Designed with the general reader in mind, this clearly written narrative history of the Soviet Union from the end of World War II to its collapse in 1991 provides an integrated introduction to the "Last of the Empires." Keep deals with those of the more than one hundred nationalities in the USSR that held union-republic status, especially the Baltic and Central Asian peoples, emphasizing the key problem of inter-ethnic relations and central themes of political, economic, social, and cultural development. The story begins with the last years of Stalin's despotic rule, which Keep treats as the introduction to the comparatively optimistic era of Khrushchev. Under his leadership Communist rule was reformed, though not necessarily liberalized, and there was an overall relaxation of police terror and an improvement in living standards. Keep shows how the ensuing Brezhnev years brought greater material prosperity but marked a setback to popular aspirations for change in other respects. Yet it was in these years that official ideology became less relevant than ever to people's everyday concerns; Keep argues that the Party lost moral authority due to internal corruption, and that the system gradually eroded. The fate of the reform policies of the younger and more pragmatic leadership symbolized by Gorbachev is the subject of the book's final chapters, which delineate how central institutions crumbled as national minorities claimed their rights and centrifugal pressures brought about the empire's collapse. Making use of a broad literature of "sovietological" expertise along with the new information made available since Soviet secrecy was relaxed in 1988, Last of the Empires sums up what is now known about postwar Soviet history and presents it in a clear and coherent narrative.

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