

Dismissing the Cold War: Reevaluating the Fall of the Soviet Union

Annotated Bibliography

Works Cited

Alexievich, Svetlana. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. Translated by Bela Shayevich,

Random House Publishing Group, 2017.

Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets is a book by Svetlana Alexievich which attempts to capture the essence of the *homo sovieticus* through interviews with people who, like her, grew up in and lived under the Soviet regime. Many of the people she interviews are understandably glad that the Soviet empire has ended, but she is particularly curious about studying those of her contemporaries who based so much of their identity on the goals of Soviet communism that they feel a sort of nostalgia for its cultural oppressiveness. She is also interested, secondarily, in the ways in which the failures of the capitalist system create a similar Soviet nostalgia among those in younger generations, who were either born at the very end of the Soviet Union or never lived during it at all. The book was originally published in 2013, and seems to me even more relevant today because of how the political situation of Russia has been sent further towards authoritarianism, in part due to Soviet nostalgia or even Tsarist nostalgia, and also because of the ways in which capitalism has continued to fail the former Soviet republics. I use this as a primary source of information about both the failures and perceived successes of the Soviet system, in the words of former Soviets, and also for the ways in which the failures of capitalism can drive people back to that system.

Allen, Robert C. "The Rise and Decline of the Soviet Economy." *The Canadian Journal of Economics*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2001, pp. 859-881. *JSTOR*,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3131928>. Accessed February 2024.

This is an authoritative source on the collapse of the Soviet empire from an economic standpoint, published in the *Canadian Journal of Economics* by acclaimed economist Robert C. Allen.

Allen examines the rapid growth of the Soviet economy starting in the 1930s all the way through the early 1970s, and argues that its slowdown after 1970 was primarily due to an overinvestment in the military rather than on continued industrialization and domestic labor. This contradicts the popular belief in America after the Cold War ended that the failures of the Soviet Economy to compete with western capitalism were due to a kind of disability of the system itself, rather than a misuse of that system. Above all, Allen emphasizes the championing of a neutral stance on the Soviet economic system for the sake of better understanding it. He warns against the popular idea that the victory of capitalism over communism was not an inevitability due to the superiority of western capitalism, and argues instead for a more nuanced approach to its demise.

I use this source to build an argument against the idea that despite capitalism's flaws, must be the best system that we've yet come up with. That the "incentives" of socialism or communism make it untenable. I will argue instead that capitalism was only able to "defeat" socialism on an economic level because of Soviet mismanagement, or to put it another way, sheer luck.

Additionally, I will use this source in conjunction with others to build a case that GDP per capita, which is the chief indicator of economic success by western capitalist standards, is not necessarily the best way to judge the Soviet economic system, because unlike under capitalism, the primary objective of a communist economy is not to spur on endless economic growth for its own sake.

CIA Office of Soviet Analysis. *A Comparison of the US and Soviet Economies: Evaluating the Performance of the Soviet System*. Documents declassified in 1999. 1985. CIA,

https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000497165.pdf.

This is a declassified CIA report which aims to evaluate the Soviet economic system for purposes of United States national security. This is a valuable source because it was conducted in 1985, when the Cold War was still on and the Soviet Union still existed, so it doesn't have any potential retrospective bias. What it has instead is a generous helping of contemporary bias, which I find extremely useful for building my argument against our past and present perception of the success and failure of Soviet communism. The 1985 report heavily emphasizes the perceived failings of the Soviet economy, particularly the fact that when compared with the United States, the average Soviet "consumes" far less than the average American. The report also points out other consumer failings, such as the unavailability of modern, high tech consumer goods such as digital watches and clocks, and the differences in Soviet diets versus American diets, namely the comparatively low levels of meat consumption in the USSR. In some ways the report seems aware of the absurdity of these types of comparisons, but aptly points out that in many of the highest offices of the Soviet government under Gorbachev, these same comparisons are what was driving decision-making. I plan to use this report as evidence in support of the idea that the underperformance of the Soviet economy in several key areas (healthcare, food availability, housing) may in fact have been the result of the influence of capitalism in Soviet government decision-making, rather than a direct failure of communism.

Darbaidze, E., and T. Niparishvili. "The Status of Women in the Soviet Union." *Journal of Geography, Politics, and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1-10. Accessed February 2025.

This paper analyzes the circumstantial changes that women underwent in the immediate aftermath of the October revolution and the rise of the Soviet Union. It examines the central role that the oppression of women has in anti-capitalist theory by Marx and Engels, and the ways in which the early Soviet government under Lenin attempted to create an equal status for women in communist society. It makes the argument that these efforts, while revolutionary, ultimately failed after leadership was transferred to Joseph Stalin. The authors explore how Stalin's policies towards women focused less on equality of opportunities for education and advancement, and more on the equality of importance in the workforce. Under this system, women were pressured to labor in agriculture or industry, while also having to maintain the domestic life of their families. I use this as an example of the Soviet Union failing to live up to the ideological aspirations it set for itself, and compare this failure to similar ideological failures of American capitalism, which promises equal opportunities for all people but has never managed to deliver on that promise. I make the argument that the earliest signs of the collapse of a system is people's disillusionment with the ideology of that system. In the case of the Soviet Union, its failure to address the inequality of women in the ambitious way that it initially set out to represent part of what led to peoples disillusionment with the goals of communism as a whole. Similarly, the ways in which the United States currently approaches social issues, especially under its new fascist leadership, is a major source of disillusion with its capitalist economic system.

Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty! An American History*. W. W. Norton, 2019.

There's not too much to say about this source, it was the textbook that I read cover-to-cover over the course of two semesters of AP US History in High School, and although I found it to be perfectly adequate for the class, and even grew to enjoy Eric Foner's commentary, I use it in the context of this paper, along with another textbook I used in High School, to demonstrate the narrativization of the end of the Cold war that is present all across the American education system.

Gessen, Keith. "How Russia Went from Ally to Adversary." *The New Yorker*, 12 June 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/06/19/how-the-west-lost-the-peace-philipp-t-her-book-review>. Accessed 12 February 2025.

This article from the New Yorker magazine is a book review of several recent books published on the end of the Cold War, and it offers some helpful additional contextual information surrounding those works, offering pushback of its own against their arguments, specifically by highlighting the importance of international factors in the collapse of the Soviet Union, which some of the books largely ignore. The article's central idea is that the current political situation in Eastern Europe, with Russia invading Ukraine, the destabilization of Russia which has led to aggressive expansionism and Soviet-era nostalgia, is as much the fault of the west as it is evidence of the fallout of the Soviet collapse. I use this source primarily as a helpful reference point for other literature that I may delve further into for my own further research, as well as a source of counter-arguments against the lines of reasoning I plan to establish using other sources. This article was the starting point of inspiration for my interest in this whole topic, and

throughout the process of writing this paper I continuously returned to it as a means of reinforcing that original spark of curiosity.

Mazarr, Michael J., et al. *The Sources of Renewed National Dynamism*. 2024. RAND, Santa

Monica, RAND Corporation,

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2611-3.html#citation. Accessed

February 2025.

This 2024 analysis of the current state of the United States' empire and the widely-evident signs of its decline is an invaluable reference point for where the United States is today compared with where the Soviet Union was forty years ago. It examines the potential for “renewed national dynamism”, or a comeback from the brink of destruction, how such a phenomenon has come about in previous times in history for other empires, and how the United States might go about doing the same thing. It comes to the conclusion that although the United States remains in a very strong position internationally and domestically, it is not currently doing what it needs to do to avoid a death spiral like what the Soviet Union underwent during the late 1980s and early 1990s. I use this source as evidence to support claims about the failures of American capitalism, and to reinforce comparisons between the failures of the Soviet Union and the failures of the United States. I might also be able to question the implication that this study does not ever address, which is the obvious question: does the United States deserve to survive given its failures? Is that the goal that we should be fighting for? I also explore these questions retrospectively about the Soviet Union.

Strayer, Robert W., and Eric Nelson. *1200 Update Ways of the World with Sources for the Ap(r) Modern Course*. Bedford Books, 2019.

Another history textbook, this time from my Sophomore year AP World History course. This one goes into greater detail about the fall of the Soviet Union, and how Gorbachev's reforms led to it, rather than exclusively emphasizing the effect this had on the United States. But similar to the Foner textbook, I use this source as a jumping-off point, to get a general idea of what American students are taught about this period, and the implications of the narrativization that goes into it.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. HarperCollins, 2015.

Once I got to the third section of my paper, where I compared the failures of the United States and the Soviet Union, I realized I needed a more authoritative source on the United States and its shortcomings than just a High School history textbook. Zinn fits the bill perfectly, because it is precisely those failures that are the focal point of his history. I acknowledge, of course, the shortcomings of this perspective if one desires to have a truly complete account of the history of the United States. Zinn is very left-leaning in the sense that he criticizes much more than he praises. But since I'm using it mostly to document specific instances of the American government failing, there's really no better place to turn. Hopefully it doesn't come off too strongly as some kind of denouncement of the United States. I'd like to think my 'final thoughts' segment is able to dissuade anybody of the idea that I'm rabidly anti-capitalist, or anti-communist for that matter. I want systems that work!

Additional sources used

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2024,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/05/31/the-state-of-the-american-middle-class/>. Accessed 30 March 2025.

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November 2024,

<https://www.cnbc.com/2024/11/19/bank-of-america-nearly-half-of-americans-live-paycheck-to-paycheck.html>. Accessed 30 March 2025.