



H-Diplo Commentary - *Journal of Cold War Studies*

Vol. 7, No. 2, Spring 2005

Special Issue: Ideas, International Relations, and the End of the Cold War

“Introduction: The Role of Ideas and the End of the Cold War” by Nina Tannenwald and William C. Wohlforth

“Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda” by Nina Tannenwald

“The Sociology of New Thinking: Elites, Identity Change, and the End of the Cold War” by Robert English

“The Guns That Didn't Smoke: Ideas and the Soviet Non-Use of Force in 1989” by Andrew Bennett

“Human Rights Ideas, the Demise of Communism, and the End of the Cold War” by Daniel C. Thomas

“Economic Incentives, Ideas, and the End of the Cold War: Gorbachev and German Unification” by Tuomas Forsberg

“The End of the Cold War as a Hard Case for Ideas” by William C. Wohlforth

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Published by H-Diplo on 25 September 2005

What drives the foreign policy(ies) of a nation? If it seems a simple question, it is only deceptively so. It might be easy enough to point to specific interests-- political, economic, or even social or cultural. It may even seem easy to discuss specific ideologies that drive a nation, such as America's desire to spread democracy throughout the world. Yet another answer, possibly less obvious, is that foreign policies are the product of various ideas promulgated within a nation at any given time and in relation to any given situation. And, of course, one could answer that a nation's actions can be explained by some combination of these things. This is where the deceptive nature of the question truly lies, however, for what is the relationship between interests and ideas? Do ideas play a role independent of material interests? Do they play a complimentary role to those interests when international politics are being played out? Is it even possible to determine when and where ideas may be the prime mover? These are a few of the questions tackled in the Spring 2005 issue of the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. This special issue of the journal is devoted entirely to examining the role of ideas in international politics, specifically as relates to the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

Nina Tannenwald and William Wohlforth are the architects of this special issue. Observing the ever-increasing importance of scholarship on the role of ideas in international relations in general, they wished to examine the role ideas played in the ending of the Cold War more specifically. Existing scholarship on this question has been challenged on the basis of theory, evidence and methodology. Tannenwald and Wohlforth offer this special issue as a response to these challenges, to push research on the role of ideas and the end of the Cold War “to a new level of rigor,” and to “advance the debate over the role of ideas in international politics more generally.”(3) They are joined in this endeavor by Robert English, Andrew Bennett, Daniel Thomas, and Tuomas Forsberg, each of whose research is not only at the forefront of the work

being done on changes within the Soviet Union leading to the collapse of the Cold War, but whose work is also involved with understanding the role ideas played in fostering these events.

To meet these goals, the articles that comprise the special issue seek to clearly establish the “precise pathways or mechanisms by which ideas helped bring the Cold War to a close.” (9) They do so by analyzing some of the “key puzzles” on the Soviet side, arguably the more interesting part of the equation. More specifically, these puzzles include Soviet redefinition of national identity in response to the West (Robert English’s article), the Soviet decision not to use force to preserve the Warsaw Pact in 1989 (Andrew Bennett’s article), the role of transnational human rights ideas in the collapse of communism (Daniel Thomas’ article), and Soviet acceptance of German unification within NATO (Tuomas Forsberg’s article). Prefacing the individual articles is a piece by Tannenwald offering a roadmap for understanding and advancing the theoretical and conceptual framework for analyzing the role ideas play in international politics. By way of conclusion, the special issue ends with Wohlforth’s commentary on the ways in which this project meets the goals set forth by its creation.

Ideational Theory Itself:

Tannenwald’s article on theory, “Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda,” seeks to “identify various explanatory strategies for the role of ideas and, in so doing, seek to clarify some methodological issues in the study of ideas” (13) She begins by discussing the different types of ideas that the articles in this issue focus on—ideologies or shared belief systems, normative beliefs, cause-effect beliefs, and policy prescriptions. Next she considers the different ways in which realist, rationalist and cognitive/constructivist schools of thought consider the role of ideas on outcomes as having, respectively, little independent effect, somewhat direct effect as independent variables, or as always mattering. At the heart of this discussion is the relationship between the material and the ideational or, in other words, at least as it relates to the end of the Cold War, how much material issues such as economic difficulties within the Soviet Union shaped the events leading to the end of the conflict vs. the extent to which those events were the product of *ideas themselves*. More broadly, this issue of conceptualizing the relationship between the material and ideational interest speaks to the causal power of ideas.

As Tannenwald’s discussion of theory unfolds, she offers different means of testing for ideas. These include examining the timing of ideas relevant to both events and policy, as well as the success of distribution of ideas and the spread of those ideas among those holding different policy positions. Additional tests relate to considering whether or not ideas expressed by individuals relate to their material interests, how seriously political actors take their ideas, and how wide the realistic range of policy options truly is. Ultimately, Tannenwald urges us to make distinctions between ideas as merely causal explanations for events and ideas as constitutive processes of events.

This brief summary of the article’s content may suggest to the reader that Tannenwald’s piece is a simple roadmap to thinking about the role ideas play in international politics. To scholars intimately familiar with thinking about ideas, this may be so. However, to those just beginning to think about what role ideas may play in shaping the policies and events they study,

Tannenwald's discussion of the theoretical agenda is somewhat dense. Readers unfamiliar with the things Tannenwald discusses may find themselves re-reading passages or pausing to look up a few definitions. Indeed an understanding of this theory may sometimes be more easily gleaned from the articles within the issue that attempt to apply some of this theory. Thomas' article on human rights ideas offers its own discussion on theoretical perspectives that is in some ways more easily followed (111).

Tannenwald should not necessarily be held accountable for a reader's shortcomings, however, as it is clear that her article and this issue are aimed at those already engaged in thinking about the role ideas play. The goal here is clearly to nudge these scholars into re-examining and honing their own work. Nonetheless, if the intent of the special issue in its entirety is to engage in a lively debate between those who distrust conclusions about the place of ideas in international politics and those defending that place, especially over the place granted to material interests, one of the means to further that debate would be to encourage and invite new scholars, particularly those in training, to enter the fray. Hopefully, a sometimes dense discussion of theory will not be off-putting for hidden within the article are the tools necessary to begin one's understanding. Tannenwald's footnotes offer a veritable cornucopia of places to look for thinking about the role ideas can play. She also, through linking her discussion to existing studies of the Soviet Union and the articles within the issue, provides examples for one to turn to see theory in action. And, while her discussion of theoretical agendas is peppered with examples from Soviet studies and the end of the Cold War, the theory is not limited to that area of scholarship. Indeed, what she offers through her discussion of "tests" for the role of ideas can be, and will hopefully be, adapted to other areas of research, both geographically and chronologically.

Theory in Action: The Specific "Puzzles" within the Soviet Union

The remaining articles in the special issue take their cue from Tannenwald's discussion of the theoretical agenda. The authors energetically engage themselves in the task of how to discuss productively the role ideas played in Soviet actions that led to the end of the Cold War, often by utilizing the tests Tannenwald set out in her discussion of theory. The articles do, however, seem to hone in on the issue of the material versus the ideational. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth's "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating A Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security*, 25:3 (2000/01) is referenced—to dispute its conclusions, agree with them, or modify them—by some of the articles here. Brooks and Wohlforth, of course, argue for the material over the ideational in explaining how changes in Soviet policy tracked the material/economic decline of the Soviet Union. When these two are not specifically mentioned, the issue of material interests is nonetheless raised.

Robert English's article, "The Sociology of New Thinking," provides an excellent lead off. By examining early insights into the social-intellectual character of the new thinkers, the development and mobilization of the new thinking, and the nature of identity change, he seeks to demonstrate how ideas influenced Soviet behaviour "in a much broader, more complex, and more fundamental manner than is generally understood" (43). For English, the new thinking represented far more than different ways to approach Soviet problems. Instead, it represented the construction a new national identity for the Soviet Union. No longer would the Soviet Union

merely cooperate with the liberal international community. Rather, new thinking believed the Soviet Union to be a *member* of that community. In so doing, it “entailed a sharply different conception of Soviet national interests in world politics” (74). Thus, English’s approach considers the ideas behind the new thinking to be normative rather than instrumental in causing an end to the Cold War.

In determining the role ideas play, English directly employs several of Tannenwald’s tests for determining the constitutive role of ideas and, in the process, gives the reader his/her first glimpse at just how well put together this special issue truly is. His analysis passes the ‘time-test’ as he argues that the origins of the new thinking trace back much farther than usually considered. In examining the young policy-making academic elite of the post-Stalinist generation, he sees a group who shared a “social identity as members of a reformist, ‘Westernizing’ domestic community” (48). By the mid-1960s this community’s private debates turned increasingly liberal. Contrary to established belief, English argues that the period after the Prague Spring but prior to the construction of détente represents the time span in which most of the ideas that would comprise the new thinking of the mid-1980s emerged. The analysis also passes the ‘relation between ideas and material interests test.’ English shows how new thinkers often faced professional and personal ruin for questioning Soviet dogma and advocating liberal alternatives to it. Thus it was not in their material interest to have adopted this new thinking. Lastly, English employs Tannenwald’s test examining the range of options available, or in other words, “whether ideational or material resources better explain why some ideas win out over others” (68.) He perceives a number of options aside from the rapid retrenchment of Communist dogma that could have been followed, such as a return to the Brezhnev-Chernenko status quo. In light of passing all these tests, he argues that ideas played a decisive role in the Cold War’s end.

Andrew Bennett’s article, “The Guns that Didn’t Smoke: Ideas and Soviet Non-Use of Force in 1989” is less forceful in advocating for ideas over material interest in explaining the end of the Cold War in its entirety, though no less forceful because of this in arguing for the constitutive role of ideas in understanding the Soviet decision to allow the German unification to occur peacefully as opposed to using force to prevent it. Whereas English disagrees with the Brooks and Wohlforth conclusion that changes in Soviet policy in the 1980s track alongside the deteriorating material conditions of the USSR, Bennett largely feels that newly available evidence “only increases the explanatory weight we should accord materialist explanations” of the end of the Cold War (82). However, while he agrees that economic decline prompted change in Soviet policy, Bennett also feels that the shift could have just as easily been in the direction of a more hard-lined Soviet policy. In other words, just as English writes, there were other directions Gorbachev could have moved in and thus we need to accord ideational explanations some weight in understanding what did happen.

Bennett’s core argument is that the ongoing military interventions the Soviet Union participated in during the 1980s offered Soviet leaders lessons that inhibited their use of force in Europe in 1989. In constructing this argument, Bennett also relies on using the tests Tannenwald sets forth, although his use is far more implicit than English’s. In particular, he considers whether the ideas expressed fit with material interests or life experiences, if changes in material conditions preceded or followed changes in ideas, and whether ideational or material factors better explain why the Soviets failed to send in the Red Army. By running his research through these tests,

Bennett's analysis offers a strong case for the blending of materialist and ideational explanations. He concludes that, "some form of dramatic Soviet foreign policy change was eventually likely in view of the Soviet Union's material decline but...ideas and governmental structure were critical in determining the nature of change in Soviet foreign policy." (83).

Bennett's findings are largely based on an analysis of two documents recently made available: an Institute of the Economy of the World Socialist Systems (IEMSS) and a Communist Party International Department report on Eastern Europe in 1989. His article thus demonstrates the need for the continued declassification of Soviet documents in understanding the end of the Cold War as well as the importance of new evidence to altering, strengthening or disproving previous conclusions. It is also a prime example of the type of analysis that can be derived from a close reading of documents, however sparse they may be. In particular, a reading of these two documents contributes a great deal to the ideational/materialist debate. With their emphasis on East European debt to the West, both reports support materialist accounts of the end of the Cold War. Both also suggest that military intervention in Germany and elsewhere would be extremely costly, even if they differed on the issue of whether the Soviets should rule out force entirely, and whether East Europe was an economic burden to the USSR. Both reports, moreover, support ideational analyses by rejecting force on principle. Bennett is able to plug these reports into a study of the role of ideas that involves cognitive theory. He uses cognitive theory to emphasize how experiences in Afghanistan and Angola led the Soviets to be pessimistic about the use of force in Germany. Gorbachev and the other new thinkers were disinclined to use force because of the costly failure of such use during the 1980s but beyond that, the new thinkers had formative experiences as young adults that made them skeptical of the morality of using force in the first place. Gorbachev thus had a deep aversion to using force in any situation and Bennett suggests, would not have used it even if he did not have to worry about economic consequence (108). Thus the new thinking fit his life experience more than any material conditions of the Soviet Union itself.

In solving his puzzle, Bennett supports the ideational because he argues that ideas influenced every aspect of decision-making in Soviet deliberation on unification in 1989. But he does not override the importance of material interests. If he thus seems to be taking the easier road of finding the middle ground, his analysis is nonetheless worthwhile for offering different means by which to examine the role of ideas—cognitive theory. In making this offer, he also points out some of the downsides to ideational explanations that focus solely on processes of socialization, persuasion, and even, as English's piece does, on identity change.

In similar vein to Bennett, Daniel Thomas' article, "Human Rights Ideas, the Demise of the Communism, and the End of the Cold War," recognizes the explanatory power of material considerations and acknowledges that material and ideational pressures intertwined and supported one another in bringing about the end of the Cold War. Thomas is, however, much like English in that if we could represent the material/ideational debate as linear, he sits closer to the ideational. He rejects rationalist approaches that assume individuals' actions are based on perceptions of how those actions can help them achieve their interests. Instead, he adopts a constructivist approach, assuming that an individual's behaviour is defined by norms relevant to who they are internally, not what they seek externally. Thus, he sees limits to the power of materialist explanations of the end of the Cold War that argue for that end as the unintended

consequence of reforms meant only to strengthen the Soviet economy. Materialist explanations are limited, according to Thomas, because they do not explain why Gorbachev pursued political and social reform as well as economic reform when the Chinese offered the example of marketization without democratization. Ultimately, he argues: “if the materialist argument were correct, one would expect Soviet leaders to use repressive measures once their hold on power was seriously endangered. Yet, rather than heed the moderate reformers’ warnings that political reform would undermine the regime, Gorbachev worked systematically after 1987 to marginalize the more cautious reformers” (116).

Thomas proceeds to outline the effect transnational thinking about human rights had on Gorbachev and the other new thinkers and to link that thinking to Gorbachev’s conception of Europe. Respect for human rights represented a core aspect of Europe’s identity; thus, for the Soviet Union to be accepted as part of Europe (which is how Gorbachev viewed it) human rights protections in the USSR needed to be expanded. This reform campaign was far more extensive than moderate economic reform required. Ultimately, this campaign led to the demise of communism and the collapse in one-party communist rule.

In a way, the role of ideas projected into the Soviet Union is what is important here, although Thomas never explicitly states this. Human rights thinking outside of the USSR had adopted a normative character transnational in scope. Thus, his article is a curious mix of the implicit as well as the explicit when considering the role ideas played in ending the Cold War. The adoption of human rights concerns inside the Soviet Union was certainly key, but this essay offers an excellent example of the ways in which internal and external ideational concerns converged to spark change in the Soviet Union. The other articles are narrowly, if understandably and excusably focused on changes within the Soviet Union itself that ultimately led to the end of the Cold War. Yet the Cold War ended as a result of more than just one country’s actions. It was, after all, a global conflict. Despite the relative strengths of English and Bennett in arguing for the role of ideas in international politics, Thomas’ article is perhaps the most successful when it comes to considering the *international* more completely and more truly.

The last article in the special issue is Tuomas Forsberg’s “Economic Incentives, Ideas, and the End of the Cold War: Gorbachev and German Unification.” Here we have an issue that is so clearly material in nature—economic incentives—that the issue of materialist versus ideational explanations for the end of the Cold War is elevated to a new level. This is thus a very fitting final test-case by which to close out the special issue, Wohlforth’s commentary on the articles collectively notwithstanding. The genius to Forsberg’s analysis lies in using the constructivist and ideational theories Tannenwald considers in the opening article as an alternative lens by which to view something that is clearly material.

What Forsberg seeks to accomplish here is “to demonstrate the crucial role ideas play in shaping the power of material factors...even if we agree that economic aid mattered, the second and more fundamental question is, *how* did it matter?” (143-44). Forsberg argues for the importance of a constructive analysis on the basis that “economic incentives were significant as trust-building measures,” and to demonstrate “how the influence of economic power depends on underlying and attached ideational constructions” (146). In the case of German unification, economic incentives were far more than face-saving measures or payment to allow for that unification. The

incentives were accepted by the Soviet Union, as Forsberg's discussion of different types of incentives is designed to show, as signals of a closer partnership and future cooperation between the Soviet Union and Germany.

Forsberg's argument is largely built on the Soviet refusal to accept similar concessions from Japan in return for settling the Kurile dispute. If it were solely about economic or face-saving need, the Soviet Union would have had no difficulty accepting Japanese aid as well as German aid. In a constructivist approach, what matters is how the aid was conceived. In the Japanese case, the aid did not signal a desire to strengthen common bonds as it had in the German case. The point Forsberg succeeds in making here is that the exchange of material items is *itself* based on ideas.

In offering an ideational understanding of what to all outward appearances is a material consideration, Forsberg certainly shows the value studying the different roles ideas can play in shaping policy. One needs to keep in mind, however, that it is only an alternative means to view the material, and not a refutation of the material itself. When considering the four articles utilizing specific puzzles concerning the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, then, what overall conclusions can be drawn about the value and need of studying the role of ideas in international politics? Has this special issue succeeded in meeting its goals? Wohlforth concludes the issue by considering these questions. Before turning to him, however, two additional considerations seem worthwhile.

The first ties directly to the issue of the role of ideas from a theoretical perspective. Each of these articles take their cue from Tannenwald's discussion, yet for all their dedication to doing so, there seems to be something missing. One of the common themes to emerge from the remaining articles, no matter how well they utilize the theoretical agenda for the role of ideas, is the issue of psychology and the issue of personality. So much of what is said emphasizes that the creation of the policies discussed, and thus the success of new thinking, was dependent on Gorbachev being in office. What impact does this widely held assertion have on analyzing the role ideas play? Theoretical discussions on the transmission of ideas can be of assistance here. However, what is also needed is a synthesis of theoretical foundations for ideas in international affairs and of psychological approaches to examining international relations. If one can query the role of ideas over material incentives in producing certain policies, one can also ask how we differentiate between ideas and personalities/ psychologies.

The second consideration is perhaps worth more to the historian than the political scientist or professor of government, although all three have much to gain here. It concerns the value of these articles as analyses of Soviet history regardless of the question of the role of ideas. In other words, let us briefly consider the articles as independent entities, as opposed to links in a thematic chain forged by examining the role of ideas. While some historians may have trouble with the role counterfactuals are granted in investigating the role ideas play (an interesting disciplinary discussion perhaps best saved for another time), most will recognize the valuable insights into Soviet history itself. English and Bennett perhaps offer the most here, while Thomas and Forsberg's research has implication beyond Soviet history.

Let us start with English and Bennett. In the same way as Zubok and Pleshakov's *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War* fosters our understanding of the internal workings of the Soviet Union, English's examination of new thinking in its earlier stages provides valuable insight into internal Soviet politics and intellectual history. English also offers us a new way of thinking about the Chernobyl disaster's impact and importance, and the place we should accord it in understanding the last years of the Soviet Union. For his part, Bennett raises a worthy question in seeking to understand why the Soviet Union, with its history of using the military to crack down on uprisings in Eastern Europe throughout the Cold War, opted not to do so come 1989. From hindsight, it may seem obvious or inevitable; especially from the standpoint of American thinking that communism carried the seeds of its destruction with it from the very beginning. History, however, never tracks an inevitable course. There are too many variables for such a path.

Turning to Thomas and Forsberg now. Given the continuing role played by human rights concerns in international affairs, any study that examines some of the origins of those concerns is worthwhile, regardless of its geographic centering. Given the Soviet Union's history with human rights violations, however, Thomas offers us a chance to view the conversion of an oppressive state and even some insight, albeit extremely implicit, as to the failure of human rights laws to fully root themselves in Russia and elsewhere after the collapse of the Soviet empire. Forsberg's independent contribution, for its part, can be found in his analysis of the German-Soviet and Russo-Japanese relationship. And, given the prevalence of aid issues both today and in much of the history of the latter half of the twentieth century, Forsberg's mapping of different meaning of aid, cannot help but improve our understanding of relationships between countries, both past and present, based on aid.

The articles in this issue were not designed solely to exist independently, however. The questions of what overall conclusions can be drawn about the value and need of studying the role of ideas in international politics and whether or not the special issue has succeeded in meeting its goals need to be returned to.

Success with Limitations?

The last article in the journal is by Bill Wohlforth. Instead of conclusions he offers a commentary on the project. His commentary is valuable not only as an architect of the project, but as a scholar who has himself engaged in the debate between the material and ideation in explaining the end of the Cold War, often titling towards the material in the process. On the issue of establishing if and how ideas influenced the end of the Cold War, he feels (and most should agree) that the issue is a clear success. Each of the articles considered here offers insights previously not encountered.

On the issue of *how much* ideas mattered, however, Wohlforth is less optimistic in his assessment of the issue's success. The Cold War's end is, to him, "a hard case for ideas" (167.) This is so for three reasons. First, "the questions remains whether accounts focused on ideas really advance claims of causal importance that contradict finding about the role of material incentives" (167). For Wohlforth, part of the problem lies in one of the basic tests Tannenwald set forth in the opening salvo: the question of examining the realistic range of policy options in

any given situation that might have been pursued. Each of the authors, English and Bennett the more so, rely heavily on this test. As interesting as counterfactuals may be, however, it is the probability and not merely the possibility of alternatives that needs to be considered.

Second, there is the question of how “optimal” Soviet foreign policy decisions were “in light of material incentives, the information decision-makers had at their disposal, and their overall vies of Soviet interests” (168). For Wohlforth, all of the actions taken by Gorbachev were optimal; no one forecasted the end of the Soviet Union as a result of those reforms. If policy choices make sense then, ideas matter insofar as they played a functional role in helping “people respond more efficiently to material incentives” (169.)

Third, there is the issue of teleology. The end of the Cold War “is the story of how old ideas lost force, not how new ones gained the power to shape human actions.” In analyzing how the Soviet Union came to terms with West, the articles in this issue plug into “an epic theme of twentieth century history that can be—and has been—told without reference to new thinking” (171-172). Indeed, other states have made radical changes without adopting new thinking. As an event, therefore, the Cold War’s demise represents something in which material incentives and ideas tracked side-by-side, in which policies were optimal in light of material issues, and in which there was movement towards acceptance of ideas already held by the world’s most powerful nation. Any event bearing these three attributes represents a poor choice for arguing for ideas over material incentives. Wohlforth’s conclusion here is not meant to be negative, though, for in recognizing these problems, scholarship can move to new more sustainable levels of analysis.

There is, then, something for all sides here. Materialists will still see vindication for their criticisms of ideational-based analyses. Ideationalists will see validation of what they have begun to do. If readers will find what they seek to find, even if being intellectually moved here and there, the issue of success for this collection seems questionable, at least with regards to its thematic focus on the end of the Cold War and the primacy of the role of ideas therein. The question of adaptability of theory and tests for the role of ideas remains open, however. Before the success of this special issue can truly be evaluated, studies of the role of ideas in international politics not dealing with the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War need to be undertaken—studies using and adapting the theoretical tools hung throughout the specific case of the Cold War’s end found here.

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