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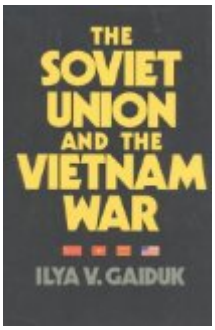
Ilya V. Gaiduk. *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1996. xx + 299 pp. $28.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56663-103-7.



Reviewed by Jaclyn Stanke

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Ilya Gaiduk's *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* is a welcome addition to the historiography of Soviet foreign policy. Based primarily on new materials from Russian archives, his study deepens our understanding of the Soviet role in Vietnam during the period of American military involvement from 1964 to 1973. Gaiduk examines the Soviet Union's role as a mediator between the United States and the North Vietnamese regime and explores whether or not Soviet actions hindered or facilitated an end to the war. He also enhances our understanding of Soviet-American relations and the making of detente. If that was not enough, he contributes to the debate on whether Soviet foreign policy was motivated by concerns of ideology or geopolitics. Finally, his study provides a lesson in how to research and write about Soviet foreign policy now that Russian archives are open, although access and declassification of top-level documents remain troublesome.

Gaiduk's main argument is that the Soviet Union actively and consistently sought a negotiated end to the war in Vietnam. A number of factors point in the other direction, though. By the end of the 1960s, the Soviet Union overtook China as the primary supplier of economic and military aid to North Vietnam. The Soviet Union also provided propaganda support to the regime, condemning American actions and hailing national liberation movements in the fight against capitalism. Finally, throughout the conflict, the Soviet Union refused to serve publicly as a mediator between North Vietnam and the United States.

Gaiduk takes account of these obstructive actions but notes that the Soviet Union had its own reasons for bringing an end to the conflict. First, Soviet leaders feared the war could escalate into a nuclear one, or, barring that, the war could force a United States-Soviet Union confrontation. Secondly, the Soviet Union sought to stem the ideological influence of China in Southeast Asia and the communist world. Soviet leaders thus hoped to establish an ideological, and hence political, foothold in Southeast Asia. Finally, Soviet leaders feared that a prolonged conflict in this remote corner of the world would dampen the prospects of detente with the United States. Gaiduk asserts that the Soviet Union wanted an end to the Viet-

nam War but also pursued a settlement that would best serve Soviet objectives.

Gaiduk proceeds in logical fashion, documenting the phases Soviet policy underwent in attempting to secure a negotiated peace. The first phase ran from 1965 to 1967. The Soviet aim was to contain the conflict and find a way to bring the United States and North Vietnam to the negotiating table. In order to do so, though, the Soviets had to convince both of the need for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. At the time, both the United States and North Vietnam believed a military solution in each's favor was possible. In 1965, Soviet influence with the North Vietnamese regime was quite low. Ideologically, China and North Vietnam were closer. The Soviets needed to rectify the situation and raise their influence with North Vietnamese leaders in order to persuade them of a diplomatic resolution of the war. The Soviets continued to provide propaganda support and gradually increased the amount of military and economic assistance.

The Soviet Union was in a precarious position. While wanting an end to the war it refused to play mediator for fear of alienating the North Vietnamese and pushing them closer to the Chinese. The Soviets did act as postman between the North Vietnamese and Americans during this period, passing information on possible concessions, negotiating positions and proposals which might lead to talks. Gaiduk discusses the various attempts to open peace talks (Operations Mayflower, Marygold, and Sunflower; Glassboro Summit) and blames the United States for their failure. Despite the number of channels opened, the United States often undermined the position of the Soviet Union, stepping up the bombing campaigns just when some headway with the North Vietnamese seemed possible.

Soviet policy entered another phase in 1968. The war was beginning to take a toll on both the North Vietnamese and the Americans. Carrying on the war was expensive for both and each was losing domestic support for its continuance. Both the North Vietnamese and the Americans were coming around to the idea that a military solution to the war would be difficult to achieve. The Tet Offensive of early 1968 proved that the war was far from over. To the surprise of everyone (including Washington and Moscow), Hanoi agreed to President Johnson's March offer of productive talks in exchange for a halt in American bombing. North Vietnamese-American talks opened in May 1968, but soon bogged down.

Gaiduk illustrates Soviet policy to obtain a peaceful resolution to the war in high gear here. Having felt their policy a success by getting the two sides to sit down, now the Soviets did everything to keep them there. They did not want peace talks to break down because the United States and North Vietnam could not even agree upon just the bases for negotiation. Rather than acting as a postman, the Soviets now came up with solutions to the problems that kept the two sides from progressing beyond the preliminary stage. The Soviets devised and offered compromises acceptable to both sides such that four party negotiations opened in January 1969. Gaiduk admits that this was the peak period of activity for the Soviets in the settlement of the war. And while it was certainly important for the two sides to find a basis for talks, one has to admit that the Soviets were not assisting in the solution of the real issues that divided the United States and North Vietnam in the war.

The third phase of Soviet policy lasted the length of the Paris Peace Talks (January 1969 to January 1973). Soviet policy reverted back to its former stance of playing postman between North Vietnam and the United States, refusing American attempts to act as an official mediator in the war. The Soviets felt somewhat more secure now that negotiations were in process. The Nixon Administration challenged Soviet policy, though. The new president and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, wanted to end the war in order to

move forward with detente. The Vietnam War was the main obstacle to better relations with the Soviet Union and China. Nixon and Kissinger discerned that Moscow was more interested in ending the war than was Beijing, and thus the two men sought to bring the Soviet Union openly into the negotiation process. Initially, they tried to tempt the Soviet leaders by linking progress on cultural, trade and arms agreements in return for assistance in helping the United States get out of the war. Gaiduk reveals Soviet views of detente here and finds that the Soviets favored better relations with the United States but considered Nixon's failed attempts to link detente with Vietnam as blackmail.

The American administration was more successful when it turned to playing the "China card." The Soviets misjudged just how far Chinese-American rapprochement had proceeded, and by 1972 found the roles reversed. Now the Soviet Union found itself chasing after the Americans for a summit and even willing to discuss the war. A major North Vietnamese offensive on the eve of the summit did not result in the Soviets canceling it. The mild Soviet reaction to the 1972 Christmas bombings reinforced the point that the Soviets would only support their ally so much. Abandoned by its communist allies and facing four more years of Nixon, North Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Agreements in January 1973. The Soviet Union had helped the United States extricate itself from the war, the North Vietnamese regime and position were preserved, the Soviet Union had gained a foothold in Southeast Asia, and the prospects for detente looked promising. After much maneuvering and time, the Soviets had achieved their objectives in the Vietnam War.

One of the strengths of the book is Gaiduk's careful detailing of the difficult balancing act carried out by the Soviet Union in its Vietnam policy during this period. He maneuvers as deftly as, if not more so than, the Soviets themselves did as they dealt with multiple relationships. He weaves a tale of Soviet relations with the North Vietnamese, the Chinese, and the United States. It is within this balancing act that Gaiduk contributes to the debate on whether Soviet foreign policy was motivated by ideological concerns or by a realistic policy based on geopolitics. Gaiduk recognizes that both motivated Soviet policy, although for the most part it seems that the geopolitical situation often took precedence over ideology. He finds that the Soviet Union moved from a policy of non-engagement in the war to increasing support for North Vietnam. At first, the Soviets tried to provide moral support for their ally and stepped up the condemnation of American policy. However, China's growing influence in the communist movement forced the Soviet Union to back up its words with actions. Thus, the Soviet Union had to prove its support in the fight against capitalism by providing more military and economic aid to those engaged in the fight.

However, even these concerns were underpinned by geopolitics as China was also the Soviet Union's greatest competitor for influence in Southeast Asia. Once a sufficient foothold in Southeast Asia was attained, Soviet policy was based more on geopolitics. Furthermore, when the United States played the China card, the preeminence of geopolitics over ideology was proven once again. Both China and the Soviet Union were willing to abandon the North Vietnamese in return for detente with the United States.

Gaiduk also illustrates how little control the Soviet Union had over North Vietnam. Throughout the war, the Soviets insisted that the North Vietnamese were not mere puppets. Gaiduk demonstrates the difficulty the Soviets had in influencing the actions of their ally. While the Soviet Union continually increased its aid to North Vietnam, its influence did not increase proportionally. The North Vietnamese often put Soviet supplies at risk to American bombing. And many times the North Vietnamese kept the Soviets in the dark about their war plans. In particular, they often

failed to inform the Soviets of impending major offensives or carried them out despite Soviet arguments against it.

Finally, Gaiduk's work and methodology demonstrate the possibilities and difficulties in current scholarship on Soviet foreign policy. He did not have access to Politburo records (few have). Instead, Gaiduk relies upon those documents he did see and squeezes as much as feasibly possible from them to draw his conclusions. He conducted most of his research at the post-1952 Party Archive located in the former Central Committee headquarters on Staraia ploshchad' (Tsentr khraneniia sovremennoi dokumentatsii, or Storage Center for Contemporary Documentation). Among the records he looked at from Central Committee files were those of the International Department, and the two departments concerning relations with communist and workers' parties in capitalist states and with ruling parties in socialist countries. He saw a variety of documents, including quarterly and annual reports from the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi, memoranda of conversations between Soviet and foreign officials, and intelligence reports from the KGB and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet General Staff. Many of these documents were sent to the Central Committee (and seen by Politburo members) from such various sources as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and KGB. He balances and supplements his tale with additional work in American archives (The Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, the Nixon Presidential Materials Project at the National Archives, and various materials on Vietnam obtained through the Freedom of Information Act held by the National Security Archive at George Washington University) and appropriate reading among secondary sources, including recent works based on Chinese and Vietnamese sources.

Overall, Gaiduk has produced a well-written, easy-to-read book on a very complex subject. His work will be of interest to scholars of the Vietnam War, Soviet-American relations (particularly those working on detente), Soviet relations with national liberation movements, and Sino-Soviet relations. While intended for those already familiar with the details of the Vietnam War, the book would also work well in graduate or advanced undergraduate seminars examining the Vietnam War or the intricacies of Soviet foreign policy.

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