

The West, Russia, and NATO in the 1990s: Missed Opportunities?

Ruud van Dijk

Vladimir Putin has charged, and quite a few critics of Western policies since the end of the Cold War agree, that the expansion of NATO during the 1990s explains much of what ails relations between Russia and the West today. Like the debate about East-West relations in the 1940s, we have a new debate about “missed opportunities” for a more benign relationship than the one that has developed. Just as for the earlier debate (at least at the current stage), there is an abundance of evidence on developments on the Western side (especially the United States) while material from Russia, although certainly available, is sparser and of a lesser quality. As a result, the debate is marked once again by an overemphasis on Western choices, and this comes at the expense of attention for what happened on the Russian side as background and context for these choices.

NATO expansion was about much more than U.S. relations with Russia, and for its part, that relationship involved many more challenges than the future of the alliance. This may seem obvious, but as some of the recriminations (then and now) toward Washington suggest, it's easy to get the balance wrong. Another, related, danger is exaggerating the importance of the expansion of the alliance. Weapons, militaries, and military organizations ultimately are tools with which to pursue political goals, not a goal in themselves. In order to explain what has gone wrong between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War and why NATO's role in post-Cold War Europe assumed such importance, we need to start on the political side of things—not only East-West diplomacy, but also developments inside Russia, the United States, and the countries of Europe.

Sarotte works hard, and mostly succeeds, at getting the balance right, even though in its conception hers remains a history of how the decisions to expand NATO emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Zubok's book is very useful too, particularly in providing crucial context (Mikhail Gorbachev's failure to reform the Soviet Union economically or politically) for the story of the 1990s. Both authors do speak of opportunities they believe existed throughout

the 1990s for the West to point relations with Russia in a more benign direction, but they do not make too much of it. And, as a mark of the quality of these books, both provide skeptics lots of material with which to question the viability of any “missed opportunity” thesis. Combined, these fine histories are excellent places to start thinking about the broader history of relations between the West and Russia after 1989. They also underscore the importance of early decisions made by leaders and others on both sides for the options available for those who came next.

As her title indicates, Sarotte's focus is on the policies of the United States administrations led by George H.W. Bush (1989-1993) and Bill Clinton (1993-2001). Among other evidence, she uses a wealth of documents from these administrations, often released at her request, and is able to show how, at three key moments, Washington “ratcheted” the evolution of post-Cold War European security structures in the direction of an open-ended and unconditional expansion of NATO. Russian leaders, European allies, and representatives of countries aspiring to join the alliance do play their part in the book, but in the end, it was the Bush administration (in early 1990s) and the Clinton administrations (in 1994 and in 1997) that executed the crucial,

NOT ONE INCH

AMERICA, RUSSIA, AND THE MAKING OF POST-COLD WAR STALEMATE

M. E. SAROTTE

“‘Not one inch to the east’ . . . [is] a history so often repeated that it’s practically conventional wisdom. Mary Sarotte . . . [describes] what actually happened.”

Max Fisher, “The Interpreter,” *New York Times*

M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2021)

one-directional and irreversible ratchets. In this way, she argues, the Americans “snatch[ed] stalemate from the jaws of victory” (15). Uncompellingly, she negatively places the 1990s beside the late 1940s when Washington turned former adversaries into long-term allies.

FIRST KEY DECISION

The book starts with the first key decision, or ratchet, which took place in early 1990 amid discussions over the future of a post-Berlin Wall Germany. This was the time when Secretary of State James Baker coined, and soon retreated from, the assurance that in return for Soviet agreement to NATO membership of a unified Germany, alliance structures would move “not one inch” to the East. Sarotte shows how, for President Bush, NATO’s central place in post-Cold War Europe was non-negotiable, but also how throughout the diplomatic maneuvering in 1990 West German Chancellor Kohl was the central player. With Washington’s solid support, and occasional admonitions, it was Kohl who ultimately secured Gorbachev’s consent to German unification and NATO membership, yielding very little in terms of restrictions on NATO while offering billions of D-Marks to pull Gorbachev across the line.

The money was important, but not just as a way to “bribe” the Soviets, and later Russians, to go along with Western priorities. It also plays a big part in the “what if” debate about Russian-Western relations at large in the form of the charge that the West failed to invest in Gorbachev’s Soviet Union and Boris Yeltsin’s Russia to support their various reform schemes. The suggestion here is that if only the United States/the West/the world had invested more, liberal democracy in Russia might have taken hold and we would not be in the mess we’re in today (I’m exaggerating just a little). This is not Sarotte’s argument, but she does mention a significant moment in this regard, quoting, of all people Gorbachev who, in 1991 told a visiting James Baker “we got a lot of money for German unification, and when I called our people, I was told they did not know where it was” (106).

Zubok, too, recounts how in September 1990 Gorbachev went asking for money in Western capitals, and also in Israel and Saudi Arabia. “He invited the American businessmen [brought along to Moscow by U.S. Secretary of Commerce Robert Mosbacher] to the Kremlin and promised them his political support. They hesitated to invest their money, fearing that the parliaments of Russia or Kazakhstan would renege on Soviet commitments.” (144) In his conclusion, Zubok argues that the West missed an opportunity: “Had the US-led West tried to ‘preserve’ the Soviet Union, there was a chance of survival. But the West did not invest in the collapsing Soviet Union, and many in Washington wanted to break it up for security reasons” (433).

His own account provides ample evidence that the moment perhaps is not deserving of the name. Invest in what? One of the main strengths of Zubok’s history is that it points out how early on, Gorbachev’s reforms began to cause economic and political chaos in the Soviet Union, and that this only got worse due to Gorbachev’s inability to grasp the potential of alternative approaches and his general indecisiveness. Certain players began to take advantage while the great majority was left out and the people purportedly in charge of the country lost control: “... the reforms of 1987-88 had created new actors-autonomous state enterprises, cooperatives, and commercial banks-which, instead of generating more consumer goods, cannibalized the existing state economy and hemorrhaged state finances” (126).

PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE

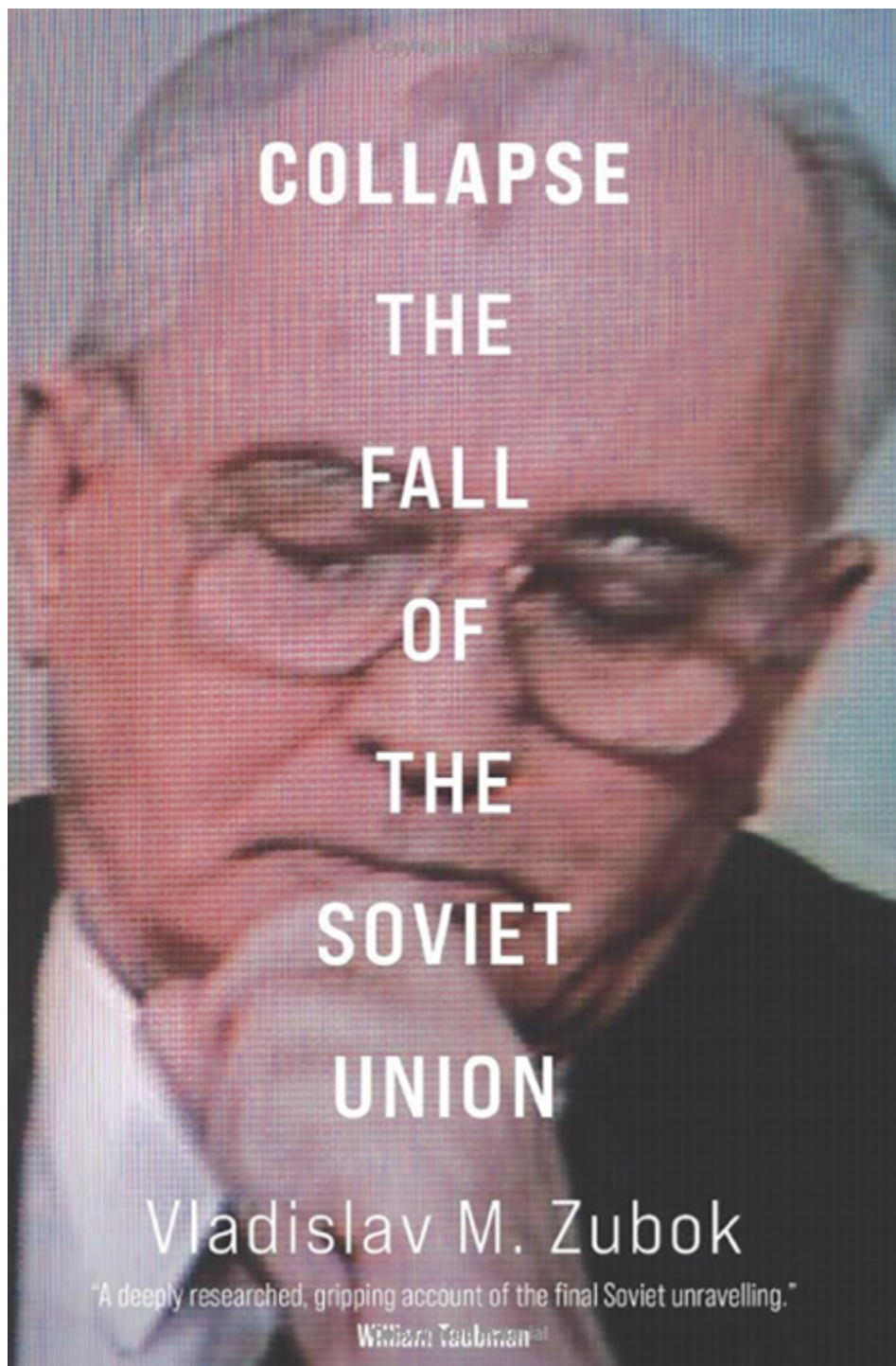
The story of relations between Russia and the West in the 1990s, including financial and economic ties, mostly is a different subject from the collapse of the Soviet Union, but again, Zubok’s book helps one understand the reluctance of many private and public figures outside Russia to invest in the new state. Rather than speaking of opportunities, this book underscores that what was primarily involved was risk.

The same could be said (invest in what?) for any political investment the West could have made in a European security structure shared with Russia (which, though incomparably weaker than even Washington’s major allies except in the area of nuclear weapons, expected a seat at the head of the table, next to the United States). This would have come at the expense of NATO, particularly the membership aspirations and the interests of the countries of the former Warsaw Pact, the Baltics, and others such as Ukraine. And this is assuming that such an investment in something new (and the concomitant disinvestment in NATO) could actually have been made by the United States. George H.W. Bush’s bottom line in 1989-1990 suggests it could not have. Furthermore, as Sarotte shows for the mid-1990s, even if a U.S. president had pursued a different course, Congress and others in Washington might well have rebelled.

Indeed, one could argue that the Clinton administration did attempt to pursue an alternative course to NATO’s expansion, or that it at least tried to have its cake and eat it: it hoped to put relations with the new Russia on a new, constructive footing while leaving expansion on the table. The attempt to square a circle, of course, was the Partnership for Peace (PfP), launched in late 1993 and buried, essentially, one year later when the Clinton administration started to work toward the near-term admission to the alliance of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. A structure for comprehensive security collaboration between the West and the states of the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union,

the PfP was a genuine attempt to make a fresh start without jettisoning the old. Part of the rationale to accommodate Moscow as much as PfP envisioned was nuclear arms control-between the United States and Russia (especially START II), but also vis-a-vis Ukraine, which in 1993 still had not fully pledged to become a non-nuclear weapons state and on whose territory remained part of the nuclear weapons infrastructure of the former Soviet Union.

The PfP's story is really the heart of Sarotte's book, and the core of her argument that the West may have missed an opportunity during the 1990s in its relations with Russia. However, the excellent section discussing the short heyday of PfP between 1993 and 1995 is especially convincing in demonstrating the forces lined up against its success, the latter defined as the West "going slow" on the expansion of NATO in favor of a series of differentiated security relationships between the alliance and the countries of the former Soviet-dominated space. The enemies of PfP included key advisers to President Clinton, countries in Central and Eastern Europe hoping to join the alliance sooner rather than later, Republican challengers to President Clinton (victorious in the 1994 mid-term elections), and last but not least a deterioration in the political situation in Russia at the end of 1993 and Russia's assault on Chechnya a year later.



Vladislav M. Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2021)

This last point-the development, or rather, the chaos of Russia-brings us back to the part of the story that, while present in Sarotte's account, deserves more weight in an evaluation of any possible missed opportunities during the first post-Cold War decade than she, or Zubok, give it. For the West in the 1990s, the strength of the nationalist right and communist left in a Russia less and less stable and increasingly resentful of the outside world, elevated the importance of a deeply flawed, usually drunk, and increasingly infirm Boris Yeltsin to the point where, at the time

and ever since, one had to wonder about the viability of any scenario for constructive, long-term cooperation. This did not keep the United States, Germany, and others from propping up the Russian President, since the alternatives seemed infinitely worse. There was the PfP, more outside money was directed toward an increasingly dysfunctional Russian economy, and there was a sustained diplomatic effort to keep Western-Russian relations focused on issues of common interest. But Russia's chaos also led the West and others to hedge against an even more volatile Russian



Sarotte shows how, for President Bush, NATO's central place in post-Cold War Europe was non-negotiable. Pictured is President George H.W. Bush shaking hands with Mikhail Gorbachev during welcoming ceremonies on the South Lawn of the White House in May 1990 (photo: mark reinstein / Shutterstock.com)

future. This was not triumphalism or hubris, merely prudent statecraft. When we get histories of the 1990s that fully take the depth of Russia's chaos into account and the dangers that went with it, the case for "missed opportunities" will likely be more and more difficult to sustain.

None of this is any cause for cheer, let alone glee. Nor is it to excuse any sins, of omission or commission, perpetrated by the U.S.-led West in the post-Cold War era. The history of East-West relations in the 1990s is a tragedy, primarily for most of the successor states of the Soviet Union, Russia very much included. Could it have been otherwise? Especially Sarotte wants to believe so when in her conclusion she lists many things the West could have done differently in her view, even as it proceeded to expand the NATO alliance, and she pleads for the United States to draw the proper lessons. Good history can certainly suggest how better choices were available to past actors than the ones

they made. But it should also think hard about the balance between, on the one hand, choices available to historical actors and, on the other hand, larger forces largely beyond their control. Interestingly, while Sarotte's history (and to a lesser extent Zubok's too) tells a tragic story, it is also a history that ultimately lacks a sense of tragedy.

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