest military confrontation in history between two great and ideological powers - the Eastern Front. The Soviets and Nazis clashed with unprecedented fierceness, and over 30 million people lost their lives - many of them civilians, exterminated with extreme cruelty in ghettos, death marches, pogroms and extermination

camps. As the Nazis advanced into Soviet territory, Eastern Front became the scene of now legendary battles and occupations - among them the Battle of Stalingrad, where the Soviet forces destroyed the German army and forced it to withdraw its forces from the West, never allowing it to gain the initiative in the East again - and Siege of Leningrad, one of the longest and certainly the bloodiest siege in history. While the U.S. and the UK were not involved militarily on the Eastern Front, both countries supplemented the Soviet Union with significant material aid. However, the country was under the rule of a despotic and paranoid Stalin, who removed many of his finest military officials from power in his Great Purge, reducing both the morale and efficiency of the Red Army - which was most evident in what became known as the Winter War, when the Soviet Union invaded Finland in 1939. Aiming to reconquer Finland, Soviets outnumbered Finns three to one and had thirty times as much aircraft and as hundred times as many tanks. Because the Red Army was forced to be led by mostly inexperienced soldiers, Finns were able to basically slaughter the Soviet forces and resist for far longer than anyone could have suspected. Although the Finns lost some of their territory to the USSR, they retained their sovereignty.

95% German Army casualties occurred on the Eastern Front; the casualties of the Soviet Union dwarf those of any other nation. The USSR lost more than 26 million of its people during the war, but emerged victorious; Soviet soldiers captured Berlin on May 2nd. The War was over; Nazi Germany was destroyed and despite enormous losses the Soviet Union emerged as industrial and military superpower. Countries changed their borders; Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have been conquered and incorporated into the USSR; Germany has been divided into two republics, East and West. The Soviet Union has established a number of puppet governments across its bordering states in eastern Europe, effectively bringing nations under its control without formal annexation. The Iron Curtain descended over half of the continent, and a new period has begun which was to last for over 50 years - the Cold War, a technological and ideological competition between the Soviet Union and the other remaining superpower: The United States.

Famous photo of Soviet soldiers raising the Soviet Flag over the Reichstag on May 2 in 1945, after the fall of Berlin.

The post-war history of eastern Europe until the final dissolution of the USSR has to be the greatest charade of the 20th century. Governments have been replaced and whole countries have been ruled by proxy; history books have been rewritten to accommodate communist ideology and glorify the Soviet Union, and carefully hide its crimes. Citizens were forced to live in repressive condition, often lacking basic necessities. State propaganda was ever-present - in schools, in television, in cinema, in literature. Yet still people were able to see through this veil and created a powerful counter-culture, and developed a dark sense of humor. They mocked and ridiculed the system among themselves and between the lines in public.

Dobbs begins his book in the waning days of the Soviet Union, and follows the events which lead to its dissolution and the breakup of communism in eastern Europe, and the violent Yugoslav wars. Different nations view the end of Soviet hegemony differently: Americans have their Reagan, whom they see as a brave fighter against the Evil Empire and whose efforts brought it down. Polish people take a pride in having Wałęsa, who led the strike in the Gdansk Shipyard which begun to dissolve the red fabric which covered the nations under Soviet control. Solidarity started an international series of peaceful revolutions where the puppet governments were gradually stripped of their power. History changed once again with the Round Table Talks, and the fall of the Berlin Wall which divided the city for 50 years. The Fall of Communism in eastern Europe was marked by extensive civil resistance and non-violent campaigns - except for Romania. Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romania's General Secretary was the most rigid Stalinist in all of the Eastern Bloc - one who created an extensive cult of personality around himself and his wife, Elena, who was as vain and rigid as her husband. Ceaușescu exported much of Romania's agricultural and industrial production in order to pay

the country's large foreign debt, which resulted in extreme shortages of food, energy, fuel and other basic resources and destroyed Romania's once prosperous agricultural sector. He outlawed abortion - which resulted in deaths of women who attempted to perform it themselves, and a drastic rise of infant mortality and number of unwanted children. Ceaușescu's policies turned Romania into probably the most impoverished nation in eastern Europe, decades behind the West. The Romanian armed forces captured Nicolae and Elena as they were trying to flee the country and performed a televised show trial, which ended with both the dictator and his wife being sentenced to be shot by a firing squad. As the dictator was being led to the wall he sang "The Internationale"; The Ceaușescus have been hit by a total of 120 bullets. All of it was videotaped and shown across Europe.

Whatever you do, don't mess with the Romanians.

My mother has visited the Soviet Union in the same year that Dobbs begins his book and when Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan, which would turn into a decade long conflict - 1979. She has won the school Olympic in Russian Language, and was one of just a few people from the whole country to board the Polish-Soviet friendship train and venture into the empire itself. She went to the Belorussian capital of Minsk and then into Russia, on each station being greeted by a special committee in regional clothes with a warm welcome for the Polish friends. She stopped at Katyn forest, where Russian officials told her about the massacre of Polish soldiers by the Germans. She went to Leningrad, where she stayed at the newly completed Pribaltiyskaya Hotel, where she experienced luxuries beyond her wildest dreams and toured the Winter Palace, residence of the former Tsars and one of the most beautiful buildings that she has ever seen. She also went to the Lion's den itself - the Kremlin. She also went to Vilnius, which was a Polish city before the war but now was the capital of the Lithuanian SSR. Polish arrivals were greeted with great joy and aplomb by Soviet comrades at every stop, and treated like kings; meanwhile many Soviet citizens had trouble finding basic means to survive, Lithuanians have been struggling to regain independence from the USSR into which they were forcibly integrated, and the truth about Katyn was one of USSR's deepest held secrets, guarded safely in a special room inside the Kremlin. Dobbs described the room as a special place where all the dirty laundry of Soviet history was stored, including the Katyn order signed by Stalin himself and the Russian original of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. They were available only to the General secretaries of the USSR - official history available to the public consisted of denial and negation. Vyacheslav Molotov went to his grave rejecting the existence of a document he himself had signed.

My mom and the trip in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) in 1979 on the Palace Square. General Staff Building is in the back.

The Tsar Cannon on the grounds of the Kremlin in Moscow.

The Pribaltiskaya.

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, the Soviet Union was on life support. The Afghan war was a disaster, draining the hopeless planned economy down and diminishing the morale of the army, which became disillusioned with offering "fraternal assistance" to the Afghans in "spreading socialism". the Soviets simply couldn't afford to continue fighting with the US-backed Mujahideen which led them to proclaim that nobody has ever won in Afghanistan, and that it cannot be conquered. The USSR, being an ideological state, sent a ton of its resources at hugely discounted prices to its fellow communist states, often not even receiving a payment at all. Dobbs portrays Gorbachev as an ambiguous figure - a reformist but also a believer, whose policy of openness (Glasnost) and reformation (Perestroika) put a death sentence on the USSR instead of

saving it as planned. Gorbachev was a skilled orator capable of elaborate scheming, but could also commit hopeless blunders - such as his anti-alcohol reform. Ignoring the American experience Gorbachev introduced partial prohibition, which did result in a decline in consumption but also in increase of moon shining, organized crime, and a great loss of revenue to support the dying Soviet state. What Gorbachev employed with the intention of preserving the USSR turned out to be the tools of its own undoing, and on 26 December of 1991 the Soviet Union officially dissolved and 15 new countries appeared on the map. Contrary to fears and expectations the Soviet Empire went out with a whimper, not a bang.

I am running out of space and have to quit. This is obviously a personal interest of mine (can you tell?). Dobbs's book is a great narrative story of the dying days of the Soviet superpower, its absurdities, atrocities and eccentricities. I have one complaint, though - why not a single photo? As it's the story of the end, I couldn't help but recounts the facts and events which led to the creation of the USSR in the first place and its history before the invasion of Afghanistan. Dobbs is a journalist, and has been at the right places at the right time, and talked to the right people (he was the first Western journalist who interviewed Wa??sa). His work is a great piece of historical journalism, crafted into a great story of the end of the world's first socialist state. Don't miss it.

Aaron Shields says

Great. Can't imagine a better book on the last 12 years of the USSR and insight into Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and various influential Eastern European leaders. Learned a bunch

Jaquen says

I didn't know Michael Dobbs before reading his *One minute to midnight* book over the Cuban missile crisis. Given how fantastic that book was, I was naturally tempted to catch on this one.

I wasn't disappointed. This book is great, very well researched and masterfully narrated. It can keep you hooked page after page even when retelling events you already know well, and will surely surprise you too with details and facts you probably didn't know or suspected.

Dobbs is very good at giving you a lifelike picture of the people behind some of the most momentous events in recent times, not just the larger than life figures you'd expect in this book (Walesa, Gorbachev, Yeltsin, etc..), but lots of apparatchiks and ordinary people getting caught, often despite themselves, in the turning wheels of history. And all of these are portrayed not as flatly as other authors do, but with all their human complexities.

It also has a lot of first-hand recollections, as Dobbs at the time was a reporter on the scene of many of the great events he writes about. His writing style is that of a master journalist and of a great narrator: never forgetting his facts and the sources, nor getting lost into details or droning enumerations, tersely and relentlessly narrating the events, without forgetting to add enough colour, observation and anecdotes to hold you even more engrossed.

If any criticism can be made, is that reading on there are SO MANY more things that you'd love Dobbs to chronicle, or some that you wish he had treated more in depth. But after all, it's already almost 600 pages :)

Humzah Yazdani says

What a book! I had previously read the author's Six Months in 1945 and had lofty expectations of this one. And it delivered! I love Michael Dobbs. He could write how to keep up with the Kardashians (I hate them and everything they represent) and I would happily read that book. Not even actually keeping up. Just how to keep up with the most deplorable clan to have infected the earth in the modern times. Despite my hectic work routine and being busy till 10pm, I would look forward to reading this book an hour before going to sleep.

Jørgen Pedersen says

Ualmindelig god analyse af Sovjetunionens fald med sans for i særdeleshed detaljen i det utal af begivenheder, der førte til det store brud

Meget - på den gode måde - journalistisk

Ikke så meget political science - men et meget fint supplement hertil

Meget anbefalelsesværdig - virker utrolig solid

Anbefalelsesværdig

Jan Jørgensen says

En god og spændende beskrivelse af vigtige begivenheder og personer under Sovjetunionens fald. De historiske begivenheder fremstilles som i en kriminalroman med hovedpersoner og bipersoners gøren, lade og tanker. Denne fiktions stilart er dog på mange område det der gør bogen læsværdig, men også det der forringer formidlingen af forståelse af de historiske begivenheder. Ikke minds da man ofte som læser kan blive i tvivl om der ikke ligger mere bag og om den fremstilling man får præsenteret er nuanceret nok!!!!

Som historisk værk vil jeg anbefale af finde andre muligheder. Men som fortælling og let læsning af et historisk emne er bogen klart et kik vær.

Lars K Jensen says

"I tog en beslutning. Det er op til os at få tingene til at stemme."

Ordet falder via radiokommunikation mellem medlemmer af det sovjetiske luftværn, da de skal finde ud af, hvad er det for en prik, de kan se på deres radar i maj 1987 - og ikke mindst, hvad man skal blive enige om at sige, det er. Det viser sig at være Mathias Rust på vej mod Den Røde Plads.

For mig er den sætning en central passage i Dobbs' fremragende bog. Dels fordi den siger noget om, hvad der sker i et totalitært styre, og hvordan Sovjetunionen blev "kørt", og dels fordi den er et fantastisk eksempel på det, Dobbs er så god til, og som andre anmeldere også roser ham for: At få de små detaljer og begivenheder med og bruge dem i fortællingen om den store historie.

Jeg elsker historie- og lignende fagbøger, der kan skifte mellem det store overblik og den enkelte detalje eller person. I 'Sovjetunionens fald' er Michael Dobbs en sand mester i dette. Som læser flyver man rundt mellem statsoverhovedet, generaler og menige soldater, der til slut bliver tvunget til at tage stilling til deres ordrer. Og det hele er vævet fantastisk sammen.

Som en anmelder skrev: Hvis man vil genoplive stemningen fra 1989-1991, skal man læse Dobbs bog. Nu kan jeg ikke huske så meget (jeg er født i 1983), men jeg kan kun erklære mig enig: Jeg følte virkelig, at jeg fulgte begivenhederne omkring østblokkens kollaps, mens de skete.

Og jeg vil især anbefale folk på min alder at give sig i kast med bogen. Afslutningen af Den Kolde Krig og Sovjetunionens fald er en af de historiske begivenheder, som vi er for unge til at huske, men for gamle til at blive undervist i i historietimerne.

Det retter Dobbs' værk op på. Og det skal han have tak for :-)

For mig har det været en sand fornøjelse at læse bogen. Jeg har glædet mig til hver eneste ledige stund, hvor jeg har kunnet tage den ud af reolen og sidde med den. Og kapitelinddelingen er hyppig, hvilket gør bogen oplagt i 'snacks'-indtag, hvor man læser få sider ad gangen.

Læs den.

Bill says

Many on the political right contend that Reagan single-handily caused the Soviet Union's collapse. Michael Dobbs, a Washington Post reporter and its bureau chief in Moscow and Warsaw, demonstrates in his far ranging history that the right could not be more wrong.

Dobbs believes the slow collapse began with formation of Solidarity and Lech Walesa in the Gdansk, Poland shipyard in 1980. Workers struck causing for the first time confusion and hesitation in the ranks of the Polish Communist leaders. This was a crack in what had been a successful, forceful, controlling and feared Communist leadership.

He reveals more causes for the collapse including a highly inefficient resource consuming economy, resentment of the perks enjoyed by top Communists, an extremely expensive war in Afghanistan, Reagan's arms buildup, an inflexible Politburo and millions of brave people in East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. This mere listing greatly understates the importance of these events, they were monumental, and they led to the downfall of an evil empire.

One man, Mikhail Gorbachev, more than any other person was responsible for the events leading to the collapse. He believed the economic and political systems must be reformed. As General Secretary of the Communist Party, the top Soviet position, he introduced perestroika, reform, and glasnost, greater personal

and press freedom. Slowly, the party's control slipped away especially in Eastern Europe. On November 9, 1989 the Berlin Wall fell. East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia soon broke away from Soviet control.

In August, 1991 Soviet hardliners waged an unsuccessful coup against Gorbachev. During the coup Yelstin gained addition political power and international fame when he climbed to the top of a tank turret where he opposed the coup. On November 6, 1991 Yeltsin banned the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Slightly more than a month later, December 8, Yeltsin and the leaders of the Ukraine and Belarus dissolved the Soviet Union.

This is at best an outline of what Dodd describes so well. He was present for many of these events and had access to archival documents made available following the collapse. Dodd is an accomplished journalist and keeps the narrative moving.

Dennis says

Ah, the good old days. This is like comfort food for those who worked in Russia or Eastern Europe in the early 1990s...

Paul Bryant says

This is one of the great stories of history, the rapid, astonishing and total collapse of one of the largest, most monolithic empires which at the same time represented the grand alternative to capitalism, the dream of equality for all, international brotherhood and peace, the dream that caused the world to live in fear of nuclear wipe-out for 50 years. It was so huge, it was Mordor, its troops and tanks numberless, and yet in a couple of years it melted away like snow on the water. And with hardly a shot being fired. Now that's a story.

Michael Dobbs zips along at a steady 55 miles an hour, starting with the disaster of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. His prose is prosaic, he hardly ever turns an arresting phrase in all of these 451 big pages, but that's okay. He's brisk, there's a lot to get done, and he does it. He allows himself room, too, for sideshows like Tiananmen Square and Ronald & Nancy Reagan's crazy occult advisor, and Boris Yeltsin's astonished, agonised visit to a Houston Texas supermarket, which is when he realised the true epic failure of the Soviet system.

The Afghan War was the first time the USSR had invaded a country, failed to take it over, and then withdrawn (sound familiar?). The first crack in the dam. The appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as successor to the Chernenko in 1985 began the whole mad whirling painful exhilarating and hopeful tale.

Gorbachev wasn't Pandora, he didn't open the box, declare perestroika, and let fly all the evils of the world out of curiosity; and he wasn't Adam being handed the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil when he became general secretary and gained power over the whole land of Eden; and he wasn't Bluebeard's wife unlocking the grisly secrets of the forbidden room and condemning himself to death in the process; but he was close kin with all three. The most contradictory of accidental heroes, he was always a communist, and

naively optimistic till the end about the possibilities of rescuing communism, but he killed it stone dead, and quicker and with less pain than anyone else could. He was the top communist in the world and he refused, consistently, to use violence to save his own world. Part blustering old guard, part chess grandmaster and part idiot, loved at first by the people and later tossed aside like a used Kleenex by the same people, he is the hero of this book and definitely one of my heroes.

SOME QUOTES

Leonid Brezhnev – that's the Brezhnev, general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union for 18 years, successor to Khrushchev who took over from Stalin, that Brezhnev, told his brother:

All that stuff about communism is a tall tale for popular consumption. After all, we can't leave the people with no faith. The church was taken away, the tsar was shot, and something had to be substituted. So let the people build communism.

In 1985 Gorbachev toured western Siberia.

Like many visitors he was struck by the contrast between the riches that were pouring out of the ground and the squalor in which people were forced to live. As he toured supermarkets, drilling rigs and gas compressor stations he was besieged by complaints about shoddy housing, poor food supplies, air pollution, outdated equipment and the lack of consumer goods. The ends had clearly not justified the means. The Stalinist system had created a monster that fed on itself, producing little benefit either for the country or its inhabitants.

Gorbachev demanded glasnost (openness) to get his dream of a remodelled communism going. What he got was

grim facts about life in the Soviet Union that had long been concealed from ordinary people. Revelations about environmental catastrophes, abysmal standards of public health, and economic lunacy poured out. An eminent biologist reported that 20% of the population lived in ecological disaster zones where every third person could be expected to develop cancer. In some parts of the country infant mortality exceeded African levels.

Dobbs has a nice paragraph on how communism turned into disaster :

Economic power was concentrated in the hands of a small group of bureaucrats at the top of the pyramid. Even if these apparatchiks had been totally omniscient and supremely intelligent, it would still have been physically impossible for them to match the collective wisdom of the millions of individuals who form a Western-style marketplace. The Stalinist system could cope with grandiose tasks, like building nuclear bombs and producing thousands of tanks, because it was good at mobilising resources to achieve a specific goal. But the command economy lacked the myriad self-correcting mechanisms of a market economy. When a capitalist entrepreneur makes a wrong decision, he is quickly put right by millions of consumers; a similar error by a Soviet bureaucrat could go undetected for years, with horrendous results.

If I may have a little gripe it's this – what, a big fat book like this and no photos? Come on, Alfred A Knopf of New York, what were you playing at? I want mug shots! I want to look the grotesque old bastards in the eye! And raise up my glass to Gorby too. May the God that neither of us believes in bless you in your old age.

Otherwise, terrific stuff.

Frederik says

Qui était la responsable de la chute du communisme? Reagan? Gorbi? Lech Walesa? Le pape? A croire l'écrivain de ce troisième tome dans la série magistrale de la guerre froide, le grand ennemi du communisme et l'idéologie même. Aussi bien économiquement que politiquement, le communisme ne pouvait survivre à long terme. Mais 1989 ne marquait pas la fin de l'histoire, non, en 1989 le communisme était remplacé par une autre idéologie, le nationalisme et avec cette histoire on n'en a toujours pas fini. Peut-être c'est juste le début?

Martin says

I started reading this to help me prepare for the second season of "The Americans", and it has instead dovetailed with the Vladimir Putin's takeover of the Crimea. This book works as a fantastic bookend to Dobbs' own "Six Months in 1945: FDR, Stalin, Churchill and Truman—From World War to Cold War" or Anne Applebaum's "Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1945-56".

The author was a foreign correspondent in many of the countries where Communism began to tear apart at the seams, and when he recounts such events there is a thrilling, off the cuff quality, particularly when the press chases down Gorbachev in Beijing while the Tiananmen Square incident is happening. Besides the USSR, the author also has a great feel for the former Yugoslavia; he uses Tito's funeral as a means to introduce the old guard Communists whose deaths and retirements will allow reformers to unwittingly loosen the stranglehold on power. Most of the epilogue is concerned with Milosevic.

As is now becoming general consensus, the USSR unraveled at this particular moment due in large part to their overextension in Afghanistan, which meant that it was unable to reign in the Solidarity movement in Poland. However, I did not realize until now just how close the Red Army came to rolling in with tanks. After the movement had been somewhat suppressed, the author writes, "The only solution was to bypass the party altogether. Society would ignore the institutions of the Communist regime and create its own unofficial structures [...] Underground newspapers would make a mockery of government censorship. A "flying university," meeting in private homes, would circumvent the state education system [...] The structures of Communist power would be preserved as an ideological fig leaf for the Kremlin, but Poland would become a pluralist society in all but name."

The author presents vivid portraits of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, culminating in their actions during the attempted coup in 1991. Yeltsin was the epitome of pugnacious as long as he had something or somebody to fight; otherwise, he could be prone to depression, anxiety and alcoholism. Gorbachev was a master schemer, but he often outwitted himself with his double dealing. He could never seem to decide if he was trying to save the country or the Party, and the reforms he made in order to save the Party from itself eventually helped the Party lose its grip on everything. And even though he so wanted to salvage Communism, it was the hard-liners who attempted to overthrow him. The author states that Gorbachev made huge mistakes starting in his earliest days in office when he restricted alcohol consumption, both a great source of revenue for the government and a palliative for the masses.

The Communist world was basically funded by the resources of Siberia, mostly petroleum and gas. Without

oil, the USSR would not have been able to support governments around the world. However, once Saudi Arabia increased petroleum production in 1985, the fall in market prices and the inefficiency of the manufacturing sector caused the USSR's economy to tailspin. 20 percent of the population lived in an ecological disaster zone, and 42 percent of children's dairy products contained poisonous chemicals.

I could summarize the book but would rather leave you with some of its passages instead:

[on the USSR's complicated and inefficient economic structure] "Since the price of bread was heavily subsidized by the state and was lower than the equivalent price of grain, it made perfect economic sense for farmers to use loaves of bread as animal fodder."

[describing a distinctly Communist smell in factory towns] "The blend of odors varied slightly from country to country, but the basic ingredients were always the same: low-octane gasoline, body odor, unwashed frying pans, cheap perfume, brown coal, cabbage, dried urine, and musty newsprint."

[with perestroika, suppressed histories and repressed voices came out of the shadows] "The rewriting of Soviet history became so extensive that Soviet secondary schools were obliged to cancel all history exams, pending the release of new textbooks."

[how enterprising people with connections quickly commandeered the economy in the final two years of Communist power] "The simplest way of making a fortune was to find a way of purchasing goods and raw materials at artificially low Soviet prices and turn around and sell the same goods for much higher free market prices. The profit margin was often staggering."

[the leaders of the 1991 thought they could seal off all communication as they had in 1964 with Khrushchev] "The information revolution had caught up with Russia by 1991, and there were dozens of ways to get the news out. [...] Within an hour Yeltsin's call for popular resistance had been photocopied, faxed, broadcast, and E-mailed all over the world. It was an impressive achievement in a land where all copy machines had been kept under lock and key up until 1989."
