How (Not) to Study the Origins of the Cold War

Geir Lundestad

In this essay I will do three things. First, quite briefly, I shall sketch what could be called the old debate about the origins of the Cold War; then, slightly more fully, I shall outline what is often termed the new debate about the origins of the Cold War; finally, I shall spell out, at somewhat greater length, my own recommendations as to how we should be studying this topic. My argument is that the decades of debate about the origins of the Cold War have delivered less than one could have hoped for, even less than one could have reasonably expected. The reason for this shortcoming is that to a disappointing extent we have focused on the wrong questions. The sooner we correct this focus, the better our analyses will be.

Old Cold War history

In the present context the criteria used in establishing the various schools of interpretation in the debate on the origins of the Cold War are really as important as the schools themselves. It seems to me that the three most useful criteria in categorizing the early scholarly debate were the following: did the scholar in question see the United States (or the West) or the Soviet Union (or the East) as the guilty party behind the Cold War? Largely flowing from the first point, who was seen as the most active party in the transition from World War II to the Cold War? What were regarded as the motive forces behind the foreign policies of the Soviet Union and, particularly, the United States?¹

Based on these three criteria, three main schools were established: traditionalism, revisionism, and post-revisionism.² In capsule, and therefore greatly simplified form, traditionalists tended to see the Soviet Union as largely responsible for the Cold War; they generally regarded the Soviet Union as the active party and described the United States as playing a passive role until the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan; and they saw the defense of democracy in the United States and, even more, in
Western Europe as the main motive force on the American side and the
communist-ideological desire for expansion as the main force on the Soviet
side.

Revisionists were basically the mirror image of traditionalists. They
tended to see the United States as largely responsible for the Cold War; the
United States as the active party exploiting a wide selection of instruments
ranging from the atomic bomb to many different economic levers, while
the Soviet Union only gradually expanded into Eastern Europe; and anti-
communism and the promotion of capitalism, the latter in the form of
investing surplus capital abroad and exporting surplus goods while import-
ing particularly strategic items, as the main motive forces on the American
side, while to a large extent the Soviet Union promoted its security interests.

Post-revisionism was a much vaguer school of interpretation than the
other two, representing the middle ground between traditionalism and
revisionism. Post-revisionists could therefore blame either the United
States or, as most of them did and John Lewis Gaddis among them –
Gaddis was in many ways post-revisionist – the Soviet Union and Stalin,
although post-revisionists generally saw the Cold War as a somewhat
more interactive affair than did the other two schools. Post-revisionists
tended to describe the United States as more active at an earlier stage than
did traditionalists, but as less active than did revisionists. Thus, post-
revisionists borrowed from revisionists in their analysis of the various US
levers, although they rejected the revisionist view of seeing these levers
almost exclusively in a Cold War perspective. On the question of motive
forces, post-revisionists tended to answer ‘all of the above’ in the sense that
different motive forces influenced both Soviet and, particularly, American
foreign policy, the exact blend of these forces varying from place to place
and over time.

One could of course add to these three simple categories. Realism is
often seen as an additional school, but political science Realism was mostly
of such a general nature that it had little to contribute in the way of detailed
analysis of the origins of the Cold War. Realists among historians, such
as George Kennan and Louis Halle, are sometimes put in this category,
but in fact combine Realism with moralism and could be seen as a sub-
category of traditionalism. Corporatism has similarly been mentioned,
but corporatism as practiced by Michael Hogan and Charles Maier had
less to say about the origins of the Cold War per se than about the organi-
zation of the Western side. To the extent that they should be placed within
the Cold War debate, corporatists had certain basic elements in common
with revisionists. Similarly, world systems theory was really more relevant
for an analysis of the international structure in general than of the origins
of the Cold War, but again even this theory could be seen as a possible
subcategory of revisionism.

In a way the old Cold War debate petered out in the 1980s. Apparently,
there was not that much to add. Although traditionalists and revisionists continued to write in their old frameworks, there was an impression that the post-revisionists had really 'won' the debate. This was perhaps most clearly seen in the movement toward the broad post-revisionist center by prominent revisionists such as Thomas Paterson, Melvyn Leffler, and Barton Bernstein.

The most interesting new development in the 1980s was the emergence of non-American interpretations of the origins of the Cold War. With the opening of archives in Britain, British historians did, as could be expected, bring back the early perspective of three superpowers, a perspective which had been self-evident in 1944–45 when the Cold War arose, but was then rather downplayed by most American historians. It was argued that the Western Europeans 'invited' the Americans to play a larger role in Europe, for economic and soon also for political and military reasons related to the containment of the Soviet Union. Historians from the various countries almost took a nationalist pride in introducing their country as an actor in the origins of the Cold War. Personally, I was happy to bring Norway on stage, particularly in the origins of NATO.

There were, however, many reasons to be skeptical about the early phase of the Cold War debate, one being the extent to which the swings in the debate seemed to follow over-all political trends. While total objectivity is an impossible goal and all historians are part of a wider political context, it could still be argued that the Cold War debate was disappointingly subjective and 'presentist'. Traditionalism dominated until the mid-1960s and was very much a product of the early Cold War climate as this was reflected particularly in the United States. Revisionism was an even more American-dominated product and quite directly mirrored the doubts springing from the Vietnam War. Since the United States was 'wrong' about the Vietnam War, perhaps it had also been wrong about the Cold War? Postrevisionism arose in the early 1970s and, it could be argued, reflected the détente policies of those years. With détente, blame had to be distributed a little more evenly than had been done by the earlier two schools.

New Cold War history

The new Cold War history arose with the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the opening up of new sources, particularly in Russia, but also in other formerly communist countries and in China. (In addition, new sources were opened in Britain and other Western European countries and also in the United States, although most American sources had been made available earlier.)

There were many important new elements in the new Cold War history. The perspective on the Cold War inevitably changed with the end of the
Cold War itself. It is much easier to explain war and conflict when they are over than right in the middle of the process. The geographical broadening of the sources and, less so, of the participating historians – less so because this debate was still dominated by American historians – was very important indeed. During the Cold War the discussion of Soviet foreign policy was based almost exclusively on public sources; now some, but far from all, Russian archives were partly opened, and a new period in the analysis of Soviet foreign policy started.

With the new sources not only in Russia, but also in many other countries, the emphasis from the 1980s in the direction of stressing other actors than simply the two superpowers continued. China certainly became an actor more in its own right, whether one emphasized ideological or more realist considerations behind its foreign policy. All kinds of minor actors appeared on stage, often in disproportionately large roles. North Korea under Kim Il-Sung may have been under strong Soviet influence, but it still had its own views on the unification issue and these views were important in the origins of the Korean War in 1950. Cuba had its own interests to advance, whether during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 or in the events in Angola and Ethiopia in the mid to late 1970s.

There can be no doubt that the new Cold War history represents very significant progress compared to the old one. With the new sources in particular, the study of the origins of the Cold War has been brought to a new level altogether. Again, however, one cannot but help notice the close connection between the interpretations of the historians on the one hand and important political events on the other. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the victory of the West brought the Cold War to an end. This easily led to the conclusion that the Soviet Union must have caused the Cold War. American democratic and free-market ideals were riding high. Despite the warnings against ‘triumphalism’, there was nevertheless an element of this in the new interpretations of the Cold War. At the same time, it could be no big surprise that also inside Russia itself the new sources and the new freedoms created a mood, particularly among the younger generations, which stimulated renewed emphasis on the horrors of the Soviet past, certainly including Stalin’s foreign policy.

New, but still Old

In fact, while much progress has been made in our understanding of the Cold War, the new Cold War history is not quite as new as its representatives generally claim. Despite their pleas to leave the old, stale schools of interpretation behind, some remarkable continuities – rather unfortunate continuities I am going to argue – exist between the old and the new Cold War history. The most remarkable is the ease with which even the
new Cold War history can be fitted into the three criteria used for categorizing the old Cold War history debate.

Three books reflect the new Cold War history best: Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov’s *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev,* 18 Vojtech Mastny’s *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years,* 19 and John Lewis Gaddis’s *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History.* These three are generally regarded as the leading new over-all interpretations of the Cold War. They are all, more or less, traditionalist in tone.

Attempts have been made to place the new material in a post-revisionist, even slightly revisionist perspective. Melvyn Leffler’s 1996 article in *Foreign Affairs* is the most striking example of this. 20 Yet, the momentum in the debate has undoubtedly shifted in a traditionalist direction.

Going back to the three criteria, first, all three books are rather emphatic in blaming Stalin for the Cold War. Zubok and Pleshakov write that ‘In the categories of “good guys and bad guys”, Stalin was indisputably a bad guy in the Cold War’, and that ‘It is tempting to lay total blame for the Cold War on the delusions of Stalin and his lieutenants.’ Still, they are relatively restrained when they go on to state that Stalin and his lieutenants ‘were not the only culprits in the conflict’. 21

Compared with his book on the early Cold War years, *Russia’s Road to the Cold War,* 22 in his new book Mastny sees the Soviet threat as having been greatly exaggerated by the West. Still, Stalin clearly was responsible for the Cold War: ‘If the methods Stalin employed to assert his control in the eastern part of the Continent had made the Cold War inevitable, his unfulfilled expectations in the western part made it irreversible.’ 23

In his work more or less founding post-revisionism, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947,* Gaddis held out against distributing blame to the final two pages in the book and warned against seeing the Cold War as inevitable. 24 In *We Now Know* he puts moral responsibility right at the heart of his argument when he stresses that ‘as long as Stalin was running the Soviet Union a Cold War was unavoidable’ (original emphasis). The West may have had its share of responsibility, but only ‘If one could have eliminated Stalin, alternative paths become quite conceivable.’ 25 He supports Mastny’s early argument that if the West ‘bears partial responsibility for the coming of the Cold War’, then this is only because of its failure to try containment earlier than it actually did. 26

On the second criterion, all three books definitely see the Soviet Union as the active part while the West, or rather the United States, since little interest is displayed in Great Britain and other Western countries, are holding back. Again, Zubok and Pleshakov are the most restrained when they argue that ‘Stalin’s foreign and domestic priorities were limited in nature, and yet they led to tension with the West.’ They even see Soviet doubts about post-war cooperation as influenced by Western actions such as the dropping of the atomic bombs, the Marshall Plan, and, after Stalin’s
death, by later examples of ‘America’s hard line’. However, these Western elements are introduced only in the final pages of the book and thus there is little actual analysis of how the two sides interacted.

Mastny describes Soviet fears of the West as having been real and the West as stimulating these fears through various subversive activities. Still, Stalin’s ‘insatiable craving’ for security ‘was the root cause of the growing East–West tension, regardless of his and his Western partners’ desire for manageable, if not necessarily cordial, relations. The forthcoming Cold War was both unintended and unexpected; it was predetermined all the same.’

Gaddis, who analyzed US’s policies so brilliantly in *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War*, now asks the question ‘Did the Americans attempt to impose their vision of the post-war world upon the USSR?’ and even answers that ‘No doubt it looked that way from Moscow.’ Still, the focus in *We Now Know* is almost exclusively on Soviet actions and Stalin’s ambitions: ‘What all of this suggests ... is not that Stalin had limited ambitions, only that he had no timetable for achieving them.’ One difference between Hitler and Stalin was that ‘Where Stalin was patient, prepared to take as long as necessary to achieve his ambitions, Hitler was frenetic, determined to meet deadlines he himself had imposed.’

Finally, on the criterion of the motive powers of Soviet foreign policy, the emphasis on communist ideology is very striking. True, Zubok and Pleshakov see Marxist ideology as being combined with ‘traditional Russian messianism’ producing ‘the revolutionary–imperial paradigm’ which is really their basic concept in analyzing Soviet foreign policy under Stalin and even later. For Mastny, the greatest surprise

so far to have come out of the Russian archives is that there was no surprise; the thinking of the insiders conformed substantially to what Moscow was publicly saying. Some of the most secret documents could have been published in *Pravda* without anybody’s noticing.

In *We Now Know* Gaddis goes to great lengths in emphasizing ideas and ideologies: ‘The “new” Cold War history will take ideas seriously.’ And Gaddis certainly takes ideas seriously, particularly Marxism-Leninism as the fountain of Soviet actions. He even blames the historians for not following the people: ‘many people then saw the Cold War as a contest of good versus evil, even if historians since have rarely done so’ (emphasis by Gaddis).

What should be done?

What is so negative about this way of studying the Cold War? What should be done to improve this situation? Again, I shall relate my comments to the three criteria which figure so prominently in both the old and the new Cold War history.
First, I have long argued that the focus on blame or responsibility for the Cold War is an unfortunate one. None of us can be entirely objective; most of us pronounce on this question whether we want to or not. The fact that a book focuses on this aspect does not in itself necessarily mean that it is unsatisfactory. Still, I do tend to think that the question of blame is a moral-political one more than it is an historical one. I must admit that after having read hundreds of books and articles on the origins of the Cold War, I am left with a sense of at least partial frustration. We have learnt simply too much about blame-throwing and about the ideological climate from which these various accounts sprang and too little about what exactly happened and why it happened. The admiration for the few who have been able to take a longer historical view increases correspondingly. In an earlier context I have pointed to William McNeill's *America, Britain and Russia*, published in 1953 at the height of the Cold War, as an example of what could be achieved on the basis of a minimum of written sources.33

In many of the writings on the Cold War there is the implication that the status quo was more or less sacred, that trying to change the status quo was ‘aggressive’ while the side upholding the status quo was ‘defensive’. Yet, as E. H. Carr argued in *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919–1939*, published in 1939, ‘The moral criterion must be not the “aggressive” or “defensive” character of the war, but the nature of the change which is being sought.’ Thus, the American colonists who attacked the status quo by force in 1776 or the Irish who did the same between 1916 and 1920 were not ‘necessarily less moral than … the British who defended it [the status quo] by force’.34

This is not meant to imply that the Soviet Union should be compared with either colonial America or Ireland struggling for independence. It does mean, however, that there are always at least two sides to a conflict, that one side is normally trying to change the status quo while the other is upholding it. The conflict arises because neither side is willing to yield. This process is what we should study; then the awarding of points for good or bad behavior simply becomes less interesting. Thus, I think more would have been achieved if we historians had concentrated more on our standard questions of what happened and why this happened instead of on our explicit or implicit political agendas of distributing blame for the Cold War.35

Does this imply a position of moral equidistance between East and West? And what about Gaddis’s accusation that the people saw the contest as one of good versus evil while the historians have not seen it in this way? Many historians have indeed seen the Cold War as a contest between good and evil. As I have tried to indicate, this moralism is an important part of the problem with these interpretations. In addition, any historian who writes about the Cold War will have to say something about the attitudes, perceptions, and political structures of the two sides, that they both saw this as a struggle between good and evil. The Cold War was a conflict...
between two basic systems of government; these two systems should indeed be presented and explained. Referring to what others thought is, however, different from the historian himself choosing to analyze the Cold War in terms of good and evil. The essence should be the conflict between the two sides, not the celebration of one of them, although it will of course have to be explained why in the end the Soviet Union collapsed and the West prevailed in the Cold War.

Second, on the question of what was the more active side in the origins of the Cold War, it is time to emphasize the interaction between East and West, between the actions of the strongest power the world had ever seen and a country ruled by one of the most suspicious rulers in history. (A most difficult combination under any circumstances.) In the old Cold War debate the emphasis was very much on the actions of the United States, which were analyzed in great detail; Soviet actions were seen as more or less important for US actions, depending on one’s over-all interpretation, but too little was really known about the Soviet side to make any study of interaction truly meaningful. In the new Cold War history much more is known about Soviet actions, but once again the new studies are presented in relative isolation, this time without any strong effort to relate Soviet actions to the Western actions which were analyzed in such detail in the first round. This one-sidedness is easily explained by the need to digest the new Russian sources, but it is still an unsatisfactory way of dealing with the origins of the Cold War, as is after all the purpose of the new books.

I would also refer to our experiences in studying World War II. The debate on the origins of this conflict has moved in three rough waves. First came the overwhelming emphasis on Hitler as the guilty person and Nazism as the guilty system, with Hitler having presented rather clear plans as to what he wanted to achieve and then basically carrying out what he had proclaimed he would do; then came the revisionism, especially of A. J. P. Taylor in his The Origins of the Second World War from 1961; this revisionism certainly did not stick but it did strengthen a move away from master plans and blueprints and toward the opportunist elements in Hitler’s foreign policy. This did not necessarily mean that Nazi Germany and its antagonists acted with equal force and determination, but it certainly meant an added emphasis on the interaction between the two sides. Even if Hitler had his objectives, he was at the same time influenced by what the other major powers did. As Alan Bullock, among others, came to believe, Hitler was both a planner and an opportunist; he had certain preconceived ideas and he was influenced by the actions of others.16

If this should be our perspective in studying Hitler, it certainly should be in analyzing Stalin because virtually everybody agrees that Stalin was much more amenable to outside influence than was Hitler. As Mastny describes Stalin, ‘Opportunistic rather than reckless, he was not impervious to pressure – his main difference from Hitler.’37 Or in Gaddis’s words:
‘Where Stalin sought desperately to stay out of war, Hitler set out quite deliberately to provoke it.’

While as yet we have made little progress on the over-all level in putting the actions of East and West together and studying the interaction between them, at the more detailed level some impressive studies have been presented. The most impressive of them all is probably David Holloway’s *Stalin and the Bomb*. Then we always have to remember that there were other powers in addition to the United States and the Soviet Union and that, even in regions where one power had over-all control, circumstances varied from country to country and local actors influenced the pace, and sometimes even the basic outcome, of events. In Eastern Europe, Krystyna Kersten and Norman Naimark have written fine studies about the relationship between the Soviets and the local communists, although there is considerably less in these books about the interaction with the West; an even richer literature is appearing on Sino-Soviet and North Korean–Soviet relations.

Third, while there is much to be said for the upgrading of ideology as a motive force in foreign policy, particularly in Soviet foreign policy since the Soviet Union was a society where matters were frequently both perceived and explained in ideological terms, we should not succumb to the temptation of the one-factor explanation. Revisionists made economic–capitalist considerations into such an explanation on the American side. This was clearly a misrepresentation of US foreign policy. To make ideology into a one-factor explanation for Soviet foreign policy is more understandable, but it would still seem to represent a vast simplification. The reality of American and Soviet foreign policy is much too complex to be captured by such one-factor explanations.

In *We Now Know*, John Gaddis argues that the old Cold War debate, in which he was such a prominent participant, ‘emphasized interests, which it mostly defined in material terms – what people possessed, or wanted to possess. It tended to overlook ideas – what people believed, or wanted to believe.’ The new Cold War history – in which Gaddis is equally prominent – ‘will take ideas seriously’. It is certainly true that ideas and ideology figure prominently in the new Cold War history, although primarily in the discussion of Soviet foreign policy. Yet, his description of the old debate really refers to more or less Marxist revisionist interpretations, not post-revisionist, and certainly not traditionalist ones.

Thus, while the emphasis on ideology provides a good counter against the assumption of political science realism that ideology is largely irrelevant, in the historical debate on the origins of the Cold War it is definitely nothing new to see ideology as an important motive force in Soviet foreign policy. In fact, one is tempted to argue that this was the very essence of traditionalist interpretations of the Cold War. What Mastny and Gaddis write has been written almost word for word by a steady stream
of traditionalists from Herbert Feis to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. In Feis's words, during World War II the Russian people under Stalin 'were trying not only to extend their boundaries and their control over neighboring states but also beginning to revert to their revolutionary effort throughout the world. Within the next few years this was to break the coalition ...' (my emphasis). Or, in Schlesinger's even more striking words, the Cold War 'could have been avoided only if the Soviet Union had not been possessed by convictions both of the infallibility of the Communist word and the inevitability of the Communist world'.

Ideology, even Soviet ideology, is not an all-explanatory factor. Neither is ideology constant; most ideologies, and certainly Marxism-Leninism, contain many different strands, and the emphasis within the ideology may shift over time. Thus, ideologically, Stalin and the Soviet leaders went back and forth between emphasizing the 'contradictions between the capitalist powers' or the conflict between 'the imperialist and the anti-democratic camp and the anti-imperialist and the democratic camp' as the basic antagonism in international relations.

Most of the time, ideology is tempered both by various situational and short-term factors and by deeper considerations, such as security needs, historical legacy, and geographic position. In line with realist interpretations, the greater the security threat, the greater the modifications of ideology seem to be. Soviet history immediately before and also during World War II would seem to provide ample evidence of this. One day Stalin was opposing Nazi Germany; the next he signed a non-aggression pact with it. And, during the Cold War, one day Khrushchev combated capitalism; the next he emphasized 'peaceful co-existence' with it. These approaches may not be entirely antagonistic, but at least they represented a change of emphasis. Changes like these are frequently explained by important events abroad. But this is the very point: situations develop, often, but not always, abroad which influence the way in which ideology is interpreted. (One may of course choose to call even this end product 'ideological', but then ideology becomes a catch-all which simply begs the question of its development over time and the relationship between the many different elements within it.)

This was indeed the way even Lenin himself saw the role of ideology. He referred to the idea that Bolsheviks should always act in an ideologically deterministic way as 'childishness' or an 'infantile disorder'. And, as John Gaddis stressed in his early work, 'Stalin was the master of Communist doctrine, not the prisoner of it, and could modify or suspend Marxism-Leninism whenever it suited him to do so.'

No 'master plan' for Soviet expansion has so far been found in the partly opened archives; neither has a plan for an attack on Western Europe. The few war plans that have surfaced seem to indicate that an advance into Western Europe would take place after the West had initiated hostilities.
Stalin’s foreign policy may in fact be so complicated that it cannot be fully understood at all. As Odd Arne Westad has written, ‘To the historian – as to his contemporaries, Soviet and foreign – Stalin’s foreign policy is not as much inexplicable in its parts as incoherent in its whole.’ 50

Zubok and Pleshakov’s ‘revolutionary-imperial paradigm’, which introduces the imperial element, would seem to represent a useful starting point for the discussion of motive forces in Soviet foreign policy, but it really dodges the question of what was what in this amalgam. 51

Mastny underscores the point that the Soviet leaders really believed there was a security threat: ‘Whether this was true or not, their constant perception of a threat prevented Soviet leaders from ever feeling sufficiently secure.’ 52 Gaddis points out that ‘Stalin sought desperately to stay out of war …’ 53 If this is indeed a reasonable interpretation of Stalin’s attitude, and I think it is, then realist security concerns would once again seem to be an important modifier of ideology pure and simple.

As Melvyn Leffler points out, other contributors in the new Cold War debate have been much less insistent on the priority and purity of communist ideology. 54 David Holloway writes:

the policy Stalin pursued was one of realpolitik. Left-wing critics would later characterize it, correctly, as statist, because it treated states, rather than classes, as the primary actors in international relations, and because it put the interests of the Soviet state above those of the international revolution. 55

Or, in the words Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue Litai, with reference to Stalin and Mao, ‘the ultimate concern on both sides was not class struggle, but state interests (though the arguments were sometimes couched in revolutionary terms). In the final analysis, realpolitik governed [Mao’s and Stalin’s] thinking and strained their relations.’ 56

The new Cold War interpretations underline the close connection between domestic and foreign policy. In Gaddis’s words, ‘For the more we learn, the less sense it makes to distinguish Stalin’s foreign policies from his domestic practices or even his personal behavior.’ 57 Such a connection frequently exists, but at the same time rulers will almost always have more control over domestic than over foreign policy. For that reason too, there will frequently be discrepancies between domestic and foreign policy. Thus, while Stalin was undertaking his purges in the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s, abroad he emphasized the ‘popular front’ with democratic and socialist parties and cooperation with the Western powers.

Three final points should also be made in this context. First, even a crucially important person such as Stalin can be given too much importance. As Naimark has shown in his fine study of the Soviet zone in Germany, locally in the hundreds of decisions which in sum constituted a
policy, Stalin could be rather distant. In a vast empire like that of the Soviet Union even Stalin could only do so much.

Second, the Cold War did not in any way end with Stalin; it continued after his death in 1953. Khrushchev may have reinterpreted ideology and at first this brought the temperature in the conflict down somewhat, only for it to rise to new heights over Berlin and Cuba. This as well would seem to indicate that too much can be made of Stalin’s role in the Cold War. The more we get to know, the less likely the theories about ‘missed opportunities’ appear, during or after Stalin’s years in power.

Third, if ideology is so important, then one would think that it was important also on the Western side. True, the United States was a far less rigidly ideological society than the Soviet Union, but its democratic-capitalist ideology certainly influenced the perceptions and explanations of America’s leaders. Here too interaction would seem to be the key concept.

Rewriting the Cold War

Thus, while new Cold War history is in many ways an obvious improvement on the old, in the three important ways mentioned it is really a reversal to a rather crude form of traditionalism.

In the third round of Cold War history that will inevitably follow I recommend that we do the following. First, pay less attention to who is to blame for the Cold War and instead focus on the basic questions, what happened and why this happened. Second, move away from analyzing one side or the other and instead emphasize the interaction between the two sides, or, even better, between the many different actors in the Cold War. We may still not have enough sources on the Soviet-Communist side to get into the details of East–West interaction, but there can be little doubt about the direction in which we should attempt to move. Third, stop believing in one-factor explanations for the behavior of the Soviet Union or, for that matter, the United States, and instead analyze how many different factors blended together. When most of us more or less intuitively understand the complexity of the process, why then do we keep coming back to simplistic one-factor explanations for the origins of the Cold War?

NOTES

For excellent surveys of the Cold War debate, see Melvyn P. Leffler, ‘The Interpretive Wars over the Cold War, 1945–60’, in Gordon Martel, American Foreign Relations Reconsidered, 1890–1993 (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 106–24; David Reynolds, ed., The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), particularly the essays by Anders Stephanson (pp. 23–52) and Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov (pp. 53–76). See also the references under note 1.

John Lewis Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). For a left-of-center post-revisionist account, see Daniel Yergin, Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977). I have long considered myself a self-declared post-revisionist. The present essay may well be regarded as a defense of post-revisionism against certain features of new Cold War history. Post-revisionism is, however, so vague that it may be seen as much as a basic attitude as representing a specific interpretation of the origins of the Cold War. The essence of post-revisionism, as I see it, is reflected in my recommendations at the end of this chapter.

See especially Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, chs 6, 8, and 11.

A. J. P. Taylor writes that ‘Wars are much like road accidents. They have a general cause and particular causes at the same time. Every road accident is caused, in the last resort, by the invention of the internal combustion engine and by men’s desire to get from one place to another.’ The ‘international anarchy’, which is the starting point of political science realism, might be compared to the internal combustion engine. It provides a general theory for conflict. Yet, as Taylor also remarks, ‘“International anarchy” makes war possible; it does not make war certain.’ See A. J. P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 135–6. For an excellent recent article on Realism and other major political-science interpretations of international relations in general, see Stephen M. Walt, ‘International Relations: One World, Many Theories’, Foreign Policy (Spring 1998): 29–46.


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23 Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, p. 27, also pp. 23–4.


25 Gaddis, *We Now Know*, pp. 292, 294. See also pp. 25, 31.

26 Ibid., p. 31. But compare this with his statement that ‘This argument by no means absolves the United States and its allies of a considerable responsibility for how the Cold War was fought … Nor is it to deny the feckless stupidity with which the Americans fell into peripheral conflicts like Vietnam, or their exorbitant expenditures on unusable weaponry … Nor is it to claim moral superiority for Western statesmen. None was as bad as Stalin – or Mao – but the Cold War left no leader uncorrupted; the wielding of great power, even in the best of times, rarely does’ (ibid., pp. 293–4).
28 Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, p. 23. See also pp. 11, 195.
29 Gaddis, *We Now Know*. In order the quotations are from pp. 36, 31, 10.
30 Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War*, pp. 1–8. Their analysis is remarkably close to George Kennan’s famous one in the Long Telegram of 22 February 1946. Thus, Kennan wrote that basically Soviet policy ‘is only the steady advance of uneasy Russian nationalism, a centuries old movement in which conceptions of offense and defense are inextricably confused. But in the new guise of international Marxism, with its honeyed promises to a desperate and war torn outside world, it is more dangerous and insidious than ever before.’ Here quoted from Thomas Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, eds, *Containment: Documents on American Foreign Policy and Strategy, 1945–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 54.
31 Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, p. 9. Yet, Mastny also refers to the attempts to advance Soviet power and influence, ‘motivated by ideological preconceptions to a much greater degree than suspected …’ (p. 197). So, there must have been some surprises after all, although even they were in an ideological direction.
33 In my opinion William H. McNeill’s *America, Britain and Russia: Their Cooperation and Conflict, 1941–1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953) was the best analysis of the origins of the Cold War until Gaddis’s *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941–1947* was published in 1972. So, with good historical judgment excellent history may indeed be written on the basis of rather limited source materials. The even better combination is of course good historical judgment and a wide array of sources.
36 For what is still a good collection of articles about the debate on the origins of World War II see Esmonde M. Robertson, ed., *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1971). For Bullock’s reinterpretation, in part influenced by Taylor, see Alan Bullock, ‘Hitler and the Origins of the Second World War’, ibid., pp. 189–224. In a telling statement about Anschluss Bullock writes that it ‘seems to me to provide, almost in caricature, a striking example of that extraordinary combination of consistency in aim, calculation and patience in preparation with opportunism, impulse and improvisation in execution which I regard as characteristic of Hitler’s policy’ (p. 204). For a good recent account, see Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), particularly pp. 30–45. On the one hand, Watt writes that ‘Such programmatic elements as can be found in Hitler’s foreign policy between 1933 and 1938 were imposed upon him by external fact, not internal vision’ (p. 32). On the other hand, Watt also states that Hitler’s ‘speeches and orders were clearly intended to set forth his aims and how he planned to achieve them. To that extent they represent a programme, or rather a series of directives. They are not, however, consistent enough in direction to be taken for more than this, and yet are too specific to be dismissed as less’ (p. 33). See also P. M. H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (London: Longman, 2nd edn, 1997), particularly pp. 44–54.
38 Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 10.
39 David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy*


41 See the references under notes 14 and 15.


43 On the American side even some revisionists paid attention to ideology, particularly in the form of anti-communism. This was most noticeable with non-Marxist revisionists such as Gar Alperovitz, David Horowitz, and D. F. Fleming.


Of course the fact that important points in the new Cold War history represent a reversal to views presented as far back as the 1940s and 1950s does not in itself mean that these interpretations are wrong. This fact would, however, seem to provide little reason for celebrating the quality of historical research on the origins of the Cold War.

45 The latter phrase is from Andrei A. Zhdanov's famous speech at the founding of Cominform in September 1947. See also Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, pp. 11–35.


50 Odd Arne Westad, *Cold War and Revolution: Soviet–American Rivalry and the Origins of the Chinese Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 55. The statement would seem to indicate that Westad does not see ideology as an overriding factor in Stalin's foreign policy. Thus, he also writes that 'The ideological elements in the CCP–Soviet relationship, on which so many Western historians have banked for their explanation of CCP behavior, receded in importance to Yan'an at the very moment when Moscow ceased being a distant ideal' (p. 169).

For a more recent, somewhat different emphasis on Westad's part where, on the one hand, he argues 'that we had been wrong and that ideology may have played a fundamental role in determining the framework for foreign policymaking throughout the Soviet experiment' while, on the other hand, he also states that 'using ideas as important elements in constructing our interpretations of Soviet foreign policy history in no way excludes making use of the essential lessons of realism ...', see Westad, ‘Secrets of the Second World: The Russian Archives and Reinterpretations of Cold War History’, *Diplomatic History*, 21:2 (Spring 1997):
259–71. The quotations are from 264 and 268.

51 In a later article Zubok further explores the relationship between ideology and realpolitik. For this, see his ‘Stalin’s Plans and Russian Archives’, in *Diplomatic History*, 21:2 (Spring 1997): 295–305, particularly 302–4.

52 Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, p. 11.

Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 10, also p. 48.

54 Leffler, ‘Inside Enemy Archives’, pp. 122–8; Leffler seems to admit that he himself probably put too little emphasis on ideology in *A Preponderance of Power*. For the admission, see his ‘Ideology and American Foreign Policy’, *The SHAFR Newsletter*, 28:3 (September 1997): 31–8, especially 33, where he writes that ‘I felt that in *Preponderance of Power* I had not sufficiently clarified the extent to which correlations of power in the international system were linked to the preservation of America’s core values, that is, a system of democratic capitalism at home.’ This shortcoming was then presumably remedied in Leffler’s *The Specter of Communism: The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917–1953* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

55 Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb*, p. 168. He also writes that ‘Stalin wanted to consolidate Soviet territorial gains, establish a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and have a voice in the political fate of Germany and – if possible – of Japan’ (p. 168). This line of reasoning would, however, seem to be slightly at odds with his conclusion, where Holloway states, first, that ‘I have been skeptical in this book about the possibility that changes in American policy would have elicited significant shifts in Soviet policy’ and, then, that ‘All attempts to imagine alternative courses of postwar international relations run up against Stalin himself … His malevolent and suspicious personality pervades the history of these years. If ever personality mattered in politics, it surely did so in the Soviet Union under Stalin’ (p. 370).


57 Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 293.

58 Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, pp. 9–11, 58–60, 465–71. It should be pointed out, however, that Naimark primarily studies Soviet policies on the local level in Germany; he is less concerned with Stalin’s personal views and role.

59 The only great believer in ‘missed opportunities’ seems to be Deborah Larson, *The Anatomy of Mistrust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). Gaddis does not really believe in missed opportunities (*We Now Know*, pp. 127–9). Mastny believes that there might have been an opportunity immediately before Stalin’s death, but he clearly sees it as rather small (*The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, pp. 164–6). For a fine study by a young Norwegian scholar, skeptical to the alleged missed opportunities for German unification in 1952–3, see Stein Bjørnstad, *The Soviet Union and German Unification During Stalin’s Last Years* (Oslo: Institutt for forskarstudier, 1998).