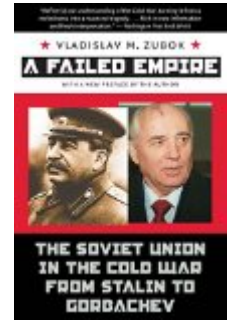


**Vladislav M. Zubok.** *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev.* New Cold War History Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 504 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-5958-2.



**Reviewed by** Nikolas K. Gvosdev

**Published on** H-Diplo (October, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Christopher L. Ball (DePaul University)

Could the Soviet Union have avoided the Cold War?[1] Would Joseph Stalin and his successors have been able to make the necessary ideological and geopolitical compromises that would have prevented the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from becoming enmeshed in a long, drawn-out, and ultimately debilitating conflict with the United States and its allies? Or did the Soviet leadership compound initial mistakes by throwing more good money after bad? These are some of the questions addressed in Vladislav M. Zubok's *A Failed Empire*.

As World War II was drawing to a close, it was not preordained that the Western Allies and the Soviet Union would clash. Some in the Soviet leadership, continuing the theme of "socialism in one country," wanted a postwar order that would guarantee the security of the USSR. Ivan Maisky, the deputy commissar of foreign affairs, argued in a memorandum to Stalin and Vyacheslav Molotov that the Soviet state had to create the appropriate geo-strategic conditions that would make it "un-thinkable" for any combination of European and

Asian states to pose a challenge to Soviet security (p. 8). Within Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, there was some receptivity to these concerns. Reporter W. L. White summed up the prevailing view, as it stood in late 1944: "We should remember that Russia is entitled to a Europe which is not hostile to her.... What they really want is a durable peace so they can build up their own country. If we insist on decent compromises, setting up governments, not Communist but friendly to Russia, they will take it." [2] This understanding formed the basis of the compromises reached at Yalta. Whether the United States would have lived up to such promises falls beyond the subject of Zubok's book. His focus is to examine why Stalin and his cohorts were unwilling to accept this grand bargain.

For starters, Stalin's definition of what constituted security for the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe was not a set of neutral states along his borders. Instead, "Stalin defined Soviet security in ideological terms," Zubok notes. "He also assumed that the Soviet sphere of influence must and

would be secured in the countries of Eastern Europe by imposing on them new political and social orders, modeled after the Soviet Union" (p. 21). This approach also carried over to how Stalin viewed Germany. Zubok argues that, contrary to the conventional wisdom that said that the Soviets would be satisfied with a "neutral" unified Germany, Stalin had always intended to construct a Soviet-style regime in his part of Germany while simultaneously trying to extend his influence over the rest of the country (p. 62).

The second has to do with the Stalinist world view. It has been popular in Western circles to adopt the paradigm of Stalin as the "betrayal" of the revolution, rejecting the internationalism of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky in favor of restoring the Russian Empire under a Soviet guise. But while Stalin was strongly influenced by the geopolitical strategies employed by tsarist statesmen, Zubok stresses that Stalin's approach "was an evolving amalgam, drawing on different sources" (p. 18). The Russian great-power tradition was one; another was utilizing the nationalism of other Soviet republics--such as Georgia and Azerbaijan--to press territorial claims on Turkey and Iran. It bears noting also that Stalin, the instigator of the great famines of the 1930s, is ironically the great gatherer of Ukrainian lands--bringing into the USSR territory that even the tsars had never controlled, and bequeathing to an independent Ukraine today a much larger state than could have been envisioned a century ago.

But Stalin never ceased to be a Marxist-Leninist. He anticipated further wars as the contradictions of capitalism and imperialism worked themselves out. His approach gave the Soviet state more length and breadth, positioning it to be able to exploit divisions in the capitalist world (or pitting, as in Korea, a possible rival in Mao Zedong against the United States)--but with an eye to the eventual spread of the Soviet system and the preservation of Moscow's leading role. And so Stalin fused his great-power Realpolitik with Com-

munist ideology in what Zubok calls the "revolutionary-imperial paradigm"--variants of which drove Soviet foreign policy from 1945 until the latter part of Mikhail Gorbachev's tenure as general secretary (p. 19).

The paradigm could be flexible, guided by realism; but it often imposed an ideological straight-jacket on the conduct of foreign policy. Foreign policy "success"--usually defined as adding more states and territories to the Soviet bloc--was used to legitimate the Soviet system at home. After Stalin's death, in a pattern that was to repeat itself until the late 1980s, "the issues of foreign policy once again became ... linked to the broader issues of ideological legitimacy" (p. 104). "Peaceful coexistence" with the West or competition with the People's Republic of China over leadership of the international revolutionary movement caused Soviet leaders--notably Nikita Khrushchev--to follow policies that complicated the Soviet global position (p. 139). Ironically, the heirs of Khrushchev's *bête noir* Mao were much more successful at de-ideologizing Beijing's foreign policy, to the point where a formerly revolutionary Communist power today is one of the staunchest defenders of state sovereignty in the international system.

The revolutionary-imperial paradigm forged alliances between Leninist ideologues, the military, and the managers of the defense industrial complex, but it also made it difficult for Soviet leaders who relied on this paradigm to maintain their authority to walk away from it even when the USSR committed itself to adventures abroad and defense spending at home which eroded its economy and exacerbated the tensions that would ultimately lead to its implosion. Even Gorbachev was unable to free himself from its constraints for the first several years of his leadership--and was unable to replace it with something durable. One point Zubok stresses--and which has continued importance for U.S.-Russia relations today--is that "Gorbachev did not have nor did he even seek to obtain in writing any agreement with the West to

preserve Soviet 'interests' in the region, such as preventing NATO expansion to the East" (p. 327).

Could there have been an alternative? Zubok alludes to the "Slavophile Leninists" (quoting a letter of the wartime minister for the tank industry, Vyacheslav Malyshev) (p. 8). Support for the Soviet construction at home and for the USSR to take the role of a Russian great power was one of the initial strands of Stalin's paradigm, but Khrushchev's efforts to revive proletarian internationalism by greater involvement in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where the USSR, if defined as a Russian state, had few strategic interests, caused a divergence in views. Those calling for Moscow to pull back and consolidate its core never succeeded in dominating Soviet policy. Yet the ideas resonated beyond the party establishment. Indeed, based on Andrei Sakharov's analysis of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, we might categorize its proposals as a form of "Slavophile Leninism" based on its support for some features of the Soviet system and its calls for focusing on the development of the USSR at the expense of maintaining the Soviet bloc.[3]

This brings us to the present. Zubok updated his book by taking the narrative of the Cold War beyond its end in 1991 to cover the post-Soviet Russian administrations of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. If Gorbachev and Yeltsin rejected Stalin's paradigm, Putin in turn has rejected Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's vague hopes of integration within a Western-led order. Is Putin a latter-day "Slavophile Leninist"? He is a proponent of a strong state capable of reshaping Russia from the top down and for Russia to have a clear sphere of influence in its region. His domestic and foreign policies have led to increased tensions with the United States. Can the mistakes that followed Yalta be avoided? Zubok is optimistic that "prudent, patient and visionary American leadership should ensure that Russia's rise ... will not threaten peace and stability in Europe" (p. xix). But that is what they said about FDR, too.

## Notes

[1]. The views expressed are those of the reviewer and do not reflect those of the United States Navy or the U.S. government.

[2]. W. L. White, *Report on the Russians* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), 308, 36.

[3]. Andrei Sakharov, "On Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*," in *The Political, Social, and Religious Thought of Russian "Samizdat"--An Anthology*, ed. Michael Meerson-Aksenov and Boris Schragin, trans. Nickolas Lupinin (Belmont: Nordland Publishing Company, 1977), 291-301.

necessary

*Fallen*

: *The Soviet Union in the Cold War From Stalin to Gorbachev*

,

e

R

Giving

all

--

Which

's

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Nikolas K. Gvosdev. Review of Zubok, Vladislav M. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24591>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.