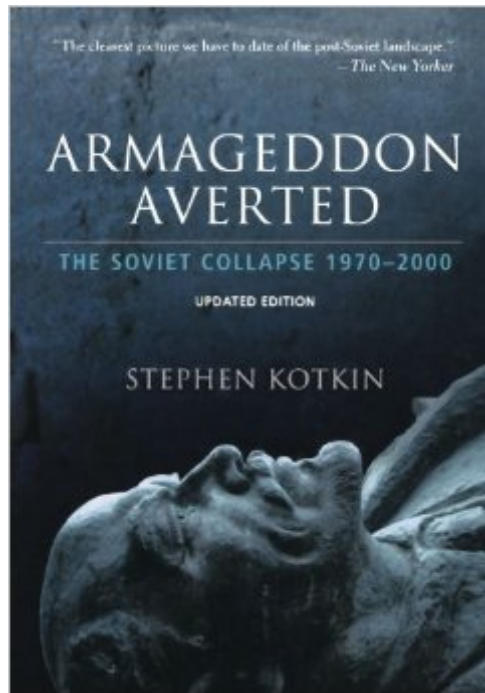


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# Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000



## Synopsis

Featuring extensive revisions to the text as well as a new introduction and epilogue--bringing the book completely up to date on the tumultuous politics of the previous decade and the long-term implications of the Soviet collapse--this compact, original, and engaging book offers the definitive account of one of the great historical events of the last fifty years. Combining historical and geopolitical analysis with an absorbing narrative, Kotkin draws upon extensive research, including memoirs by dozens of insiders and senior figures, to illuminate the factors that led to the demise of Communism and the USSR. The new edition puts the collapse in the context of the global economic and political changes from the 1970s to the present day. Kotkin creates a compelling profile of post Soviet Russia and he reminds us, with chilling immediacy, of what could not have been predicted--that the world's largest police state, with several million troops, a doomsday arsenal, and an appalling record of violence, would liquidate itself with barely a whimper. Throughout the book, Kotkin also paints vivid portraits of key personalities. Using recently released archive materials, for example, he offers a fascinating picture of Gorbachev, describing this virtuoso tactician and resolutely committed reformer as "flabbergasted by the fact that his socialist renewal was leading to the system's liquidation"--and more or less going along with it. At once authoritative and provocative, *Armageddon Averted* illuminates the collapse of the Soviet Union, revealing how "principled restraint and scheming self-interest brought a deadly system to meek dissolution." Acclaim for the First Edition: "The clearest picture we have to date of the post-Soviet landscape."--*The New Yorker* "A triumph of the art of contemporary history. In fewer than 200 pages Kotkin elucidates the implosion of the Soviet empire--the most important and startling series of international events of the past fifty years--and clearly spells out why, thanks almost entirely to the 'principal restraint' of the Soviet leadership, that collapse didn't result in a cataclysmic war, as all experts had long forecasted."--*The Atlantic Monthly* "Concise and persuasive The mystery, for Kotkin, is not so much why the Soviet Union collapsed as why it did so with so little collateral damage." --*The New York Review of Books*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In a relatively short book, Stephen Kotkin brilliantly brings to light the economic and socio-political factors that led to the death of the Soviet Union, and how, unlike the violent demise of the former Yugoslavia, Gorbachev and other progressives in the Soviet government managed to turn the possible apocalyptic death of the Soviet experiment into a relatively peaceful half-transition to a market economy. Kotkin also explores how that transition crippled the pseudo-prosperity of the Soviet republics (though he focuses primarily on the Russian SSR and the East European neo-states, with only moderate mentioning of the effects of the collapse to the Soviet Socialist Republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus). Professor Kotkin also exposes in an eye-opening view the failures of Perestroika (Gorbachevian Soviet Reform) and Glasnost (openness), and how Gorbachev attempted to steer the USSR's reform policies to reflect the true ideas of enlightened socialism. In addition, his description of the extent of corruption in post-Soviet Russia also makes you see how ineffective Russia's economic system really is. The book is a definitive description of the twilight time of the USSR, and is a must-read for those who wish to expand their knowledge of Soviet-era market reforms, and also for anyone who is outright curious about Soviet-era economic and political history.

In *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse*, historian Stephen Kotkin demonstrates a profound knowledge of the political and economic structures and institutions that have shaped Soviet and post-Soviet history over the past several decades. This excellent little book makes two provocative arguments that contradict the conventional wisdom concerning the demise of the Soviet regime and its aftermath. Kotkin's first argument is that what has passed for "reform" since 1991 has been the ongoing structural and institutional decay of the old system. Obsolete, inefficient factories are no more productive now than they were during Soviet times; government officials, well-connected insiders, and factory managers continue to bilk the country of its treasure; and presidential

perquisites rival those of former politburo members. With no rule of law, no system of credit, a weak legal system, and a national bank that speculates on its own currency and hides funds in offshore accounts, the reforms of the post-Soviet era are a myth. Indeed, in a de facto sense, the old system is still in its death throes. The second part of Kotkin's argument concerns the end of Soviet rule in 1991. Kotkin believes that the Soviet regime could have muddled along for several years after 1991 without imploding. It still had a large and powerful military with nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons at its disposal. It wasn't the brilliance of American foreign policy or economic decline that caused the regime to fall when it did. Instead, in a paradoxical sense, it was Gorbachev's belief in the humanistic nature of socialism that did in the system. Socialism was supposed to be fair and just, ensuring a decent quality of life for the Soviet people, a dream that Gorbachev tried to deliver. His ideological convictions led him to try to reform a system that could not be reformed. His policy of "glasnost" or openness made even more apparent to the public the failings of the system. And, because he believed that socialism was based on humanistic principles, he refused to resort to violence on a large scale to hold the Union together. While this is a brilliant little book, some important issues could have been more extensively explored. A greater exploration of the influences underpinning Gorbachev's ideological convictions would have been helpful. What books did he read? Why did he see the good in the system when so many others did not? Other than believing in the inherent goodness of socialism, were there additional factors that fueled Gorbachev's decision to allow the Soviet Union to disintegrate relatively peacefully? For example, some may argue that Gorbachev, keenly aware of his place in history, knew that he would be viewed as a villain had he butchered his own people to save the regime. Indeed, Gorbachev just may have been too decent a human being to preside over a bloodbath, regardless of his ideological convictions. Moreover, from a geopolitical standpoint, it would have been dangerous for Gorbachev to use overwhelming force internally. The United States and the rest of the world were keeping a close watch on him. Gorbachev had no assurances that the West wouldn't support independence movements in the Republics had he moved decisively to suppress them. In his concluding remarks, Kotkin indicates that Russia's best bet for the future might be to join the euro. While this might be a great idea in theory, one wonders when Russia will be able to meet the economic criteria required to do so.

This relatively short book is a strong analysis of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath. Kotkin is particularly concerned with rebutting Western triumphalist accounts of the Soviet collapse and focuses on the people who really made the key decisions, the leading elites of the Soviet state. Kotkin points to 2 major structural features that undermined the Soviet Union. The first was the

failure of the Soviet economy to keep pace with the burgeoning economies of the USA, Western Europe, and Japan. As early as the mid-1960s, intelligent Soviet economists were warning of economic stagnation. The second factor, greatly magnifying the effects of Soviet economic inefficiency, was the burden of Cold War competition with the USA and its allies. The Soviet state promised economic and social utopia, and despite real achievements in modernizing Russia and other parts of the Soviet state, delivered sluggish economic growth, massive corruption, an oligarchic party-state, and suppression of human rights. Many Soviet leaders were aware of these problems, but the generational shift that occurred with the ascent of Gorbachev brought a real reformer to power. Unlike his predecessors, who were willing to temporize and maintain power with very modest efforts at reform, Gorbachev was willing to take what were in the Soviet context truly radical steps. A pragmatic idealist, Gorbachev was motivated by a sincere desire to produce a humane form of socialism, but the ironic result of his efforts was to destroy the entity he wished to save from itself. Kotkin lays out nicely how efforts at reform, notably the weakening of the Communist Party, undid some of the key bonds holding together the Soviet Union. He shows as well that many of the features of post-Soviet world were continuations of patterns well established during the Soviet years and that others, notably some aspects of the economic chaos, were the result of a weak central state. Kotkin makes a particularly interesting point that the nationalism that emerged with the breakup of the Soviet Union was partly a product of the way the Soviet Union was organized into national republics. Once the trans-Union bonds of the Party, the military, and the KGB had been broken, the national republics were the remaining formal governmental structures. Kotkin sees the poverty and lawlessness that followed the end of the Soviet Union as essentially inevitable and argues that a democratic state will emerge in Russia only with the establishment of an effective central government and legal system. He also, however, offers measured praise for both Gorbachev and his successors. True to his essentially idealistic nature, Gorbachev ultimately chose principle over the maintenance of power. The dissolution of the Soviet Union could have been accompanied by the type of massive violence seen in the former Yugoslavia, a rather scary thought given the size of the Soviet nuclear arsenal.

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