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Maartin van Alstein, "The Meaning of Hostile Bipolarization: Interpreting the Origins of the Cold War." *Cold War History* 9:3 (August 2009): 301-319. DOI: 10.1080/14682740902981395. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682740902981395

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Review by **Tom Nichols, United States Naval War College**

Maartin van Alstein sets himself a difficult task at the outset of this article, noting the discordant arguments among the various schools of Cold War interpretation (and they are many and profound) and seeking the possibility of a synthesis among them that does not force false, one-sided choices between exclusive explanations of the Cold War such as "power" or "ideology." He rightly notes that "Cold War historiography is in need of a theoretical framework which is not only capable of generating a coherent synthesis of various explanatory factors, but also of addressing questions such as agency and causality…" (303) Of course, this could just as easily be said about the entire field of international relations itself, and this attempt to find a kind of "unified field theory" of the origins of the Cold War is laudable, if daunting.

Does van Alstein succeed? It is difficult to know, partly because of the density of the author's prose. He proposes what he calls a "hermeneutical-constructivist" perspective which, he claims, offers "a methodology of interpretation and a theory of meaningful human action" in which interpretations (his emphasis) "are understood as 'elementary particles' in the fabric of social reality." (304) What follows is an unnecessarily complicated explanation that boils down (I assume) to the argument that human perceptions are formed on the one hand by interactions with other human beings, and on the other hand by the social environment and the structures and institutions within which people live. Several rather arduous paragraphs follow elaborating on this observation (as well on matters such as hegemonic discourse).

Van Alstein then returns us to the ostensible subject of the article, the early Cold War, and notes that application of his framework "implies that it is necessary, in a first step, to interpret how, in the specific historical context of international politics at the end

of World War II, various actors and groups of actors…interpreted world politics and the role of their own nation in it." (306) In other words, the first step to understanding the origins of the Cold War is to understand the beliefs and perceptions of the people who were present at its beginning and the nature of the world they lived in. This is not a new observation and is, even on repeated reading, an obvious one, although van Alstein's presentation of it includes more than the usual amount of academic scaffolding, much of which is already familiar to the experienced reader of a specialized journal like Cold War History and is an unneeded distraction here.

More troubling, however, is that van Alstein's framework is too overarching; he verges uncomfortably close to creating a set of causal relationships in which everything explains everything. He traces what he calls the movement from a "cooperation paradigm" among Eastern and Western Cold War participants--and that, of course, assumes there actually was one--to a "sceptical paradigm," finally collapsing into a "hostility paradigm." (If stated in plainer terms, would anyone doubt or argue that the Grand Alliance decayed from cooperation to suspicion to conflict?) And all of these seem to happen primarily in the passive voice; van Alstein notes, for example, that in 1946 "tensions between the great powers rapidly increased over a series of issues and problems" including the list of flashpoints well-known to Cold War scholars: Germany, Iran, Greece, and many others. (310) Both sides, according to van Alstein, then began increasingly to view each as the "other", and to interpret each other's actions in an increasingly hostile way. But tensions don't just "increase" on their own: concrete policies, chosen by real people, for actual reasons (good or ill) were the mainspring behind these "issues and problems." Van Alstein then notes that both sides blamed each other for the breakup of the Grand Alliance, and argues that this was part of the "hostility paradigm" that became "hegemonic" by 1947. (As a matter of history, this itself is debatable; there are many, including me, who believe that neither side really "blamed" the other for the collapse of an alliance that many on both sides never much valued in the first place, but that is another argument for another time.)

In the end, we are left with very little but a cumbersome set of new and overly complicated terms that trace the evolution of the East-West relationship from grudging cooperation against Hitler to open confrontation with each other. Van Alstein seems to make the same errors he seeks to correct: he drains the Cold War of choice, human agency, and intellectual depth. Instead, he rehearses the period from 1944 to 1947, and argues, in effect, that both sides, and neither side, wanted a Cold War but got one anyway, mostly due to misinterpretation, the unconscious adoption of paradigms and discourses, and the inherently different structures of two societies (which was no one's fault, of course, but nonetheless predestined a certain amount of conflict at the international level). Only the Europeans emerge from this account as people with any sense; it was they, van Alstein informs us, who truly wanted to stay out of the playground fight between the two big bullies and their British junior partner, but who got sucked into the vortex against both their will and their better judgment. (313) Again, this is in itself a contestable proposition, but not one that need

be engaged in this review, except to point out that it is an argument that van Alstein requires in order to make his overall explanation of the origins of the Cold War congrue more tightly with his own framework.

At its core, van Alstein's "hermeneutical-constructivist" approach leaves us only with the obvious conclusion that the Cold War was begun by a group of people who lived in certain social circumstances, and believed in certain things, at a certain time in history. Van Alstein invokes the work of Mark Kramer here, and Kramer would have been a good model for him to emulate more closely, as Kramer's work is a leading example in a small but important movement in Cold War studies that actually does manage to place people and their beliefs in an historical and political context. And one contribution van Alstein does make is to take us just a few inches further away from increasingly fruitless realist explanations of the Cold War as a conflict as easily explicable as any other. But the verbiage surrounding van Alstein's critique and the obviousness of his conclusions might inadvertently add ammunition to the assertion realists could make that their explanations, even if lacking a certain texture, are simpler and clearer. This would be unfortunate, since van Alstein's criticism is sound, even if his solution is needlessly overcomplicated. Van Alstein is to be applauded for reminding us that the endless dance among power, culture, ideology, and other factors at some point has to find a more coherent synthesis. But it is not to be found in this article, despite van Alstein's significant and admirable efforts.

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