The book traces the antecedents to the committees' success: women's role in the Soviet system and the changing types of women's social activism and its perceptions. Some issues are evaded, such as the likelihood of FSB controls and the heritage of political repressions in the Soviet era, when the state's attitude to millions of people was the opposite of *zabota*, the "care" that is expected of the state and which, according the author, is the ethical basis of the committee' work. The ways in which the latest political developments in Russia affect the committee are beyond the book's time frame. Yet one of its interim conclusions is a striking thought about the role of personal relationships: "Leaving the concept of the informal," writes Lebedev, "bracketing the problematics of corruption and clientelism while analyzing the less perverse extensions of *close relationships*, one can achieve a better understanding of the structuration of the political in Russian society" (109, emphasis added).

The book ends with sample texts of the anxious letters that the committee has received from soldiers' families seeking help.

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The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union. By Serhii Plokhy. New York: Basic Books, 2014. xxii, 489 pp. Notes. Index. Plates. Maps. $32.00, hard bound.

The Last Empire, a narrative in four-hundred-plus pages covering just a few months, offers a very good read. Serhii Plokhy again proves an able raconteur: this book, too, sparkles with direct quotations from participants and reinjects suspense into contemporary history. The story pivots on two episodes, the December 1, 1991, referendum on independence in Soviet Ukraine and, six days later, the declaration at a forest hunting lodge in Belarus dissolving the 1922 Treaty on the Creation of the USSR. The work draws on declassified archives (the George Bush Presidential Library, the Gorbachev Foundation), scattered interviews (Leonid Kravchuk, Nicholas Burns), and a wealth of published memoirs and secondary accounts, including the volume of testimony by V. G. Stepankov and E. K. Lisov, *Kremlevskii zagovor: Versiia sledstviia* (1992), used extensively by David Remnick in his deadline-quick masterpiece *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (1993). Plokhy's distinguishing quality, besides incorporating material that has subsequently come to light, consists in lengthy treatment not just of Moscow but of Kiev and especially Washington, D.C.

Highlighting personalities, talking points, and intelligence profiles, Plokhy adduces choice anecdotes and evinces a welcome appreciation of paradox. For example, President George H. W. Bush, who had boldly backed the unification of Germany, expelled Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in a grand coalition, and assisted the peaceful character of the USSR's monumental dissolution, crowed a bit in his January 1992 State of the Union Address about "one sole and preeminent power, the United States of America" (390). But Bush went on to lose his reelection bid: the United States was mired in recession, and a third party candidate, Ross Perot, split the Republican vote. Chunks of the book consist of Mikhail Gorbachev's phone calls to Bush and meetings with Secretary of State James Baker. Plokhy reminds us that Gorbachev's resignation speech in the Kremlin was filmed by U.S. television crews, while an American (Tom Johnson, president of CNN) provided the Soviet president with the pen to sign the decree. Plokhy also notes that during the August 1991 coup, Voice of America became the most important broadcaster of objective information, bolstering the resistance. That said, he frames his account as a repudiation of the "triumphalist interpretation of the Soviet collapse as an American victory in the Cold War" (xv). He quotes the

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former American ambassador to Moscow Jack F. Matlock, Jr.: "We did not bring down the Soviet Union, though some people want to take credit for it now, and some of the chauvinists in Russia would like to accuse us of it. It just isn't true" (392). Question: if the Bush administration, fearing a violent Yugoslav-style breakup across Eurasia, tried to hold onto Gorbachev and the Soviet Union, does that mean the United States did not win the Cold War?

This was a collapse that none of Plokhy's principals had sought—not Bush, Gorbachev, Boris El'tsin, Kravchuk, or Stanislav Shushkevich—but that each of them helped accelerate. In that light, Plokhy deftly returns Ukraine to the center of the story, without indulging the Ukrainian nationalist narrative, showing in fine detail how Ukraine's very late drive to secession made inevitable the demise of the USSR. At the same time, he is inexact about the formation of a separate RSFSR KGB and a separate RSFSR defense ministry, both of which, crucially, helped fracture the central Soviet elite and both of which existed before summer 1991; this imprecision allows him to place greater emphasis on the dramatic events of late 1991. He is also ambiguous on whether Russia's earlier move to secede from the USSR was a condition for Ukraine's. He does note that by the time El'tsin came face-to-face with the consequences of his political opportunism, it was too late to save the relationship with Ukraine that the upstart Russian president had never intended to sever. Threats by El'tsin's government in 1991 to reclaim Crimea for Russia failed to halt the sudden momentum in Kiev.

Plokhy does not address the longer-term Soviet and global economy, Poland's Solidarity, the rise of east Asia, or other factors that had put the USSR in such a shaky position by the time he commences his narrative, focused on a handful of men. He also does not recount the gist of the USSR's formation, particularly the role of the early Ukrainian SSR's leadership in refusing to be reabsorbed into a unitary Russia. Could there have been a 1991 without this decisive 1921–23 Ukrainian history of preserving its status as a union republic?

In conclusion, Plokhy asserts that the American establishment—deluded that it had brought down the communist behemoth—hubristically went forward, under the second Bush, to topple lesser regimes, such as Saddam Hussein's. "In many ways," he writes, "the road to the [2003] Iraq War had begun in 1991" (408). What of the litany of Cold War-era instigated coups and military interventions?

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Der Putsch gegen Gorbatschow und das Ende der Sowjetunion. By Ignaz Lozo. Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2014. 501 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. €39.90, hard bound.

This book is a detailed study of the attempted coup of August 1991 against the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. It is strongly concentrated on the events of the coup itself rather than its consequences for the Soviet Union, which are covered in a mere twelve pages. There is a good reason for this approach, however, because, as the author points out, no scholarly study has yet been published on the subject, although a considerable period of time has elapsed since then.

The background to the coup is, naturally, also considered. The author's version of the situation Gorbachev inherited in 1985 is very bleak—perhaps a little too bleak. Arguably, Leonid Brezhnev did not bequeath a "serious crisis" (26) to his successors. The Soviet economy was still growing in the early 1980s. CIA figures on Soviet GDP

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