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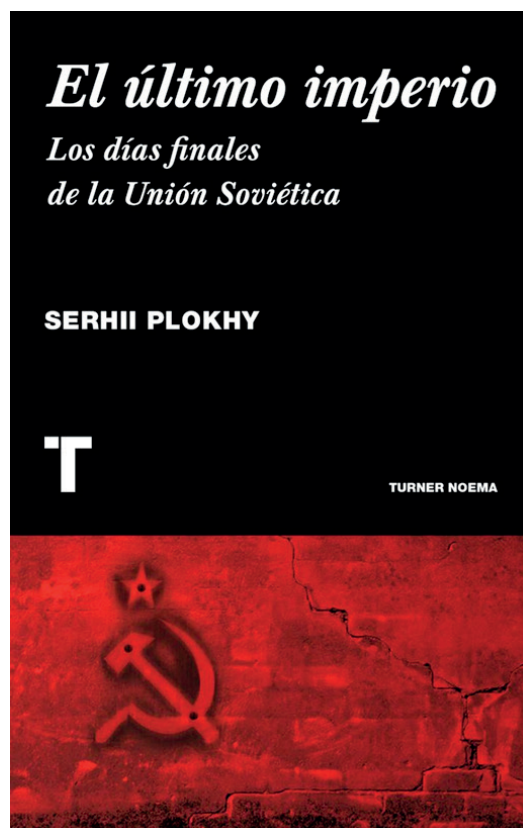
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BOOK REVIEW

THE LAST EMPIRE. THE FINAL DAYS OF THE SOVIET UNION

*Author: PLOKHY, Serhii. Madrid. Publisher: Turner, 2015. 576 pages.
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The subject of this book is highly topical because it refers to symbolism as well as to geopolitics. To this effect, the fact that stands out is that it was 25 years since the failed coup to the then still Soviet Union in August of 2016 stands out. That failed coup had targeted toppling Gorbachev and, consequently, reversing the democratic changes that he had brought to his country after becoming its maximum authority in 1985. Likewise, the dispute that Russia carries on with Ukraine today, in spite of Minsk II, has turned the former Soviet area into a protagonist of information and debate.

The Last Empire is a meticulous and clarifying account of the dismantling of the USSR. The author transmits it giving priority to the role played by its two main republics (Russia and Ukraine), and the United States under the presidency of George Bush, and with James Baker as Secretary of State.

Serhii Plokhy adequately defines the aim of his study. On the one hand, he identifies the main actors, who are not always in conflict, although conflict rather than cooperation tends to prevail between them; in fact, when the latter takes place, in most cases it is out of self-interest. On the other hand, he chronologically restricts his work (August – December 1991); in other words, from the failed coup against Gorbachev until the signing of the Belavezha Accords by which the USSR was dissolved and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was created, with Russia, Ukraine, and to a lesser degree, Belarus, as the driving forces (and leadership) behind its creation.

The introduction to this work is a fundamental part of it because in it the author explains his research methodology, standing out his thoroughness. Indeed, besides his readings of monographs, reports and the press, Serhii Plokhy stresses that he interviewed some of the main political actors that are mentioned in his work, and that he had access to consult the «*declassified documents at the George H.W. Bush presidential library, among which are the archives of the National Security Council of the United States, the correspondence of White House civil servants in charge of arranging trips abroad for the President, and transcriptions of interviews and telephone conversations between Bush and other leaders*» (pg. 22).

Throughout the almost 600 pages of this work, Presidents, Prime Ministers, diplomats and ministers also appear..., with whom the reader who is not specialized in History or in International Relations may not be familiar. To make up for this deficit, the author adequately contextualizes each one of the names that come up, which enriches the book and makes its reading easier.

In the introduction, Serheii Plokhy also anticipates the theses that he will prove as the book unfolds. The main thesis refers to the idea that the disintegration of the USSR had as its main factor the position taken by its two main republics (Russia and Ukraine), linked to two names: Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk. From this point on, he narrates, dissects, and analyzes the events that followed.

Likewise, the figure of Gorbachev is a transversal protagonist of the book, and he uses this to describe the situation of the USSR in 1991, a «giant stroke of luck with clay foundations». However, Gorbachev was unable to understand nor assume such a reality; proof of this is that in his actions he combined requests of economic aid, with

the hope that his country, along with the United States, would become the governing focal point of a «gradually more disperse and multipolar» world. (pg. 47)

As previously pointed out, such a fantasy collided head-on with the facts, as Boris Pankin (Foreign Affairs Minister of the Union) narrated: *«we needed economic aid from the United States, and to get it, we were willing to make many concessions. That is why we accepted the Independence of the Baltic States, we withdrew from the Third World, and reduced our support to Cuba. We could no longer afford that type of relations, although we presented abandoning them as a sign of good will»*. (pgs. 241-242).

In fact, the author reproaches Gorbachev, who unlike Yeltsin, for not understanding that the citizens had turned into a decisive force in the USSR. This fact was proven as a result of the failed coup in August of 1991: *«although the mobilization of the masses was the result of the glasnost and the perestroika, the Muscovites had not defended, during the days of the coup, the ideals of the Soviet President: people did not aspire to restructure the «system», but rather to build a new one»* (pg. 166).

Consequently, the contradictions between ends and means marked Gorbachev's behavior during his years leading the USSR, although they became stronger throughout 1991. His obsession to keep his leadership turned into a display of messianism and paternalism. As a paradigm of this premise, his words during his resignation speech (25 December, 1991) stand out: *«I have declared myself a convinced supporter of the independence and freedom of the peoples, and of the sovereignty of the republics, but also of safeguarding the unitary State and the integrity of the country»* (pgs. 426-427)

Throughout the book, a series of actors gradually appear, with their own agenda of objectives which differed from that of Gorbachev. Indeed, while the latter tried to preserve the unity (and sovereignty) of the USSR at every moment, such a desire was not shared by the representatives of the former republics, Russia included, where nationalism gradually permeated. To this respect, note the following statement from Yeltsin (May 1990): *«the central government cruelly exploits Russia, it cuts back its aid, it does not think of the future. We must put an end to these relations so unjust. It is Russia that must decide which functions to keep, and which to transfer to the central government, not the other way around»* (pg. 63)

Therefore, it is not surprising that, as the reading of the book goes on, a phenomenon acquires self autonomy: the loss of attributes of the Union, which were automatically assumed by the republics, without excessive legality respect for the constitutional legality, it should be added. Yeltsin's Russia and Kravchuk's Ukraine symbolized this phenomenon.

Despite his attempts, Gorbachev could not stop the dynamics described. The position of the United States, though, was more pragmatic, or realistic (not opportunistic). In this sense, in the summer of 1991 (before the coup in August), during his first visit to Ukraine, he blurted out that: *«some have demanded from the United States to choose between President Gorbachev and the independent leaders in all of the USSR. I think this is a false dilemma. Let's be fair: President Gorbachev has achieved extraordinary progress. With the perestroika, glasnost, and the democratic reforms, he has placed his country on*

the road to freedom (...) freedom is not equal to independence. The United States will not support those who seek independence to substitute a distant tyranny for a regional one, nor those who promote a suicidal nationalism based on ethnic hate» (pg. 91).

Indeed, the Bush administration had found in Gorbachev a spokesperson in whom to trust, which resulted in agreements regarding matters which the White House considered transcendental (in particular, nuclear disarmament). However, he also gradually understood the imminence of the dismantling of the USSR, which required finding new partners through whom to channel the relations.

Nevertheless, Bush, especially, under no circumstances managed without Gorbachev, whom he always supported. In fact, Bush did not automatically recognize the independence of Ukraine after the referendum held on 1 December, 1991, in which over 90% of the citizens voted for the independence, accepted by Yeltsin's Russia (though warning that Crimea belonged to Russia, not to Ukraine).

In the United States *modus operandi*, two conflicting alternatives may be identified. On the one hand, the one sponsored by Dick Cheney (to support the dissolution of the USSR, and open consulates in all of the republics). On the other hand, the one from James Baker, George Bush, and Brent Scowcroft, who thought that the declarations of independence made by the republics could generate territorial, economic, and military conflicts among them; thus, the disintegration of the USSR should be sealed pacifically (pg. 238).

As a result of everything, December of 1991 witnessed the disintegration of the USSR, and the creation of the CEI, lacking supranational structures. Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus had acted unilaterally, voluntarily omitting the figure and attributes of Gorbachev. Furthermore, they considered the United States as the only actor to whom to communicate its actions (which should not be taken as a synonym of held accountable).

Once the events took place, the Bush administration also changed the tone and content of its rhetoric: *«it is a victory for democracy and freedom. It is a victory for the moral superiority of our values»* (pg. 432), stated the American president during Christmas of 1991. However, in spite of the profitability that he thought he would obtain from this message during the presidential elections in 1992, such a strategy failed; thus, *«like Winston Churchill who had also led his country in times of war, Bush failed to take advantage of the success of his foreign policy. In both cases, the voters wanted a change in domestic policies»* (pg. 444).

In short, this is an essential work to understand some of the current conflicts because it points to their genesis. Serhii Polkhy transmits to the reader, with rigor and precision, a fundamental part of the history of the 20th century, the disintegration of the USSR, whose consequences are still tangible in the 21st century.

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