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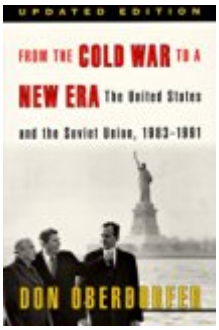
Don Oberdorfer. *From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983-1991.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xvi + 536 pp. $19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8018-5922-9.



Reviewed by Donald L. Zelman

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Don Oberdorfer provides an excellent, balanced account of the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States during the years of the Reagan and Bush administrations. The book is an updated version of an earlier work, ***The Turn from the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983-1990*** (Poseidon Press, 1991). The present work makes few changes from the original, but it takes the story from 1990 to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The author, a former diplomatic correspondent for the ***Washington Post***, attended many of the meetings and press conferences where key Soviet and U.S. officials hammered out their differences. His role as an observer helps explain his interest and insights into the topic, but this work is not a personal recollection. It is, instead, a well-documented scholarly study. Among other sources Oberdorfer consulted in both countries were official documents, media accounts, and secondary works. What adds particular credibility to the work is the 122 interviews with both American and Soviet participants, including the two American presidents, the Soviet general secretary, the America secretaries of state and Soviet foreign ministers.

As the title implies, this is a history of an international relationship that evolved from bellicose to harmonious. When the book begins in 1983, the long-standing tension between the United States and the Soviet Union was exacerbated by a nuclear arms race, the Soviets' attack on an unarmed Korean Air Lines jetliner, and the American placement of nuclear weapons in Western Europe. In neither nation did the leadership seem prepared or willing to work toward accommodation. Yet by the time the book ends nearly a decade later, the two countries had signed arms reduction (including nuclear) accords, agreed to the unification of Germany, and collaborated against Iraq, a recent Soviet client state. The United States was even shaping its diplomacy in ways designed to keep the current Soviet administration in power.

Oberdorfer attributes the improved relationship in part to such factors as the collapsing Soviet economy, the economic impact of the arms race on both the Soviets and the United States, and the

realization in both nations that nuclear competition could lead to nuclear annihilation. But as influential as these issues were in bringing the two nations together, Oberdorfer hands most of the credit to the leaders of the two nations. Different leaders could have pursued more confrontational policies. As it was, the wisdom and bravery of the men who led America and the Soviet Union in the later years of the 1980s--impressive individuals who stood up to strong opposition within their own countries--reduced the tensions that divided these nations from the end of World War II. As Oberdorfer notes in his preface, "to a remarkable degree this is a story of remarkable human actions" (p. xi).

People who lived during Ronald Reagan's presidency might find it strange that this devout anti-communist, an advocate of negotiating through military strength, would be identified as a major contributor to harmonious relations with the Soviet Union. But Oberdorfer portrays Reagan as more complex than his public persona would have one believe. For all his anti-Soviet bluster, the president was motivated by an abiding fear of nuclear holocaust and by a conviction that a summit meeting could erode the differences between the two powers. His decisions, complimented by his tough but accommodating Secretary of State George Shultz, were critical in the improving relationship between the two countries. As Oberdorfer concluded, few could have succeeded where Reagan did, for his strong anti-Communist credentials enabled him to make concessions that a more liberal president would have found difficult getting past the congress or American public.

As important as was Reagan's role, Oberdorfer makes it clear that the new Russian General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, aided greatly by his foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, was the real catalyst in bringing the two nations into harmony. Gorbachev may have initially shared the genuine Soviet fear and distrust of America, but his nation's desperate economic situation determined his course of action. The Soviets could no longer afford the Cold War, particularly the arms buildup. Realizing that an end to the arms race could improve his depressed nation's standard of living, as well as diminish the possibility of nuclear annihilation, Gorbachev became driven, often desperately so, to reach accommodation with America.

Illustrating the importance of relationships in shaping diplomacy, Oberdorfer describes the summit meetings between Gorbachev and Reagan from their wary encounter at their first summit in Geneva to their developing camaraderie at Reykjavik and Washington. Reagan clearly held the upper hand, given the Soviet's desperate economic situation. But with time in Gorbachev's presence, the president's suspicions of the Soviets diminished so that he came to share Gorbachev's vision of a nuclear-free world. Nothing illustrates more clearly the impact of this personal relationship than the summit meeting at Reykjavik. Caught up in the euphoria of their newly-shared idealism, the two men, without consulting their allies or military leaders, almost agreed to give up their nuclear arsenals. But what personal idealism created, it also destroyed. Reagan, convinced that defensive weapons could prevent wars, refused to give up his Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars). Gorbachev, fearful that SDI would lead to a space arms race, backed away from the agreement. Oberdorder, though not convinced that the nuclear-free agreement would have been wise, seems to sympathize more with Gorbachev's frustration than with Reagan's justification of SDI.

There were other frustrations for the Soviets. With George Bush, the Russians found themselves confronting a president whose suspicions of them ran deeper than Reagan's. Further, the Americans were willing to use their advantages to push the Russians on such issues as arms control, human rights, and Afghanistan. The Soviets initially rejected the American pressure; however, Gorbachev, determined to achieve accommodation,

eventually not only agreed to most American demands but even took the lead in offering concessions. Gorbachev's charm, his patience, his determination and the steps he was willing to take eroded Bush's suspicions, just as they had Reagan's. Halfway through the Bush presidency it was apparent that the Soviets were no longer America's adversary but rather a potential ally on the world scene. The defining event here took place on August 3, 1990 when the U.S. and the Soviets agreed to collaborate against Iraq, a former Soviet client state. Secretary of State James Baker called it the day the Cold War ended.

Though Oberdorfer lauds Gorbachev's role, he does not dismiss his weaknesses. The author concludes that the general secretary used his power unwisely. When he unilaterally reduced forces or introduced perestroika and glasnost, officials who foresaw danger from these actions were frequently removed from office if they opposed him. With his path thus cleared, Gorbachev's power blinded him to possible negative repercussions.

It's a sad irony that Gorbachev's success in winning over the Americans did much to undermine his position in his own empire. He soon found that events not only went counter to his goals but actually began to spin out of control. Instead of adhering more fervently to Socialism, the public, both in the Soviet Union and in the European satellites, embraced capitalism and the West. As Poland, East Germany, and the remaining satellite nations began leaving the Soviet orbit, Gorbachev's decision to demilitarize in Eastern Europe illustrated that he no longer had the will to protect the Warsaw Pact from its own people. In Lithuania, the one country where Gorbachev decided to take a military stand, he eventually backed down under American pressure. A significant response to these results was growing opposition to Gorbachev's leadership at home.

As Gorbachev's status declined, George Bush became the wise man in Oberdorfer's narrative. Basically pleased with the agreements made between the United States and Russia on such issues as arms control, ending aid to Castro, and collaboration over Iraq, the Bush administration did not want to see them collapse with a changing Russian leadership. Therefore, the relationship developed into the ultimate irony... the United States had to try to save Gorbachev.

Bush's choices were not easy. He could not support a divided Germany or a Soviet invasion of Lithuania and win approval at home; yet he could not encourage dissent in the Soviet Empire and have Gorbachev remain in office. It is Oberdorfer's conclusion that Bush followed a sound, cautious policy. He refused to gloat with the fall of East Germany; he refused to act forcefully when the Soviets threatened to invade Lithuania. But by this time it was too late to help Gorbachev stay in power. An attempted coup among Gorbachev's opponents marked the general secretary's downfall. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

This is a convincing chronology of the changing relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during the closing years of the Cold War. It follows well its title, tracing the historical events from the depths of the Cold War to a more promising new era. The strength of the book is the perceptive analysis of the key individuals involved. The author's interviews with these individuals and his insight into their motivations helps make this work an important contribution to Cold War literature. There are few apparent weaknesses, though occasionally the book seems to drag when the writer provides excessive details, particularly when covering the summits. Despite these lapses, the book generally holds its interest. Over all, it provides an informative discussion of the demise of the Cold War and belongs among the shelves of anyone interested that topic.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>.

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