

## WHO UNDED THE SOVIET UNION?

### The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze

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By Carolyn McGiffert Ekedahl and Melvin A. Goodman

University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997,  
352 pp., \$29.95 cloth.

### Translating History: Thirty Years on the Front Lines of Diplomacy with a Top Russian Interpreter

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By Igor Korchilov

New York: Scribner, 1997, 400 pp., \$27.50 hardcover.

### My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter

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By Pavel Palazchenko

University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997,  
384 pp., \$35 cloth.

Reviewed by Jacek Bylica

Most students of international relations who have read Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbot's *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War*<sup>1</sup> would probably agree that a book on world politics can be as exciting as one of Tom Clancy's novels. The plot is intricate, the action fast-paced and the

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*Jacek Bylica is a member of the Polish Foreign Service and has served in Warsaw, Vienna, Shanghai and Beijing. He is currently completing his mid-career studies at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy where he will be receiving a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy with a specialization in international security studies in May 1998.*

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stakes are certainly high. In this vein, there is perhaps no story more important and exciting than the demise of Communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union. This event marked the end of a century characterized by unprecedented technological and industrial progress and an equally unprecedented political and ideological mobilization; the combination of these two trends has led to much suffering, violence and bloodshed. The end of such a century calls for its chroniclers.

There are basically two schools of thought on the roots of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first asserts that the system was doomed from the beginning since, from its very inception, it was based on mistaken and unworkable assumptions. According to this school, Marxism was a fallacy that could not have worked under any conditions or in any part of the world. The dismal economic performance of planned economies and the growing discontent of entire nations were convincing evidence that the system was heading towards collapse.

The second school of thought suggests that there was actually nothing inevitable about the manner and timing of the Soviet collapse. With a bit of luck, the Soviet Union and its empire could have dragged on for another decade or more, just as it had been doing for the better part of the twentieth century. It was only the actions of particular individuals that sent it spinning toward collapse. This theory begs the question of which individuals were responsible, and there are plenty to choose from; An American president pushing for Star Wars? A CIA director working to undermine the Soviet Union? A Gdansk shipyard worker organizing a strike? Or was it the youthful Soviet leader who unleashed a chain of events he proved unable to control?

It is interesting to note that it is the Marxist historians who have had the most trouble deciding the role that individuals play in history. Highly mechanistic insistence on the inevitable forces of history left little room for an account of the actions and influences of individuals, even top leaders. Those ex-Communists in Moscow who now place all the blame for the Soviet collapse on Mikhail Gorbachev and his advisers are actually being quite un-Marxist in their own thinking.

Without prejudging the validity of either of the two schools of thought, it is difficult to deny that the books of the second variety are more fun to read. Instead of pages of uninspiring statistical data, depressing economic graphs or intricate philosophical reasoning, the authors present engaging human interest stories.

### **From Foreign Minister to Foreign President**

The biography of the last Soviet foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, by Carolyn McGiffert Ekedahl and Melvin A. Goodman, is certainly one of these books. When a former CIA analyst (Ekedahl) and a National War College professor (Goodman) collaborate on a subject they have spent the better part of their careers studying, you expect them to come up with something worth reading. And in this case you should not be disappointed.

Ekedahl and Goodman make it clear at the outset that assessing the impact of Shevardnadze on the history of the Soviet Union is a major aim of their book. They note, "We have tended to underestimate the role played by the last leaders of the Soviet Union because historians have focused on the societal problems that precipitated that country's collapse and because political commentators have engaged in a protracted debate about the contribution Western policies made." The authors concentrate on the human factor and attempt to take us through their protagonist's biography with a skill that would evoke envy among Alfred Hitchcock's screenwriters. The prologue begins with the 1995 attempt on Shevardnadze's life and the plot only thickens.

The description of Shevardnadze's early career is rather sketchy since not much is generally known about it. His rise to political fame started in the infamously independent Soviet republic of Georgia. From local Communist Party *apparatchik*, Shevardnadze rose to top Georgian positions. To be sure, the jobs of interior minister and party secretary in a republic notorious for being a hotbed of organized crime were not meant for a weakling. That Shevardnadze survived them, and even earned a reputation for toughness, speaks volumes about him.

The selection of Shevardnadze, with no foreign policy experience, to head the Soviet Foreign Ministry by the new General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev, came as a shock to the foreign policy community in Moscow and other world capitals. After almost three decades of rule by Andrei Gromyko—an ambassador even in FDR's time—such a choice was both puzzling and unsettling. Many possible causes have been mentioned, from personal friendship to Gorbachev's desire to root out corruption and cronyism in the Soviet Foreign Service. Maybe more consideration should be given to the idea that Gorbachev really wanted to give Soviet diplomacy a fresh start, which meant separating Gromyko from the day-to-day decision-making in the Foreign Ministry. Any new minister coming from the typical pool would always be inclined to listen to his former boss, who was moved to the largely ceremonial post of the Soviet head of state.

A large part of the book is devoted to the analysis of the highly innovative policies that Shevardnadze adopted during his years as Soviet foreign minister. He played a key role in ending the arms race with the United States and initiated a number of far-reaching agreements in this field. He abandoned ideological proselytism and actively accepted the principles of human rights by prompting the Soviet retreat from the Third World, accepting the dissolution of the Eastern European empire, and allowing the unification of Germa-

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ny. It is a breathtaking list. He faced a constant struggle against both domestic and international opponents of his policies—hence the “wars” he had to fight. He was driven by the conviction, shared with Gorbachev, that the Soviet Union badly needed time and resources to reform its economy. Returning to his native Georgia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Shevardnadze became President of Georgia, bringing his career full-circle, and has been immersed in its violent politics ever since. In his armored Mercedes limousine, received as a gift from the German government grateful for his role in German unification, Shevardnadze seems a rather sad symbol of change. Even the authors do not seem to be sure whether their hero is satisfied with the achievements of his life and the road that his country has taken.

A great advantage of the book is that the authors do not attempt to downplay the dilemmas Shevardnadze has been facing or gloss over inconsistencies and contradictions in his policies. Like Gorbachev, Shevardnadze is a highly contradictory personality and will surely have volumes written about him. Ekedahl and Goodman’s book is a successful first attempt and should become standard reading for any student interested in the last wave of Soviet statesmen.

### Translators as Traitors

One thing that Shevardnadze certainly needed in his ministerial position in Moscow was the assistance of interpreters. In fact, some Soviets argued, tongue-in-cheek, that he also needed one to interpret from his native Georgian to Russian. Interpreters—for the spoken word—and translators—for written documents—are the unsung heroes of diplomacy. Igor Korchilov makes this point convincingly in the prologue to his book, *Translating History: Thirty Years on the Front Lines of Diplomacy with a Top Russian Interpreter*, which serves as a concise introduction to the importance of diplomatic interpretation. While most professional foreign service officers are fluent in at least one foreign language, interpreters are indispensable at international conferences, during serious bilateral negotiations, and certainly at top-level summits. However, despite their indispensability, diplomats have the tendency to pretend that interpreters do not exist. According to Korchilov, *Pravda* had once published an official photo of Brezhnev seated in his Kremlin office across the table from a foreign guest. At the end of the table an open notebook and a pencil were suspended in air with no visible means of support—the photo editors had obliterated the face of the interpreter, but had forgotten his notebook and pencil.

Korchilov’s book is full of such anecdotes. The author not only has a good ear for language—my favorite phrase came when he described Brezhnev’s talking points as his “verbal crutches”—but also a fine eye for visual detail. As a result, the book is a feast for anyone wanting to know what gifts heads of state exchange during official visits and how a summit bomb-sweep is conducted. Next time you are invited to a state dinner at the Kremlin or White House you might want to consult Korchilov on what attire ladies wore when

he was there and what souvenirs to discretely pick up for your future grandchildren.

Yet we should not be misled by Korchilov's colorful descriptions and pithy anecdotes. He is not a mere interpreter, a talking-machine of sorts, but a highly competent top-rate diplomat; he is a graduate from Moscow's Diplomatic Academy and has spent years working on substantive issues in the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Korchilov obviously relies on his notes when recounting conversations he has interpreted and this offers quite a bit of substantive information as a result. When he writes about these issues, you have a feeling that he really does understand them, "Interpreters should know the basis and logic of the case their side wishes to make before they are called upon to render it into the other side's language...A good interpreter must know almost as much about world affairs as the statesmen whose speeches he translates."<sup>3</sup> This is an ideal book for any student considering a career in the Foreign Service. In addition to providing a lot of historical details on the last years of U.S.-Soviet relations, it manages to be both amusing and realistic in its description of diplomatic events—not a easy balance to achieve. Russian speakers get more bang for the buck, since Korchilov often discusses the problems he encountered while struggling with Russian and English equivalents.

An old Italian saying "Traduttore traditore" suggests that translators, and presumably interpreters, are traitors.<sup>4</sup> This phrase can be understood in a number of ways. It could mean that a reliance on interpretation in serious negotiations may lead to a number of misunderstandings as meanings are lost in translation. Thus both sides are deceived by the interpreter: the speaker into thinking that all the subtleties of his message are being conveyed, and the listener into believing he is hearing the whole story. Alternatively, the saying could mean that interpreters, in their well-meant desire to convey the full meaning of what is being said, go one step too far and reveal too much of the speaker's position. Yet another interpretation is that top-level interpreters are privy to so many secrets that they are bound to reveal at least some of them sooner or later.

If we accept the last interpretation of traitor-translator, than Pavel Palazchenko in his book, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter*, certainly is not one of them. A reader familiar with memoirs by Schultz, Baker, Gorbachev, or even Korchilov for that matter, is not likely to learn much about the substantive U.S.-Soviet discussions during the final

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years of the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> Palazchenko is very discreet in his revelations and openly vows that he would never reveal "some human things and secrets of government." One suspects that Palazchenko might have been one of the principal anonymous sources for Beschloss and Talbot's account but prefers to err on the side of caution in his own book.

In his book, Korchilov recounts a rather well-known story about Winston Churchill staying up late into the night drinking with Stalin at the 1945 Yalta Conference. The next morning he said to Stalin "I hope I didn't say anything

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indiscreet last night," to which Stalin replied, "Don't worry. I had the interpreter shot." Such occupational hazards aside, the most likely reason for Palazchenko's approach is his deep and apparently undiminished attachment to Gorbachev. Palazchenko not only stayed with him until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but also quit his government job to continue to work for Gorbachev. His loyalty is evident in his account of the final hours of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Palazchenko laments "If an empire had to disappear, why was it dismantled so clumsily?" Palazchenko makes no secret of his ill feelings for Yeltsin whose "main political strength is his unfailing instinct for power." Palazchenko's suspicions led him to ask the American government through Secretary of State Baker contacted through Strobe Talbott, to make clear to Yeltsin that "he must not get involved in attempts to fabricate a criminal case against Gorbachev." He insists that he did so on his own initiative and had not been prompted to make such a request by Gorbachev, but only the two of them know the truth.

It is this spirit that makes Palazchenko's book an interesting and at times engaging reading. It has "a soul" and a Slavic one at that. It is sometimes too easy for a foreign academic reader to forget what all those historic events meant to the participants themselves, and that human emotions were involved. Palazchenko's memoirs are a useful, if sometimes understated, reminder of the personal factor in great historical events.

So we are returning to our initial question about the impact of individual leaders on history. The thought that individuals could make or break empires at will is certainly empowering. Korchilov mentions remarks made by many Americans after Gorbachev participated in a 1987 meeting in Washington that "if he were an American, he could very well run for president." Suppose that Gorbachev was an American president. Would we be asking ourselves today, "Who undid the United States?" Just give it a thought.

## Notes

1. Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbot, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1993).
2. If you are interested in a stark example of this interpretation you might want to consult a journalistic account by Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy that Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994).
3. Chas. W. Freeman, Jr., *The Diplomat's Dictionary, Revised Edition* (Washington, D.C.: USIS Press, 1997).
4. If you are interested in the most literal meaning, you might have a look at an article by Francis Agnor, "The Interpreter as an Agent," reproduced [in H. Bradford Westfield, ed.], *Inside the CIA's Private World: Declassified Articles from the Agency's Internal Journal, 1955-1992* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
5. George P. Schultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan, 1993); James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace 1989-1992* (New York: Putnam Publishing Group, 1995); Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1996).



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