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1989 and why we got it wrong

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Abstract

The Cold War generated more discussion and controversy than any other topic since 1945. Yet, the possibility that the Cold War might end was neither on the radar of scholars nor of politics and the military. This essay seeks to explain why 'we' got it wrong by focusing in the main on how 'we' in the West understood the Soviet system. Part one thus deals with the Cold War itself and its impact on what came to be known as western 'Soviet Studies'. Part two then looks at the way in which the USSR was understood by an emerging group of new social scientists in the 1970s and 1980s. Part three considers the Gorbachev problem. And part four examines the ways in which the socialist left thoughts about the USSR in the context of the Cold War. In conclusion, I offer reflections on how the generally flawed understanding of the Soviet Union precluded the anticipation of Soviet collapse.

Keywords

Cold War, Soviet collapse, Soviet economy, Soviet Studies, social science, Gorbachev, Socialism, Stalinism

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Introduction

Whatever else might be said about the Cold War, the one thing it cannot be accused of is having failed to engage the interest and attention of the Western intellectual community. As a problem, it very likely generated more discussion and controversy than any other single topic in the post-war period. The reason is clear: as a system it was something from which none of us could escape and about which all us who experienced it had a view. From the Third World to the countries of Eastern Europe, from the front line of a once divided Germany to the American Midwest, the Cold War constantly made its presence felt. In the process it inserted itself into the economies of the two protagonists, shaped people's political choices, determined the outcome of elections, set the parameters for the debate on human rights, and helped promote democracy in some countries and authoritarian regimes in others. It also shaped culture (not always of the lower variety!), led to the deaths of millions (primarily in Third World), made some states rich and powerful, others poor and miserable, and for the better part of forty years threatened to destroy us all.¹ Little wonder that the Cold War was studied in such minute detail. It was very nearly the most important relationship we all had at the time.

By definition the Cold War was also a deeply argumentative relationship, and those who wrote about it before 1989 reflected these various divisions almost perfectly. Indeed, for every single event there were at least two – usually more – incompatible narratives promoted by both states and individuals who were party to the competition. ‘The ‘Great Divide’ as Isaac Deutscher once termed the Cold War, thus not only reflected some deep structural forces at work but caused a few of its own as well. Moreover, these ideological disputes – especially bitter in the United States in the 1960s and Europe in the 1980s – had serious political implications. As another participant in the struggle later noted, it was critical for the West to win the battle of ideas (largely one about who started the Cold War and why) because the side that could shape the intellectual agenda had more chance of prevailing. Yet in spite of this, the two superpowers did at least agree about one thing: that in a nuclear age the Cold War required very careful management. This was crucial. In fact, for the greater part of the Cold War most people were more concerned to ensure that it did not turn hot rather than think creatively about how it might end. Some, it is true, did seek to challenge the logic of the Cold War in Europe and the Third World by building (in their minds) zones of peace or neutrality. But the Cold War continued to roll on in spite of the many fine statements and schemes that annually seemed to announce what turned out to be its premature end – and the longer it did go on, the more many believed it would.

This last observation may in part explain one of the great intellectual conundrums of the post-Cold war period: why it is that this most analysed of relationships did conclude, and why it did so moreover with hardly a shot being fired in anger. Here after all was a phenomenon dissected to the *nth* degree. But when that same phenomenon first showed signs of fatigue, then wilted visibly, and finally passed away altogether in the late 1980s, the intellectual and policy-making community was largely taken by surprise. Naturally, the experts later queued up to explain why the conflict had ended. But this could not hide the simple fact that with very few exceptions most of them – policy-makers and academics alike – had not anticipated such an outcome.² Naturally, some simply dismissed the charge of failure. The task of the social scientist, they argued, was to explain, not predict; hence it was unfair (and beside the point) to accuse commentators of not foreseeing the great international earthquake of the 1980s. Others though were less defensive. As John Gaddis later conceded, the end of the Cold War found many of us wanting intellectually.³ And Gaddis was right.

Indeed, far from anticipating profound change in the Cold War system most observers before 1989 assumed continuity not change, and did so in large part because in their view the Cold War was the international expression of a profound and irreconcilable opposition between two well-established and well-defined social systems. The idea that one or either of them would actually fail seemed beyond the bounds of possibility, a mere fantasy indulged in by intellectual speculators but not to be taken seriously by mature commentators. There were of course exceptions to this general rule. Some brave souls even managed to get it right. But in the main, those who had had the temerity to suggest that the USSR was in longer term decline—as opposed to being merely weak, insecure or in crisis—were not taken that seriously. The odd Soviet émigré, certain US conservatives, one or two Marxists, possibly Paul Kennedy and Emmanuel Todd, and the American sociologist Randall Collins all pronounced on the Soviet Union in ways that after its demise now seem prescient. But their words carried very little weight at the time.⁴ Embarrassing though it is to admit now, hardly anybody of note then expected the USSR to withdraw from Eastern Europe in 1989 and collapse two years later.⁵

This essay seeks to explain why ‘we’ got it wrong by focusing in the main on how ‘we’ in the West understood the Soviet system. Part one thus deals with the Cold War itself and its impact on what came to be known as western ‘Soviet Studies’. Part two then looks at the way in which the USSR was understood by an emerging group of new social scientists in the 1970s and 1980s. Part three quickly considers the Gorbachev problem. And part four briefly examines the ways in which the socialist left thoughts about the USSR in the context of the Cold War. I conclude with a few reflections.

I begin though with a few observations about the issue of theory and suggest that perhaps one of the reasons it was difficult for most academics to foresee great change in the Soviet system is that they were simply not trained to do so.

The Academic Dilemma

It can be argued (and I would certainly want to argue the point here) that academics teaching in highly specialized disciplines in Western universities were – and in many ways still are - discouraged from asking ask big questions. They are deterred from doing so in all sorts of ways: by a doctoral system that emphasizes the footnote over the idea; by the subdivision of knowledge that finds its organized expression in the departmental system; and finally by career opportunities that are at risk for those who stray outside narrow channels. Universities moreover tend (and again have tended) to reward their members for the ability to publish detailed work in increasingly specialized journals rather than in more general periodicals. Indeed, there are few journals (except the less prestigious ones on the margins of academia) that actually publish non-specialist material.

Modern academics—including those within what was once called Soviet Studies—were thus caught on the horns of a dilemma. To succeed, they had to specialize and do "useful" or "practical" research that was recognized and rewarded by the university. But once involved in what effectively became a web of professional dependency, they found it increasingly difficult to examine larger issues; in fact, they may have been thought decidedly odd if they had done so. In this way, large-scale problems about the dynamics or contradictions of this or that social system (including, I submit, the former USSR's) were simply pushed off the agenda and left to those whose reflections may now seem especially wise but whose views at the time were largely ignored.

This leads to a second general observation, not about the structural constraints imposed upon the academic – now as much as then - but about the intellectual ones. To put it bluntly, the very nature of conventional social sciences would have made it extraordinarily difficult for the student of the USSR to foresee its decline and final breakup. The reason, quite simply, was and remains the dominance of empiricism in the academy: those so influenced simply avoided theorizing about systems in general. Indeed, they were literally invoked not to by the "greats" of social sciences, in particular by the anti-theoretical Karl Popper. The result of this persistent and, in the end, effective attack upon "grand intellectual designs" was to render most academics incapable of examining the large picture historically; the large picture was precisely what they were trained not to look at. The proper object of study was the very specific and the highly detailed: parts of the whole but not the whole itself. Large issues—such as why systems rise, mature, and finally wither away—were ignored or left to the speculator or journalist. Or, it might be added, to a Toynbee or a Marx—neither of whom would have felt very much at home in an academic department in the post-war period.

The final constraint was less methodological than institutional and professional. For over forty years careers had been made, journals produced, books written, budgets justified, and international conferences organized on the assumption that something would continue to exist: the Soviet Union. It would be no exaggeration to say that the USSR became a way of life for a very large number of people—not just in universities but in Western intelligence services, military establishments, major industries, diplomatic missions, and alliances abroad—who were all directly dependent upon the Soviet Union. The object of their distrust had, ironically, become the reason for their being. The idea that one day it might no longer be there was virtually inconceivable—as one academic discovered when he asked a group of leading American officials in 1985 whether or not we should be "looking ahead to the possibility that the Cold War might someday end." According to the academic in question, John L. Gaddis, the "embarrassed silence [that] ensued" was finally broken by a highly respected senior diplomat: "Oh, it hadn't occurred to any of us that it ever would end."⁶

Soviet Studies and the Cold War

This brings us then to the field of Soviet Studies itself. Here we need to ask a simple but important question: Why was the Soviet Union so great a subject of Western interest? For what purpose was it analyzed? There is no one answer to this, yet it would be somewhat disingenuous to abstract the discipline of Soviet Studies from its context, and that context was the Cold War. This, I would argue, profoundly influenced the assumptions of many Sovietologists. To understand why, we must briefly look at the development of the subject after the war.

The exponential growth of Soviet Studies as a discipline coincided with the emergence of the Soviet Union and the United States as the most important actors on the world stage after 1945. Understanding the USSR—which Churchill once characterized as this "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma"—became something of a preoccupation in Washington for two very good reasons. First, it was the only power capable of challenging or at least placing a limit on American power. Second, the world was in turmoil, and it was feared that the USSR would benefit from this fact. The United States thus had to develop an assessment of the Soviet Union's capabilities and intentions. This it did rather effectively.

Indeed, if one now reads through much of the American intelligence on the subject before 1950 at least, one is forcibly struck by its many insights. The Soviet Union was of course a problem, but as the influential George F. Kennan pointed out in both his "Long Telegram" of 1946 and the "X" article a year later, Russia was "by far the weaker party." The United States therefore had little to worry about; it could do what it had to do in the certain knowledge that Moscow would be unable to upset its plans for restoring world order.

As the Cold War unfolded, however, this more or less balanced approach was replaced by one that increasingly emphasized the seriousness of the Soviet threat. The reasons for this transition were complex. In part it had to do with Soviet actions over Berlin in 1948 and 1949. The detonation of the first Soviet A-bomb and the revolution in China in 1949 further upset U.S. calculations. A year later the North Korean attack on South Korea also did a great deal to confirm the dangerous character of the USSR to U.S. policymakers. Finally, as the wily (but engagingly honest) Dean Acheson understood only too well, stressing the threat helped mobilize a reluctant people behind the new American empire. Whether or not he actually believed his own propaganda, the fact remains that in public at least he tended to emphasize Soviet power and understate its known weaknesses on the assumption that doing so made for a more effective American foreign policy.⁷

Exaggerating the Soviet Union's strengths while underestimating its flaws had obvious consequences, the most important one being that people in general came to regard the USSR as having far greater capabilities than it really possessed. Hence the constant scares, the bomber and missile "gaps," and the "windows of vulnerability" that dotted the history of the Cold War. These were all part and parcel of a particular mind-set, an almost instinctive perception of the USSR which no amount of information to the contrary seemed able to dislodge. No wonder so many were taken by surprise when this apparently impregnable (and oh so dangerous) edifice came tumbling down—it simply wasn't in the script.

Nor, quite obviously, was the Soviet decision to disengage from the struggle with the West in the later 1980s. Again there was a good reason for the intellectual failure to anticipate this, for one of the central props of the Cold War was the assumption that the USSR was bound by its very nature to expand. The thesis was not entirely unreasonable, given that the USSR was formally wedded to an anti-capitalist ideology; had natural allies in the Third World; and to survive in a hostile setting had to win friends and influence people abroad. All this was obvious. The problem was that those who stressed Soviet expansion appeared oblivious to other facts: that the Soviet reach was never great; that Moscow frequently exercised great caution; that it sometimes retreated voluntarily; and perhaps most important, that for an inefficient and uncompetitive system like the Soviet Union, expansion was an extraordinary burden and one likely to grow as the economy began to slow down. Yet hardly anybody anticipated that the USSR might one day do what all other declining powers have been impelled to do in history: that is, retreat from an empire it could neither afford to support nor hope to control over the longer term.⁸

The assumption that the USSR could never withdraw from entrenched positions also helps explain why Soviet Studies failed to predict one of the most important strategic developments of all in the post-war period: Soviet disengagement from Eastern Europe in 1989.⁹ Nearly all strands of Sovietological opinion indeed assumed that the USSR would stay where it was—for apparently good reasons. First, according to the strategic wisdom, the USSR would remain where it was because doing so both placed pressure on the West and reduced Western pressure on itself. Second, it limited German ambitions by guaranteeing

Germany's continued division; indeed, if there had been no other reason for the USSR to remain in Eastern Europe, the desire to keep Germany divided would have been enough. But there was more. The USSR needed Eastern Europe (or so it was argued) both for economic purposes and for the conduct of its foreign policy, because without the support of its Warsaw Pact allies it would not have been able to project its influence so effectively. And finally, to withdraw from the region would have threatened the integrity of the USSR itself. For all these reasons, it was believed, the USSR could not possibly do what it finally did in 1989: disengage and return to home base.¹⁰

In considering the impact of the Cold War upon Soviet Studies, one must also look at the dominant paradigm of the Cold War: totalitarianism. Deployed initially as a term to describe fascist Italy in the 1920s, and subsequently applied by analysts to understand Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the 1930s, it became increasingly popular after the war as a means of characterizing the USSR. The post-war influence of the concept is readily explainable: It was simple; it seemed to describe the peculiarities of the Soviet system rather well; it was politically correct by the conservative standards of the time; and it provided a moral justification for Western policy in the Cold War by equating the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany.

In fact, precisely because it looked like an ideological device designed to legitimize (and perpetuate) the Cold War, the idea of totalitarianism later came to be opposed by many within the Soviet Studies profession.¹¹ Yet despite the backlash, the totalitarian thesis continued to exert a tremendous influence on Soviet Studies—with the important consequence that those who still supported the idea (and there were many) tended to assume the persistence of the Soviet regime not because it was legitimate but because it could deploy an enormous battery of controls to prevent latent discontent from becoming overt. These controls, such observers pointed out, had guaranteed the system after the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, had been perfected under Stalin, and—whatever their modifications after his death—remained in being until the 1980s. The people might mutter and the intellectuals moan, but given the power of the secret police and the atomized character of the population, there was no possibility that society's contradictions could ever express themselves. In fact, according to émigré writer Alexander Zinoviev (whose work exercised a great deal of influence in the West following the publication of *The Yawning Heights* in 1976), "Homo Sovieticus" was so traumatized that he (and presumably she) preferred the order guaranteed by Soviet communism to the likely disorder that would follow its demise. The system therefore was secure, strong not only in its own right but in having actually implicated the ordinary Soviet citizen in his or her own subordination to this perfected form of the Leviathan state.¹²

The Social Sciences

The Cold War shaped the contours of Soviet Studies for nearly two decades. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, there was a serious and determined drive both to modernize the subject and to integrate it more completely with the broader social sciences.¹³ The effort proved very effective, and by the early 1980s the discipline had changed beyond recognition. Yet despite this methodological invasion of what had once been a rather isolated academic preserve inhabited by the émigré, the government official, and the conservative, the new wave proved no more successful in predicting the upheavals of the late 1980s than their more orthodox predecessors. Carrying neither the intellectual nor the

political baggage of the "totalitarians," the second generation of Sovietologists failed as completely as their less liberal opponents in anticipating the collapse of the Soviet system. Why?

One part of the answer, ironically, has to be sought in the new cohort's rejection of the original totalitarian model.¹⁴ Supporters of that model, recall, believed that the USSR would remain in being not because the system was popular or inherently stable but because the Soviet state was extraordinarily repressive.¹⁵ According to a number of social scientists who rose to intellectual prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, this view was profoundly misleading: It not only overemphasized the role of force in maintaining the Soviet regime but seriously underestimated the reserves upon which the regime could draw to reproduce itself. That the system was not democratic in the Western sense did not mean that it was without support. On the contrary, it had deep roots in the Soviet population. Some even spoke of a "social contract" between rulers and the ruled in which the former fulfilled their part of the bargain by guaranteeing the latter full employment and minimal welfare. Moreover, it was argued, the Soviet people were proud of their country's achievements; they had been given far more educational opportunities than their parents or grandparents had had, and their children, crucially, had the chance of an even better life. So why should they want to destroy or undermine the system?¹⁶

But it was not merely sociological factors that challenged the totalitarian myth of a system held together only by terror. The fact that the post-Stalin elite permitted some degree of group involvement and popular participation in the political process also suggested that the Soviet system was less unstable than some conservatives maintained. In fact, according to one leading American political scientist, the Soviet Union was nearly as open (if not more so) than the liberal democracies of the West.¹⁷ Moreover, although Soviet elections may have been a facade, it would be wrong to conclude that they were meaningless. If nothing else, they allowed yet one more access point for the ordinary citizen to be involved in, or at least bring pressure to bear upon, the deliberations of government—further proof, if proof were needed, that the USSR was a long way away from the totalitarian nightmare portrayed in the popular literature by George Orwell and in the academic field by such notables as Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski.¹⁸

The new writing had a profound impact upon the way the USSR was perceived in the West. First, it made the Soviet system look decidedly less unpleasant than it had before; second, by implication, it led many who analyzed the USSR to the not illogical conclusion that the system was relatively stable. In fact, how could such an order—one that guaranteed jobs for life to an upwardly mobile, patriotic people who were not excluded from the political process—be on the verge of disintegration? That was beyond the bounds of possibility, a mere fantasy, entertained by extremists but not supported by the facts.

This conclusion was endorsed (in part) by another innovation introduced by the social sciences into the study of the Soviet system: that of political culture. Again trying to move beyond the limits of a totalitarian model whose residual influence probably had "less to do with its scholarly merits than with its ideological attractions," a number of leading scholars (political scientists in particular) sought to use the concept of political culture as a way of "allowing a greater degree of attention to be paid to the historical and national specificity of Soviet politics, as well as to the similarities it shares with other political systems."¹⁹ The results, though not devoid of merit, nevertheless tended to reinforce the view of the USSR being a good deal more stable than it actually was. After all, according to the "culturalists,"

the system had been particularly successful in shaping Soviet beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, in their view the regime had acquired legitimacy by doing things, especially in the socioeconomic sphere, that fulfilled popular needs and demands. David Lane, for one, thought that the study of Soviet political culture not only revealed a previously unknown degree of "congruity between the attitudes" of the political elite and the people but showed that the political system itself was perceived positively because it was "carrying out many desirable policies." It was reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the elite (or more precisely, "political elites") had some level of "support among the population" as a whole.²⁰

Finally, the argument that the regime may have been more successful than the totalitarians had assumed was implicit in much (though not all) of the new writing on the national question.²¹ Here, once again, traditional views came under attack from a group of social scientists who neither sympathized with nationalist aspirations nor believed that nationalism was as potentially dangerous to the system as had previously been supposed. Implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, attacking the thesis that the USSR was a "prison house of nations," a modern generation of analysts arrived at some decidedly revisionist conclusions about the ethnic question in the USSR.

The first and perhaps least controversial was that in spite of the great wrongs historically done to many nationalities, the policy of the centre after Stalin's death had been culturally tolerant, politically fair, and, by and large, economically equitable. Thus there was little reason to assume that so-called captive nations were straining at the leash to escape their now relatively benign captors. Nor did it follow that there was an inherent conflict between being a member of one of the various nations and a citizen of the wider Soviet Union. As one writer put it, ethnic consciousness "did not necessarily signify a lack of loyalty to the Soviet regime."²² In fact, according to another analyst, it could be channelled to make it "integrative" rather than disintegrative of the state.²³ There was, in other words, no prima facie case for thinking that nationalism presented the system "with an impossible or even a potentially disturbing future."²⁴ As another commentator noted in a popular and widely used textbook published in 1986, "For the foreseeable future, most communist states, certainly the more legitimate ones [such as the Soviet Union], should be able to cope with," though "not fully solve the problems of nationalism and ethnic conflict."²⁵

The Soviet Economy

Thus far it has been argued that the real cause of the failure to anticipate the end of the Cold War lay in a collective failure to recognize the USSR for what it was: a weak and flawed system in terminal decline. Nowhere was this failure more pronounced than in the study of the Soviet economy. Of course, most Western economists agreed that planning was inferior to the market; they also acknowledged in the 1980s that the Soviet economy was in difficulties. But few believed that the country's great (and growing) economic problems would actually bring about its disintegration.²⁶ The consensus was that although the economic system was in trouble, it had enough reserves to get by. This was certainly the view of the CIA, which in a well-publicized report of 1982 concluded that the Soviet leadership would be able muddle along almost indefinitely.²⁷ Significantly, it was also the opinion of influential American economist Ed Hewett, who went on to become Bush's principal adviser on Soviet affairs. As late as March 1989, Hewett warned the West not to overestimate Gorbachev's economic problems. The Soviet economy faced challenges, but it would be foolish to think it was "teetering on the brink of collapse." That line had been

peddled before, he said, but should not be repeated; there was too much at stake.²⁸

Why did so many Western experts fail to detect the fact that the Soviet economy was in terminal decline? One reason (we now know) was technical. Using Soviet figures, as most of them did, Western economists were bound to arrive at overly optimistic conclusions about the USSR's potential, for these figures both hid the degree of the Soviet slowdown and seriously overestimated the actual capacity of the economy. In fact, according to figures released by Moscow *after* 1989, the Soviet economy was not merely smaller than that of the United States but only one-third its size. Previous Western estimates of Soviet per capita income and productivity turned out to be even further off the mark. In other words, the Soviet economic system was not merely inefficient (that, we had always known) but far, far weaker than could have been imagined.²⁹

There was, however, a second and more political reason why some underestimated the Soviet economic malaise. Throughout the 1980s there had been fierce infighting between those in the United States who promoted a strategy of confrontation and others who simply wanted to manage the Soviet Union in a stable bipolar environment. The former, naturally enough, sought to justify their approach by stressing the critical condition of the Soviet economy.³⁰ The latter, not surprisingly, tended to point to the system's enduring qualities. Indeed, so opposed were those in the second group to the policy of squeezing the USSR that they were inclined to seize any means to undercut the neoconservative case, and the simplest and most effective one was to pour cold water on the right-wing thesis that the USSR was in dire trouble and could be forced onto the ash heap of history. The result was to lead a large section of the American establishment—effectively its liberal or "realist" wing—to the incorrect conclusion that the Soviet economy had more vitality than it really did.

Finally, the debate about the Soviet economy necessarily became intertwined with the wider discussion about economic change. The majority of analysts (economists in particular) believed in the possibility of economic reform. That profound obstacles stood in the way of restructuring was self-evident, but there was no reason in principle to conclude that improvements could not be made. There might even possibly be some "third way" between the Scylla of the command system and the Charybdis of the free market. This is where Gorbachev enters the picture. Assuming, or at least hoping, that he would directly address some of the difficulties facing the USSR, economists and others helped reinforce the belief (very widespread before the Gorbachev strategy began to implode) that the system would persist not because the economy was working well (it obviously was not) but because it was susceptible to improvement from above.³¹

The Gorbachev Factor

From our perspective today Gorbachev looks like a transitional, quasi-tragic figure that failed in nearly everything he attempted to do. In 1985, remember, he set out to revitalize the Soviet economy; in the end however he only managed to accelerate—some would insist, cause—its collapse. He also sought to transform the USSR into a more dynamic and attractive superpower; however, by the time he was forced from office in 1991 the Soviet Union was no longer a major force in world politics. And he tried to construct a new relationship between the peoples of the Soviet Union, but his ambiguous policies in this vital area only led to the empire's fragmentation. History, one suspects (especially that written by Russians themselves) may not deal Gorbachev a particularly good hand.

But to most professional students of the USSR at the time, the early Gorbachev years appeared to be a golden age dominated by an energetic reformist leader—the modern combination of Peter the Great and Stalin, according to one noted commentator.³² Indeed, how could one not be impressed by the man—especially since he was providing Soviet Studies with the biggest boost the field had received in over twenty years? Here perhaps is the key to understanding the "Gorbymania" that swept Soviet Studies for a short while: For the first time in many years the world as a whole was intensely interested in the Soviet Union, and who was on hand to provide instant, in-depth analysis about the latest developments in the Kremlin? None other than the long-ignored Sovietological experts. Many an academic career was given a sudden shot in the arm by Mikhail Gorbachev.

To say that the vast majority of those in Soviet Studies were supportive of Gorbachev would be an understatement. Until the end of 1989 at least, he assumed an almost heroic status in the eyes of most Western experts, so much so that those who were less than enthusiastic about him were regarded as either unreconstructed reactionaries who only wanted to return to the good old days of the Cold War, or ultra-left fanatics. For a while it was not *de rigueur* to be negative about Gorbachev or his policies.

Besides boosting the sales of books on the USSR, this temporary cult of Gorbachev had dual consequences for Soviet Studies. One, of course, was to make a number of well-known Western scholars virtual cheerleaders for *perestroika* abroad. The other was to obscure from view what was actually taking place in the USSR. The common wisdom was that Gorbachev was renovating the Soviet Union; in reality, the combination of changes he was implementing accelerated its decline and fragmentation. Yet few seemed to appreciate the fact; certainly not many talked about it; and when more finally did, it was too late. Momentarily buoyed up by the new man in the Kremlin, most seemed to feel (until it became clear in 1990 that the system was falling apart) that Gorbachev was breathing new life into the Soviet Union. Consequently, observers ignored or failed to see what was really occurring: that behind the facade of superpower summits and the new *entente cordiale* between East and West, the country and its economy were imploding. It took the coup of August 1991 for many to find out just how far the process had gone.

Socialists and Stalinism

It would be easy to leave the discussion at this juncture, to point the finger at either shortsighted policy-makers or those within the corridors of academic power. But this would be both intellectually one-sided and politically misleading. The left also has more than a fair share of egg on its many faces. After all, it had spent a good deal of time debating the "Russian question" and reflecting upon East-West relations; those two issues indeed seemed to preoccupy the left. In the end, however, the left in its broad spectrum - with one or two notable exceptions - were no more capable of understanding the peculiar downward dynamics of the USSR than their more mainstream colleagues.³³ As a result, they were as astounded as nearly everybody else when Stalinism collapsed and the Cold War came to an end in the late 1980s. The interesting question is, why?

One reason, clearly, is that many on the left either identified with, were sympathetic to, or had residual faith in the Soviet project. Accordingly, they believed (or hoped) that the USSR would prosper and survive. This is hardly surprising, given their general understanding of

the system. Critical of the Soviet Union's political arrangements, many socialists nevertheless saw the system as economically and socially superior to Western capitalism. Whatever its flaws, these had to be set against the USSR's many past achievements and its continuing deep reservoir of support among its people. Moreover, under Gorbachev's leadership there was a good chance that its problems could be resolved, through a process either of economic adaptation or political reform or a combination of the two. Anyway, the USSR had confronted hard times before and won, and it would do so again. Soviet socialism had been created against the odds in the 1930s and 1940s. There was no reason to believe it could not be "remade" in the 1980s and 1990s.³⁴

More critical voices on the left took a somewhat less sanguine approach. According to the Trotskyites, the USSR was a species of degenerated workers' state that could be regenerated only after the workers themselves had taken political power. But even the most orthodox of Trotskyites did not believe the entire system would disintegrate. How could they? The USSR, though not truly socialist in their view, still retained its planned character; by definition, therefore, it was economically more dynamic than Western capitalism. Furthermore, its non-capitalist character had to guarantee full employment to the workers and thus, despite its deformed nature, was bound to retain their loyalty. The USSR may have been in crisis, as Ernest Mandel admitted, but it would continue to function—and once the proletariat assumed the helm and recreated the conditions for socialist democracy, it would do so even more effectively.³⁵

The idea that the USSR would continue was upheld even by socialists who had no illusions about the system at all: namely, those who supported the politically virtuous but theoretically idiosyncratic view that the Soviet system was a species of state capitalism. Adherents of this particular school of thought travelled a theoretical route different from that of their rivals on the left, yet in the end they arrived at the same destination. The reason they did so was implicit in their original argument: If, as they maintained, the Soviet system was another form of capitalism, then it followed that the Soviet economy was no more (or less) likely to grind to a halt than the economies of the West. And as those economies were not on the verge of collapse, it seemed reasonable to conclude that the Soviet system would not break down either. Indeed, one exponent of the state capitalist theory went to some length in 1987 to remonstrate with those who conjectured that the Soviet economic system was in decay. It was very wasteful, he agreed, but the level of waste—and by implication the degree of contradiction—was no greater than in Western systems. Indeed, according to Mike Haynes, the USSR had quite a respectable economic record. All talk of collapse therefore was nonsense. The USSR would persist.³⁶

Conclusion

I have advanced the thesis that the failure to anticipate the end of the Cold War was the result of a generally flawed understanding of the Soviet Union. To demonstrate my point I have concentrated on the body of work popularly known as Sovietology, Kremlinology, or, more plainly, Soviet Studies. Some may think that my critique is overly harsh, that at least some students of the USSR did anticipate the final demise of the Soviet system. I accept this, however, we need reminding that those who made such a prediction were really quite peripheral to the mainstream debate—whether that debate was taking place in the universities, in the wider foreign policy community, or on the broad left. This is not to suggest that those involved in analyzing the USSR were unaware of its defects, or to imply

that they were blind to the fact that the system was in crisis. But what the vast majority of commentators would not accept and did not foresee was that these defects and problems would finally lead to the end of Soviet power. Nor were they likely to draw this conclusion, given their own intellectual conceptions. Their ways of seeing Soviet reality in effect precluded their anticipating Soviet collapse.

It might then be objected that the Cold War came to an end for all sorts of other reasons, so that by focusing only on the demise of the Soviet Union I present a singularly one-dimensional, almost monocausally structural explanation of why the international system was turned upside down after 1989. Perhaps so, but reviewing all the other reasons that have been advanced to explain the end of the Cold War—from American pressure politics to the purported part played by the peace movement in eroding the bloc system in Europe—one is ineluctably and irresistibly drawn back to the argument that the Cold War did assume two opposing social systems, that it was bound to continue in one form or another as long as these systems endured, and that the collapse of one of them inevitably brought the antagonism to a conclusion. Of course, this line of analysis tells us little or nothing about why the Soviet system failed, or what additional role (if any) the United States, the West, globalization, a Polish Pope or even the peace movement might have played in accelerating its decline. But this has not been the aim of my paper. Its purpose as I have stressed throughout has not been to discuss the several different theories about why the Cold War ended but rather to suggest a line of analysis as to why most people in the West never thought it would happen in the first place.

Notes

1. See Bruce G. Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1993).
2. Perhaps the most dumfounded commentator of all would have been former President Richard Nixon. In his book *1999—Victory without War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989)—published just as the Berlin Wall was coming down—he called upon the United States to "create peaceful rules of engagement for a [superpower] conflict that [would] last until 1999 and well into the next century."
3. See John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 17(Winter 1992-93): 5-58. Gaddis observes that the inability of those in International Relations to foresee the end of the Cold War must raise big "questions about the methods" they previously employed (6).
4. See for example Andre Amalrik, *Can the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?* Richard Pipes, *Survival Is Not Enough: Soviet Realities and America's Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984); Hillel Ticktin, *Origins of the Crisis in the USSR: Essays on the Political Economy of a Disintegrating System* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1992); Emmanuel Todd, *La Chute finale: Essais sur la decomposition de la sphere Sovietique* (Paris, 1976).
5. For an earlier discussion, see my "The End of the USSR and the collapse of Soviet Studies' *Co-existence*, 31, 1994, pp. 89-104.
6. Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), vi.
7. The problem of effectiveness in U.S. foreign policy is explored in Richard A. Melanson, *Reconstructing Consensus: American Foreign Policy since the Vietnam War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).
8. Interestingly, one of the few serious commentators to suggest that the USSR might be impelled to retreat from empire because of "relative economic decline" was not a Sovietologist but a historian of comparative civilizations: See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Fontana Press, 1989).
9. Naturally, it was assumed that *perestroika* in the USSR would bring about what one commentator called "fundamental changes in the ways" East European societies were "organized and run." What was not foreseen was that the Soviet Union would finally disengage from the region. See David S. Mason, "Glasnost, Perestroika, and Eastern Europe," *International Affairs* 64 (Summer 1988):431-48.
12. Typical examples of views on Soviet-East European relations before Soviet disengagement in 1989: In early 1986 one noted writer believed that Gorbachev "recognized" certain "limits that he himself cannot overstep"; see Vladimir V. Kusin, "Gorbachev and Eastern Europe," *Problems of Communism* 35 (January—February 1986): 53. The following summer another commentator emphasized, "No one can doubt that the region continues to provide a vital security guarantee that Moscow is unlikely to abandon"; see A. James McAdams, "New Deal for Eastern Europe," *The Nation*, June 13, 1987, 800. At about the same time, Charles Gati speculated that the most likely outcome of change in Eastern Europe would be to undermine *glasnost* in the USSR itself; see his "Gorbachev and Eastern Europe," *Foreign Affairs* 67 (Summer 1987): 958-75. As late as June 1989 another expert could still write that the states of Eastern Europe would "survive, albeit greatly changed"; see Valerie Bunce, "Eastern Europe: Is the Party Over?" *Political Science & Politics*, June 1989, 238-39. One of the most influential early critiques of the totalitarian model was H. Gordon Skilling, "Interest Groups and Communist Politics," *World Politics IS (Apl'A 1966)*: 435-51. For a useful and less critical discussion, see Archie Brown, *Soviet Politics and Political Science* (London: Macmillan, 1974), esp. 30-41. Rather oddly, once the applicability of the concept of totalitarianism to the post-Stalin period had been questioned, a number of writers began to challenge its relevance to the 1930s as well! This attempt to rethink Stalinism (or, some would argue, provide an apologia for it) was led by Arch Getty in his *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). See Alexander Zinoviev, *The Reality Of Communism* (London: Paladin Books, 1984).
13. According to Robert S. Sharlet, "Concept Formation in Political Science and Communist Studies: Conceptualizing Political Participation," *Canadian Slavic Studies* 1 (Winter 1967): 641, the problems facing Soviet Studies in the late 1960s stemmed from its "isolation . . . from the best of systematic and comparative political science." Because of this, it had "grown up methodologically impoverished."
14. For a brief but fairly scathing attack on the notion of totalitarianism by one of the new cohort of social science scholars, see David Lane's highly influential *Politics and Society in the USSR* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1970), 188-90.
15. See Leonard Schapiro, *Totalitarianism* (London: Macmillan, 1972).
16. For a sample of the new literature on Soviet stability, see David Lane, *The End of Inequality? Stratification under State Socialism* (Harmondsworth, England.: Penguin Books, 1971); Timothy J. Colton, *The Dilemma of Reform in the Soviet Union* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1984); and Seweryn Bialer, *The Soviet Paradox: External Expansion—Internal Decline* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).
17. This is certainly implied by Jerry Hough in his controversial rewrite of Merle Fainsod's classic, *How the Soviet Union Is Governed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 276. It is also suggested in his

- Soviet Leadership in Transition* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1980), 15.
18. For an early attempt to demonstrate how certain groups exploited their access to the policy-making process, see Joel J. Schwartz and William R. Keech, "Group Influence and the Policy Process in the Soviet Union," *American Political Science Review* 62 (1968): 840-51.
19. Stephen White *Political Culture and Soviet Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 4, ix.
20. David Lane, *The Socialist Industrial State: Towards a Political Sociology of State Socialism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), 91.
21. For a more "traditional" (some believed, at the time, apocalyptic) treatment of the national question in the USSR, see Helene Carrere d'Encausse, *Decline of an Empire: The Soviet Socialist Republics in Revolt* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1979).
22. Brian Silver, "Social Mobilization and the Russification of Soviet Nationalities," *American Political Science Review* 68, (1974): 66.
23. Peter Rutland, "Nationalism and the Soviet State: A Functionalist Account," (paper presented to the annual conference of the National Association of Soviet and East European Studies, Cambridge, England, March 1982), 1.
24. Mary McAuley, "In Search of Nationalism in the USSR" (paper presented to the annual conference of the National Association of Soviet and East European Studies, Cambridge, England, March 1982), 2.
25. Leslie Holmes, *Politics in the Communist World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 353.
26. Marshall I. Goldman, *Gorbachev's Challenge: Economic Reform in the Age of High Technology* (New York: Norton, 1978), 262, expressed the dominant Western view in 1987. Having surveyed the prospects for reform he concluded that "short of some unexpected catastrophe, the Soviet economy is unlikely to come close to collapse.... In the end, Gorbachev, like his predecessors, will probably have to settle for an economy that has to rely more on its natural riches than on its creative potential."
27. The CIA concluded in 1982 that although there had been a marked "slowdown" in Soviet growth since the 1970s, the Soviet economy was "not going to collapse." Indeed, the agency expected "GNP to continue to grow, although slowly." For the full text, see Henry Rowen, "Central Intelligence Briefing on the Soviet Economy" (December 1, 1982), reprinted in *The Soviet Policy in the Modern Era*, ed. Erik P. Hoffmann and Robbin F. Laird (New York: Aldine, 1984), 417-46.
28. Ed. A. Hewett, "An Idle U.S. Debate about Gorbachev," *New York Times*, March 30, 1989, warned against overestimating Soviet weakness—"something we have done in the past"—because there were still "strengths and reserves" left in the system. These included "a huge defence industry producing many world-class products; a formidable, hitherto underutilized scientific establishment; enormously rich natural reserves; a modest international debt, and a well-educated workforce."
29. See Michael Wines, "C.I.A. Accused of Overestimating Soviet Economy," *New York Times*, July 23, 1990; and Colin Hughes, "CIA Is Accused of Crying Wolf on Soviet Economy," *The Independent*, July 25, 1990. For a defence of the CIA's record, see Richard J. Kerr (acting director), "C.I.A.'s Track Record Stands Up to Scrutiny," *New York Times*, October 24, 1991.
30. President Reagan's views on the "crisis" of Soviet "totalitarianism" were unambiguously expressed in his speech to the British Parliament on June 8, 1982. See "Promoting Democracy and Peace," in *Realism, Strength, Negotiation: Key Foreign Policy Statements of the Reagan Administration* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 1984), 77-81.
31. Moreover, as Anders Aslund pointed out in *Gorbachev's Struggle for Economic Reform* (London: Pinter, 1989), 195, "the world" was "likely to be a safer place if the Soviet reforms" succeeded.
32. Phillip Hanson, "The Soviet Twelfth Five-Year Plan," in *The Soviet Economy: A New Course?* (Brussels: NATO, 1987), 10.
33. One of the few Marxists (apart from Ticktin) who saw the USSR tending toward absolute stagnation was Pavel Campeneau; see *The Syncretic Society* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1980), published under his pseudonym, Felipe Garcia Casals.
34. This was certainly the message conveyed in Jon Bloomfield ed., *The Soviet Revolution: Perestroika and the Remaking of Socialism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989).
35. For an orthodox Trotskyist assessment of the USSR under Gorbachev, see Ernest Mandel, *Beyond Perestroika: The Future of Gorbachev's USSR* (London: Verso, 1989). For a less orthodox, Trotskyist perspective on the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, see Tariq Ali, *Revolution from Above: Where Is the Soviet Union Going?* (London: Hutchinson, 1988). One of the two people Tariq Ali dedicated his book to (the other being Boris Kagarlitsky) was Boris Yeltsin!
36. See Mike Haynes, "Understanding the Soviet Crisis," *International Socialism*, no. 34 (1987): 4-5.