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Louis Sell. *From Washington to Moscow: US-Soviet Relations and the Collapse of the USSR.* Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016. 416 pp. $27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-6195-4.

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Louis Sell is a retired foreign service officer with twenty-seven years' diplomatic experience in Soviet-Russian and Balkan affairs. Some will recall his fine earlier book, ***Slobodan Milosevic and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*** (2002). His senior postings—in addition to years in the US embassies in both Belgrade and Moscow—range from member of the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) delegation to deputy high representative for Bosnia to Kosovo director for the International Crisis Group. But it is Sell's earlier experience as a junior diplomat in Moscow, dating back to the 1970s, that provided the insights and perspective that make this new book on the Cold War's end so interesting.

It should be admitted first that the book also suffers from the main but hardly crippling defect of most histories of great transformations that an author lived firsthand—namely, a diary-like organization, often a chronicle of events that Sell himself participated in, that leaves readers wondering in early chapters just what it is he will be arguing, what he thinks were the main causes of the USSR's collapse or Yeltsin's failures or Putin's hostility. That is, until the event have passed and Sell pauses in reflection. But the good side to this is a story that is extremely vivid, lively in its detail and persuasive in its assessments, that engagingly recreates what is now a bygone era for many readers and so a world they have difficulty imagining through dry, academic analysis.

Nearly half of the book is devoted to the pre-***perestroika*** years, that is, more or less the mid-to-late Cold War, the years of Leonid Brezhnev and his two brief successors. These corresponded to the Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan presidencies, a useful periodization because as a US diplomat Sell's experience was strongly shaped by the different policies—and often assignments—that came under each president. After a useful summary of the essentials of Brezhnev's rule—the economy, society, the Communist Party, foreign relations—Sell focuses on the Soviet dissident and human-rights movements. Because he spent a great deal of time in these circles, whether passing ***samizdat*** literature for publication abroad or

mingling with Moscow's *refusenik* community on Saturday afternoons, Sell knows the saga of these individuals (Andrei Sakharov, Anatoly Shcharansky, Yuri Orlov et al.) very well. He vividly recounts the bravery, integrity, drama, and anguish of their struggles, and it is no surprise that he later assesses the moral-ethical failings of the Soviet Union as key to the country's eventual collapse.

The same is true for other aspects of Russian domestic life in the 1970s and early 1980s, though less so when it comes to some political and especially military affairs. Sell is good on the detail of the Nixon-Kissinger approach to the USSR, but then with respect to Gerald Ford mentions "revelations about real and imagined intelligence abuses [that] called into question the US ability to use covert operations which had been a fixture on both sides of the Cold War struggle" (p. 83). The student reading Sell's account as a general history of this period in US-Soviet relations will have no idea that he is referring to the Church Committee hearings, the US congressional investigation into the CIA's history of coups, assassinations, and other clandestine operations. But Sell's lament for the supposed hobbling of such operations is belied just a few chapters later when he recounts the saga of the disastrous Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979. Sell nicely captures the confusion that attended Moscow's decision—essentially taken by just three Politburo members, none of them General Secretary Brezhnev—but mocks the Soviets' fear of US incursions into their putatively socialist neighbor as "otherworldly" (p. 101). This seems odd when, just a few pages later, Sell acknowledges that nearly six months ***before*** the Soviets invaded, President Carter authorized covert US aid to the mujahideen rebels fighting the socialist Afghan government (p. 103). This came when ties with Moscow had already worsened over Angola and Ethiopia, three years after the new Carter administration—with its contradictory goals and feuding personalities—had already "wrestled itself to the ground over US-Soviet relations" (p. 87).

The first years of the Ronald Reagan administration—and its counterpart Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko general secretaryships—are vividly and accurately described in setting the stage for the epoch of Mikhail Gorbachev's sweeping reforms. One might wish for better and clearer sourcing—sometimes two or more detail-filled pages pass with no citations, though Sell's bibliography is full of valuable memoirs and documents—but the story of the corruption scandals and political intrigue that churned under Andropov is nevertheless excellent. The rise of Gorbachev is nicely summarized too, but by this point in the chronicle it becomes evident that Sell was no longer "on the scene." Gorbachev's accession and first years in power are told mainly through secondary sources. The story becomes dry and somewhat distant, the judgments conventional, and the only personal observations are from afar—Washington, DC, or Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Thus the critical Chernobyl tragedy of 1986 is recounted with the standard condemnation of the USSR's (and Gorbachev's own) secrecy, with little sense of the actual drama of the event and the fierce opposition that liberals faced. The rise of ***glasnost*** over 1986-87 is dealt with surprisingly briefly, with the usual milestones noted and little sense of how it felt and unfolded at the time—rather, a fairly standard and low-key hindsight appraisal again reflecting mostly secondary sources. The difference between this and Sell's telling of earlier years, when he was on the scene, reminds one of the stark difference between Dusko Doder's two books on the Soviet Union—***Shadows and Whispers*** (1986), based on his own residence and reporting, and ***Heretic in the Kremlin*** (1990), researched and written mainly from afar. These weaknesses of the latter are perhaps seen most starkly in Sell's brief treatment of ***perestroika***'s economic woes. Key reform initiatives and legal changes are barely mentioned, problems in their implementation and functioning are omitted, and

there is certainly no up-close depiction of the obstacles workers and managers faced in attempting their implementation. In all, both *glasnost* and economic reform over 1985-87 take up just five pages (pp. 185-189).

The drama and detail return when Sell turns to back foreign policy. The insider's perspective, combined with digging into the latest memoir and documentary sources, lends his discussion of the origins of arms control proposals, the early summitry, and the negotiations between (and within) the Soviet and American sides vividness and insight. So too his wide-ranging research makes Sell's account of accelerating domestic change—leading up to the climactic Congress of People's Deputies in 1989—a thorough and lively chronicle. Unfortunately, as before, the economy is a weak point and this vital realm is dispatched superficially with the familiar—but basically useless—references to "timidity" and "half measures" (p. 347). As with Gorbachev's much-criticized failures to run for president of the USSR as early as 1989 or 1990, or to break with the hardliners and create two Communist Parties (p. 250), there is virtually no analysis devoted to which "bolder" economic reforms might have worked and how they would have been implemented. Yet this is vital, for even as Sell, like so many other authors, finds that key underlying causes of the USSR's collapse included political polarization and nationalist separatism, he pays relatively little attention to the economic discontent that underlay these movements.

The unasked questions include: Exactly what bolder economic reforms might have worked? How could they have been implemented against fierce party-bureaucratic resistance? And had they worked, how might a stronger economy have weakened radical currents of all sorts and strengthened Gorbachev's hand in preserving the USSR? Sell does not really ask the latter question at all, but implies instead that it was the legacy of decades of Soviet repression of national aspirations—frustrations that burst forth when publicized by *glasnost* and then given voice by democratization—that seemingly made secession of various non-Russian peoples from the USSR inevitable. That is certainly how it looked from the aspirations and appeals of many nationalist politicians. But this may be "the inevitably of hindsight" at work, and in fact successful economic reforms might have undercut many separatist movements and also reduced the appeal of populist politicians such as Boris Yeltsin.

Sell's telling of the "annus mirabilis" of 1989, the chain of events in Eastern Europe that saw rapid dissolution of the Soviet bloc and stoked conservatives' anger back in Moscow, is strong. The contentious issue of German reunification—and the place of NATO in a new Europe—is dealt with largely conventionally. Sell argues the mainstream position, that there was no real agreement to limit subsequent NATO expansion into Eastern Europe. So it is dismissed as a direct or justifiable cause of subsequent Russian resentment, with Sell offering a different explanation for the souring of relations with the United States and the West in general: "the inability of Moscow after the Soviet collapse to come to grips with its necessarily reduced role in the world; the failure of Russia's post-Communist leadership to create a vibrant and prosperous new domestic system, which had the effect of undermining support for every aspect of the post-Soviet settlement; and the failure of theWest to find a way to include Russia as an equal partner in the creation of the new, post-Cold War European order" (p. 278).

Readers will immediately note the tensions, particularly Russia's "inability … to come to grips with its necessarily reduced role in the world" side by side with "the failure of the West to … include Russia as an equal partner." This same dualism is woven through Sell's vivid, heartfelt postscript on post-Soviet Russia. Russian leaders failed to manage economic transition well, but the West is guilty of giving little aid and lots of question-

able advice. The United States was correct to back the courageous Yeltsin, even in his violent suppression of hardline opposition, but maybe winking at his falsification of elections and passage of a new constitution was not such a good idea after all. NATO expansion was key to integrating former Soviet-bloc states into a "united and democratic" Europe, but also caused an understandable "sense of humiliation" that fueled the anti-Western turn of Vladimir, Putin who now threatens those same former Soviet-bloc states. This final section of his book is written with renewed detail and passion, and the reader is not surprised to learn that Sell returned for another posting in Russia from 1991 to 1994. And this experience gave him fascinating insight—but still no easy answers—into the questions of what has gone wrong in Russia's transition and where Russia is headed in the future.