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# The Collapse of the Soviet Military

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the international order of nuclear weapons capabilities, intentions, and defenses; be sufficiently expansive to consider nonnuclear weapons of mass destruction; and offer reasonable certitude. Cimbalá's book is an expert step in these necessary directions.

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Odom, William E. *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1998. 523pp. \$35

This book should be one of two books on the reading list of those who wish to understand the current crisis of the Russian military. William Odom, a retired U.S. Army general and Soviet specialist, brings excellent credentials to this study. His research is extensive. His approach to the collapse of the Soviet military is deeply rooted in the history of the Soviet state and its military system.

Odom argues that the military collapse of the Soviet Union was at the very heart of the disintegration of the Soviet system. His book is broken down into two unequal parts. The first provides an in-depth, historical perspective on the origins, development, and crisis of the Soviet military and its commanding place in the Soviet system. In the second part, Odom examines the efforts under Gorbachev

to reform the system, efforts that led to a deepening crisis, internal conflict, and collapse. The author emphasizes the role of Marxism-Leninism in providing an ideological framework for defining threats to the Soviet state and in rationalizing the militarization of state and society.

The first five chapters cover the Soviet military from its birth, during the period of revolution and civil war; examine the role of the military in the mature party-state system that emerged under Stalin; discuss the model of preparation for mass, industrial war, which dictated huge standing forces based upon conscription; and the permanent war economy, which ensnared the national economy in constant preparation for war even as it stifled innovation and economic growth under "mature socialism."

Some will take issue with Odom's emphasis upon ideology as the core, driving factor in the formation of Soviet military strategy. They may prefer to emphasize the critical role of personalities in dictating particular shifts in direction of military policy. Examples would be Khrushchev's cuts in conventional forces and his gamble on strategic nuclear arms; Brezhnev's willingness to fund military programs across the board, even at the risk of contributing to economic stagnation, and his decisions to embark upon the Afghan adventure, even against the advice of the Soviet General Staff, and to avoid direct military intervention in Poland in

the face of the challenge from Solidarity; or the distinct role of Admiral Sergei Gorshkov in creating an oceanic navy to challenge the U.S. Navy for command of the seas.

Odom treats Afghanistan as a continuation of Soviet policies of force projection into the Third World, not noting the very different character of Soviet intervention. He is not alone in this argument; it is one articulated by the late General Dmitri Volkogonov, in *Autopsy of an Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime*. Volkogonov made a compelling case for the limitations imposed by Marxism-Leninism upon the possibilities of systemic reform. It is a theme that Andrei Kokoshin, deputy defense minister and secretary of the Security Council, also emphasized.

Where Odom breaks with Kokoshin is on the question of an enduring professional military legacy with roots in the imperial Russian army, cultivated by military specialists in the Red Army and retained as a part of the world view of the General Staff even after the repression of the specialists. The contribution of A. A. Svechin to the development of military art features prominently in Kokoshin's treatment of Soviet strategic thought but receives scant attention from Odom. For Odom, the military elite and the party had become one. This fed the forces of careerism and opportunism that undercut military professionalism as a unifying criterion for the military's

autonomy in its area of professional competence—the defense of the state from external threats.

This ideological-political limitation on reform dominates the second part of the book. Odom suggests that Gorbachev embarked upon reform without understanding the fundamental aspects of the military crisis, especially the relationship between the existing military system and the nationality question in the Soviet Union. While reducing forces and seeking to reform the war economy to make it more efficient, Gorbachev set in motion powers that he could neither control nor direct. Gorbachev's chief failure in these efforts was his inability to break with the party and Marxism-Leninism, even as he undermined the authority of each. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* generated forces that were fundamentally hostile to the regime and its military system. As Odom states, "The simple answer is that Gorbachev made it collapse." He argues that Gorbachev's double-dealing ultimately set in motion the alienation of reformers and conservatives. The failed crackdown in the Baltic republics in January 1991 marked the onset of the final disintegration and collapse of the Soviet military and with it the Soviet system. In the end, the Soviet military divided. Some of its command elite joined the conspirators, while others refused to take sides; a critical few sided with Yeltsin.

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In the aftermath of the August coup, Boris Yeltsin and Russia became heirs to a broken military machine. Odom argues that empire and militarism were the internal logic of Russian statecraft from the tsars to the commissars, and he questions whether Boris Yeltsin's experiment has broken that fatal logic. One may agree or disagree with this reading of Russian history (this reviewer sees it as a dangerous oversimplification of the national experience), but one conclusion is unassailable: the Soviet military collapsed, and Yeltsin's Russia has overseen its death throes, unable to build an effective national alternative. Chechnya has been the overt manifestation of that continuing disintegration.

Odom has written an important book on the history of the Red Army, and those interested in the future of the Russian army in this time of troubles would be well advised to read it.

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Williams, Marion D. *Submarines under Ice: The U.S. Navy's Polar Operations*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998. 256pp. \$27.95

Although the ends of the earth are poles apart, polar exploration has a long tradition in the Navy, from Robert Peary to Richard Byrd to Operation DEEP FREEZE. Marion

Williams, a former submariner, adds a new dimension to the subject with his history of naval submarine operations in the under-ice polar oceans. Salting his book with generous quotations from the logs, reports, and journals of the submarines and men involved, Williams gives a full account of each submarine under-ice probe and voyage from 1931 through 1962.

The first was that of Sir Hubert Wilkins, the Australian Antarctic explorer, who rechristened an old World War I-era navy submarine *Nautilus* and took it to within five hundred miles of the North Pole in 1931. Along the way, he carried out the first-ever oceanographic data collection from beneath the polar ice cover.

Between 1946 and 1953, several submarines explored the marginal ice zones of the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean. Short under-ice probes were conducted during these expeditions, but the endurance limitations of diesel-electric submarines precluded far-ranging under-ice voyages.

By 1956 the Navy had come to realize that the Arctic was an important theater for the Cold War. Williams passes lightly over the reasons for the Navy's renewed interest in under-ice submarine operations. Clearly, however, the Arctic basin looked to be an important patrol theater and launch zone for the ballistic missile-firing submarines that were on the drawing boards and were soon to join the fleet.