

# The Domestic Politics of Soviet Collapse

Winter 2024  
Tuesdays 11-1

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office hours: Fridays 10-12 via [Calendly](#)

This course tries to understand how one of the most successful empires of modern times collapsed seemingly overnight. We focus on the domestic and internal sources of this profound transformation by looking at the forces and personalities inside the USSR. Our time is short so we will get partial, confusing, and sometimes contradictory answers, using a small and inherently biased sample of the literature. Nevertheless, we will do our best to consider this historical event from a variety of perspectives, and perhaps even speculate about what it means for Russian politics today.

## Requirements

Four formal components make up your grade:

**Weekly Responses.** 35%. These are short responses (350-400 words) that critically assess the week's readings and raise questions related to the themes and arguments in those readings. There are seven responses in total, worth 5% each, in Weeks 2-8. The responses are due (via Quercus) by midnight the day before class. More information is available in the reading responses handout on Quercus.

**Class Engagement.** 15%. Marks for course engagement are typically determined by things like who talks a lot during class. In this course such participation is only one component of course engagement, and implies not only consistent but *useful* participation, as well as things like:

- being prepared by reading everything beforehand and coming in ready to discuss
- being specific and concrete with your comments
- staying focused and engaged by avoiding distractions during class
- listening to what others are saying (and keeping in mind what they are not saying)
- most importantly, *asking questions* – in your writing, in office hours, during the presentations of your fellow students, and of course in our weekly discussions.

**In-Class Presentation** – 10%. In the last four sessions of the course, you will sign up for a session to present your final project. This will be a slideshow presentation, about 10-15 minutes long, that describes the arguments you're making and the kinds of evidence you plan to use, followed by a Q&A.

**Final Project: The Podcast** – 40%. For your final project, put together a video podcast (20-30 min in length) dealing with a theme or puzzle encountered during your readings. We will discuss expectations for the final project a bit later on. A traditional final paper (about 20 pages double-spaced) is also welcome as an alternative.

## Readings

It's optional but recommended to get copies of the following books. All readings will be posted on Quercus.

Francis Spufford (2010) *Red Plenty*

Vladislav Zubok (2021) *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*

David Remnick (1994) *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire*

Svetlana Alexievich (2017) *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*

## Course Outline

### Session 1 – January 9

Introduction. No readings.

### Session 2 – January 16

- *Red Plenty* (2010) by Francis Spufford . Parts I and II - all; Part III – Intro only; Part IV – Intro, Chapter 3; Part V – Intro, Chapter 2; Part VI – Intro only

### Session 3 – January 23

- M. Urban “Conceptualizing political power in the USSR”, *Studies in Comparative Communism* 18:4
- Robert Daniels, *The End of the Communist Revolution*, Ch. 1
- *Collapse* by Zubok, Chapter 1-6

### Session 4 – January 30

- *Collapse* Chapters 7-12
- Christopher Caldwell 2022. "Lessons of the Fall: Revisiting the Collapse of the Soviet Union." *American Affairs Journal*.
- *Lenin's Tomb* by Remnick, Preface, Chapters 1-6, 10, 13, 17, 19-20

### Session 5 – February 6

- *Collapse* Chapters 13-to the end
- Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, pp.58-112
- Chris Miller, *The Struggle To Save The Soviet Economy*. Chapter 7 and conclusion

### **Session 6 – February 13**

- Daniels Ch.2
- Bonnell, Victoria E., and Gregory Freidin. 1993. "Teleovorot: The Role of Television Coverage in Russia's August 1991 Coup." *Slavic Review* 52 (4): 810-838.
- Remnick Chapters 25-26, parts IV-VI

### **Session 7 – February 27**

- Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, Chapters 27-29
- Kotkin Ch. 7
- Bunce, Valerie. 1998. "Subversive Institutions: The End of the Soviet State in Comparative Perspective." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 14 (4): 323-354.
- A. Dallin Causes of the Collapse of the USSR *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 1992, 8, 4
- Zubok. 2022. "Can Putin Survive?" *Foreign Affairs*.

### **Session 8 – March 5**

- *Secondhand Time* by Svetlana Alexievich (2016), Part I

### **Session 9 – March 12 – Presentations 1**

### **Session 10 – March 19 – Presentations 2**

### **Session 11 – March 26 – Presentations 3**

### **Session 12 – April 2 – Presentations 4**