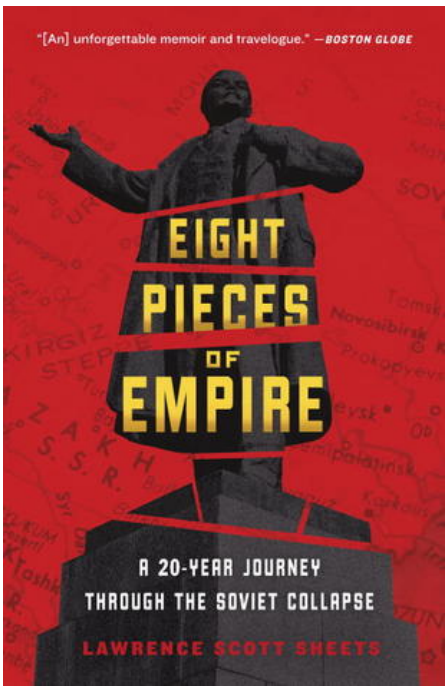

Eight Pieces of Empire: A 20-Year Journey Through the Soviet Collapse

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Not with a bang, but with a quiet, ten-minute address on Christmas Day, 1991: this is how the Soviet Union met its end. But in the wake of that one deceptively calm moment, conflict and violence soon followed. Some of the emergent new countries began to shed totalitarianism while other sought to revive their own dead empires or were led by ex-Soviet leaders who built equally or even more repressive political machines. Since the late 1980s, Sheets lived and reported from the former USSR and saw firsthand the reverberations of the empire's collapse. *Eight Pieces of Empire* draws readers into the people, politics and day-to-day life, painting a vivid portrait of a tumultuous time.

Sheets' stories about people living through these tectonic shifts of fortune—a trio of female saboteurs in Chechnya, the chaos of newly independent Georgia in the early 1990s, young hustlers eager to strike it rich in the post-Soviet economic vacuum—reveal the underreported and surprising ways in which the ghosts of empire still haunt these lands and the world.

Eight Pieces of Empire: A 20-Year Journey Through the Soviet Collapse Details

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From Reader Review Eight Pieces of Empire: A 20-Year Journey Through the Soviet Collapse for online ebook

Melanie says

Sheets was everywhere--in Chechnya during the school hostage tragedy; in emptied villages around Chernobyl where a few people live; on Sakhalin Island with a vanishing tribal culture of reindeer herders; and in dozens of battles and skirmishes as the former Soviet Union disintegrated. (Oh, OK, he couldn't get into Turkmenistan.) But he was able to cross from Uzbekistan into Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. NPR and Reuters sent him to cover the stories, and he shares them with us. Some of them are horrific, of course, but many of them are absurd, and funny, and his up-close view reminded me of some bits of history I'd forgotten, clarified others, and answered questions I didn't know I had, like, where ARE the Romanovs buried, anyway? The people he encounters--the woman who broadcast the local radio report to pack and leave the villages around Chernobyl in one hour, but who has returned to live in her village; the young man who wants to open a ketchup factory; the former art dealers turned political strongmen, among many others--are well worth a visit. Beware, they drink vodka on almost every page and it may inspire desire to join them in spirit. The booze made from old bread, though, left me cold.

Keyton says

A great firsthand perspective on many important events over the last couple decades in the former Soviet Republics. You'd have to go elsewhere for much of the historical and cultural context -- he's swinging a magnifying glass across massive chunks of time and space -- but the places he decides to spend time are excellent and enlightening.

The highlight for me were the chapters on Chechnya. Sheets does a great job of walking the reader through the phases of the Chechen evolution: idealism and a thirst for independence, quickly coopted by gangs and criminals, later radicalized by fundamentalist foreigners and outside money, eventually leading to ideological and actual battles and the end of normal life in much of the region. Sadly, it's a story we're seeing repeated in several areas of the world.

Rachel says

Full disclosure before review: I won this book through FirstReads.

This book in general gets four stars from me. Author Sheets is clearly someone who has spent a lot of time in the area of the world he writes about and has a affinity for it. He has a reporter's eye for how the story of one person or group of people can reflect a larger world event, like a war. He presents a lot of modern history in quick-moving, accessible language. The proofreading left a lot to be desired in my copy, though I hope we can assume that those things were corrected before the first printing to be sold. (In particular, the unclosed parenteses that crop up a lot bug me.) Sheets also isnt' a very robust writer in terms of word choice or sentence structure, but otherwise this is an interesting book that covers a piece of modern history.

Asya says

Some vivid stories from around the former Soviet Union in the process of collapse, which don't quite add up to a whole. The author is a war reporter and the anecdotes read as such, choppy, new journalistic, sometimes memorable and striking, sometimes less so. The idea is a good one in theory, to tell the story of USSRs collapse in a style that mirrors the reality: no coherent narrator, no master plan, no neat chronological narrative to be made of all the tragic, absurd events. And yet historians do write narratives of the most incoherent events, that is what writing history means, so I don't quite buy the premise of the book and don't think it justifies the patchiness of style. Still and all, I wouldn't miss the few really brilliant pieces that work and appreciate the author's front lines perspective.

Raza Syed says

The author watched the demise of The USSR from a front row seat in Moscow. He was there when Gorbachev took the ailing USSR off life support. The end of the Cold War, the world at peace, no more senseless bloodletting over ideologies. Time would prove that to be a terrible delusion.

Over the next 15 years Sheets covered the bloody and turbulent wars that's broke out in various regions of the former Empire. He survived the carnage and lived to write about it.

His perspective and insights into these tragedies are quite interesting and informative. This book covers the Armenia - Azerbaijan conflict, the various tragedies befalling The once prosperous Soviet Republic of Georgia, the state of repressive affairs in Most of The Tans (Uzbekistan, Kazakistan, Turkmenistan etc etc), it dwells on the Chechnya drive for independence and the Russian overreaction.

Sheets looks into the Islamization of these South Caucasus struggles over time and the warping of their original nature into more of a terror organization.

Interesting book to read...

Margaret Sankey says

Sheets was a grad student living in an eccentric Soviet collective housing unit in 1989 and had a front row seat for the changes affecting ordinary Russians. He came back in the early 90s as a reporter quickly tasked to cover the small and devastating wars that rocked the southern Republics, mostly because he was the only person crazy enough to go. This is a memoir, culled from his journalistic pieces, with anecdotes that veer from the bizarre (the commander at the frontier crossing who wants a western partner to help deal snake venom), the surreal (staying at a lush but abandoned Soviet "rest spa" outside of the Georgian capital as it got pounded with "grad" missiles, terrifying (getting out on the last overloaded Aeroflot cargo plane, with bald tires and sketchy fuel) to the tragic (refugees freezing in the heirloom carpets they were dragging across the mountains as escape barter).

Marisa says

Eight Pieces of Empire is a fascinating look at the breakdown of the former U.S.S.R. through the eyes of an American journalist. This was the perfect book for me, since I love travel and politics, non-fiction, and memoirs; this book is all of those things wrapped up in about three hundred pages. Not that it is a completely comprehensive history of that period, by any means. It's more like one American's experience in a somewhat mysterious and misunderstood corner of the planet.
I loved this book. The topics were wide ranging and although there were several parts detailing the many wars and instances of violence, the author always managed to make a human connection to the events. This seemed to keep the book from being too bloody or depressing, even though the reality of the situation is pretty grim. The human element was really what made this book shine for me. The disappearance of Galina Nizhelskaya was a really emotional part of the book. The chapter about Beslan was so intense I almost couldn't finish that section. I think the real brilliance of this is how someone who is an outsider yet truly understands the situation in Russia can illuminate the politics and personalities involved in a way that conveys the struggle of the average person living through these events. It wasn't all dark, however. I really liked the section where the author visits the indigenous reindeer herders of Sakhalin. Also, the part about the date with the Chechen women was pretty great, too.
In some ways, this book reminded me of another of my favorites, Nothing To Envy by Barbara Dimmick. Although there are several differences in the style and topics, they both seem to cut through complex geopolitical issues to reveal the real lives of everyday people.

Scottnshana says

Good, solid journalistic impressions of the Former Soviet Union. Many of the focal events of the last two decades are here (i.e., Beslan and Chernobyl) in Mr. Sheets's personal experience, as are the minute but unique details of life in the former USSR. The book has some insight on several issues the rest of the world is dealing with today, like the 2008 Georgia War and the continuing trouble in Afghanistan; the observations on the way Chechnya went from a nationalist revolt to Islamicist shenanigans are especially poignant to anyone monitoring the "Clash of Civilizations". Good writing, good perspectives, good book.

Jeremy Zentner says

Amazing historical/contemporary portrayal of war and strife in the former soviet empire. I have always been interested in soviet history and to some extent, Putin's ascension to power. This interest is generally drowned in Cold War documentation, which is respectable in it's own right, but not the complete story of the former communist nation. Eight Pieces of Empire will chronicle life amongst poverty-stricken communists, black market gangsters, a proud survivor of the Nazi invasion, secular insurgents turned Islamic fundamentalists, the inner workings of the Uzbek Stalinist state and its roll in Afghanistan, the beginnings of the American war in Afghanistan, civil wars and foreign wars throughout the Caucus region, dwindling native ethnicities in Siberia, the excavation of the Romanov dynasty, communities still living in the radioactive Chernobyl, and general comments on a psyche that witnesses a decade of war and violence over trivial issues. By far one of the most interesting reads on Russian history.

Jeffrey says

I received an uncorrected proof for free in a Goodreads giveaway

Lawrence Scott Shields spent the last twenty years watching the Soviet Union disintegrate into a disparate array of states, many in disarray. This memoir collects some of his experiences as a reporter for Reuters and NPR. Mostly set in the failing southern, largely muslim states, Shields brings a refreshingly contextual view to a number of events that were poorly covered by the American media when they occurred.

As a memoir, it's neither a complete narrative of the post-Soviet era to date, nor does it have a coherent message to convey. Indeed, if one could find a singular message, it's that the Soviet Union was never the monolith America thought it was and those differences are only widened by the Union's collapse. For most, things have changed quickly and people's fates have turned on the smallest of whims, including the author's.

This book will not be as rewarding for those unfamiliar with Russian history. Sheets makes cultural references, like Potemkin Villages, which are going to be unfamiliar to a complete neophytes. But there are enough moments, particularly around the U.S. Afghan invasion and the South Ossetia war that will be enhanced for those who only followed American press reports.

As noted, I received an uncorrected proof. While I'm not going to gripe about typos, though Marist-Leninist just makes me laugh, or small word errors, there Sheets' inexperience as a writer shows up in a couple spots. For a particular resort, the windows were "shattered" no less than three times over ten pages. While it may even be true, the repetitive illustration of conflict's proximity to the author tires quickly.

Regardless, I still think this book is worth reading, even if it expects a lot of its audience.

Mikheil Samkharadze says

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Kathleen says

I have to say, this book was really not what I thought it was going to be. After a solid start, Sheets gets bogged down in the wars in the Caucasus and Central Asia, which makes for a very different book. This is not to say that these are not terribly important, just that it seems kind of ridiculous to call this a "Journey Through the Soviet Collapse" if nearly half of the book focuses on Georgia. When he does adventure outside of these regions, these sections are not written nearly as well, are not nearly as informative or interesting.

I also felt that Sheets did not give enough background information, didn't do enough to contextualize and frame the subjects he closed. One prime example of this is his treatment of collectivization, or should I say lack of treatment. Yes, he is writing about the 1990s and early 21st century, but I don't think a reader who didn't have a background in the region would have any idea of what this really meant for his reindeer farmers on Sakhalin. This was perhaps less of an issue for me, but I think it would take a lot away from the book for the uninitiated reader.

I had been quite excited for this book, but in the end I only finished it because I'm stubborn and don't like to quit books once I'm more than 50ish pages in.

Patrick Worms says

Imagine a starving child gazing longingly through a window at a rich candle-lit restaurant table, her bare feet in the snow. That is what this book is like. We get lovely glimpses of a strange world beyond the window, but we never quite get there. Almost every chapter concludes at the end of what should rightfully have merely been its scene-setter. Sheets seems to have strung together his Reuters and NPR pieces, his sub-editors were sloppy, his descriptions often banal. Yet I gave the book four stars. Why? Despite its flaws, it works. It is a page-turner. And it may well be that the book's shortcomings are only glaring for those who know the area. For those who have no particular reason to focus on the Soviet empire, however, this is a very readable short book.

Tony says

When I declared my undergraduate major, one of the required courses I would have to take senior year was "Soviet Foreign Policy." However, by the time senior year rolled around, there was no more Soviet Union, and the course had been haphazardly reconstructed as a seminar given by two visiting professors from Moscow on the Commonwealth of Independent States. In this book, a journalist who covered Russia and the former Soviet republics in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR provides a fragmentary glimpse into the collapse of the old and the birthing pains of the new. I say fragmentary because Sheets only writes about places and events he personally covered, and thankfully avoids attempting to patch together any master

thesis out of his experience. Instead, what he provides are brief glimpses into corners of the fragmented remains of an empire and some of the many fragmented lives that resulted from that collapse.

His stories unfold chronologically, starting in Part 1 with his time as a language student in the late '80s (his fluent Russian is what led to his success as a journalist in the region), and the most vivid episode from this time is his friendship with one of the mafiya types that were just starting to bloom. From there, he moves on to discuss the calamitous war in Georgia and Abkhazia, then to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, then Chechnya. These three parts on the Caucuses are a depressing litany of lost causes and warlords, chaos and civilian casualties. All of which have been covered in much greater detail in many other books, but Sheets' anecdotes and interludes provide a true "you are there" sense of the futility of it all, as well as a sense of the actual people on the ground. Part 5 is a brief peek into the return and normalization of Orthodox Christianity in post-Soviet Russia, but felt a bit incomplete -- I could have used some more on the topic of the reemergence of religion in Russia. Part 6 touches upon the Central Asian republics, with three items focusing on Uzbekistan, including a breathtaking account of the Battle of Qala-i-Jongi. Part 7 is a hodgepodge of pieces, including the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the fate of the indigenous Ulta people of Sakhalin Island, life in the restricted zone of Chernobyl, and a horrific account of the 2004 massacre at the Beslan school.

The book concludes with a very brief epilogue that provides some small measure of closure on Sheets own history with the remnants of USSR. Again, there is no large lesson to be learned from the book, just impressions and images of the chaos that emerges when an empire collapses. Those with an interest in, and prior exposure to the history of the Soviet Union and its component republics will find it an interesting set of vignettes, that lend depth and color to what they already knew, but it seems like a book that's unlikely to gain a wider audience.

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

In its beginning was its end. Actually that’s not quite true; the Soviet Union came in with a bang and out with a whimper. Even so the two events were united, a long, slow motion curtain-call for the old Russian imperium. Aleksandr Kugel, a Russian theatre critic and editor, writing a few months after the Bolshevik coup in 1917 put the matter rather well;

The dying process has begun. Everything we see now is just part of the agony. Bolshevism is the death of Russia. And a body the size of Russia cannot die in one hour. It groans.

It certainly did groan, decade after decade, a body in terminal decline, a body destroyed by the most aggressive form of ideological cancer. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the USSR, made one fundamental error: he formed the belief that he was a doctor; in fact he was an undertaker; he tried to raise Caesar only to bury him. His twin medicines, glasnost and perestroika, openness and restructuring, only served to reveal just how bad the patient was, how terminal the condition. The benighted man finally opened to the truth, delivering a funeral oration on Christmas Day, 1991. It all ended with mealy-mouthed good wishes.

There are odd historical ironies here. Imperialism, according to Lenin, is the highest stage of capitalism. His communist state was the highest stage of imperialism. In other words, the revolution of 1917 preserved in aspic what was in effect a Tsarist colonial structure built up over centuries. The Russian Slavs had taken up the white man’s burden, ruling over Kalmyks, Uzbeks, Chechens, Inuits, Tatars and patchwork of other

nationalities, races and ethnic groups. As it was, the nationalities suffered the harshest colonial oppression at the hands of Stalin the Georgian, whose first post in the Soviet government was - another irony - Commissar for the Nationalities.

The house that Lenin built collapsed that Christmas Day in what is surely an event unparalleled in the history of anti-climaxes, but the aftershocks were quite devastating, the fall-out from this post-imperial scramble. Lawrence Scott Sheets, an American reporter working for Reuters and National Public Radio, witnessed the whole thing, his experiences now written up in *8 Pieces of Empire: A 20-Year Journey Through the Soviet Collapse*, which serves as a personal record; part memoir, part travelogue, part political analysis.

There are surely few regrets over the death of the Soviet Union; there must be lots over what followed - the crazy ethnic conflicts; the revival of quarrels sublimated for generations; the murders, the kidnapping, the anarchy, the criminality, the chaos and the terrorism. Then there was the flight into fresh forms of dictatorship in some of the new states, based on personality cults that might have embarrassed Stalin.

This terrible scattering left peoples and countries trying to establish a place for themselves, a sense of identity, a sense of belonging. With borders defined in the past by bureaucrats, taking little account of history or ethnic composition, the outcome was sadly inevitable – a series of racial and territorial wars that are thought to have cost the lives of up to 200,000 people.

It's the pathology of upheaval, to use his own phrase, that Sheets writes about, in an intimate, honest and wholly revealing way. It was at its worse in the Caucuses, particularly in Georgia, whose post-Soviet history might very well serve as a case study in political lunacy. This was a place that went, as the author puts it, from being the crown jewel of empire to a failed state by steady stages. There was Eduard Shevardnadze, once a respected Soviet politician, fleeing from his homeland, the newly-independent country's first president, in a ravaged, jet-fuel-dripping plane covered in bullet holes, the principle victim of the so-called Rose Revolution

Conflict, fissure and war were to follow, in a country so extreme in forms of behaviour that notices had to be posted in parliament reminding the legislators to leave their guns outside. What astonishes me most is that Georgia was once a serious candidate for NATO membership, with all its smouldering resentment against Russia, coming to a head in 2008. How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we might have been involved in a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing, as someone or other once said.

The book concludes with the greatest horror of all – the Beslan Massacre of 2004, when a school in North Ossetia, the scene of a hostage crisis, saw the deaths of almost four hundred people, many of them children, caught in a vicious cross-fire between Chechen terrorists and heavy-handed government forces. Sheets is at his most poignant here, recalling how he gave a shocked teenager his phone so he could contact his sister. She was already dead.

"Feeling at best an interloper and at worst a tragedy speculator," he writes, "I put my equipment away. Covering war and tragedy is a bit like exposing oneself to radiation. In carefully measured doses, it often poses few well-established health risks…Unlimited exposure over very long periods, however, is unwise for the mind and the soul."

He stopped, I feel sure, just at the right time, for the process of fragmentation, as he warns, is by no means at an end. A return to these horrors was unthinkable, save for the fact that in Russia nothing is unthinkable, as Isaiah Berlin once wrote.

There is no analytical depth to Sheet’s book, no meta-narrative, but it cuts in a personal and revealing way, without fuss and burdensome detail, into several tragedies in several acts, staged all the way from Saint Petersburg in the west to Sakhalin Island in the east, all in eight uneasy pieces and more. It’s a story told with moving sincerity, one that goes far in helping to understand how a country evolved from a bureaucratic morass into an ethnic mess. I will never think of journalists reporting from the front line in the same way again.
