

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Vojtech Mastny. *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years.* New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. xi + 285 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-510616-9.

Reviewed by Alexei Kojevnikov (University of Maryland, College Park)

Published on H-Russia (January, 1998)

In an important and still useful 1979 book *Russia's Road to the Cold War*, Vojtech Mastny studied the development of diplomatic tensions between anti-Nazi allies during World War II, mainly over the issues of Eastern Europe. In a new book, he continues the study through the early Cold War period, from 1947 through 1953. Meanwhile, many changes have happened—revolutions in communist countries, the fiasco of theoretical schemes of Sovietology, the dissolution of the USSR, the end of the Cold War, opening of many important archives—which require a reconsideration of the history of the East-West conflict.

The main lesson realized so far by Cold War historians is the solidified evidence that a Soviet military threat did not exist during the early and most strained stage of the conflict, simply because the USSR had neither capacities nor plans to launch a war against America or Western Europe. It was a weaker superpower economically, militarily and geopolitically, being almost totally exhausted by the war against Nazi Germany, having neither nuclear weapons nor military bases around the world, nor any other means to strike American territory. The most important source of Soviet conduct in foreign affairs was a pursuit of security as Stalin understood it.

Aware of his weakness and drawing on the experience of earlier wars, Stalin tried to transform his geopolitical gains from the victory over Germany into a security belt along the Soviet Union's borders. As long as he hoped for a peaceful division of the post-war world into three spheres of influence, he preferred friendly rather than communist regimes in Eastern European countries and a unified, neutral, and demilitarized Germany. As the conflict escalated, he reacted and overreacted to Western pressure by establishing a tighter grip on Eastern Europe and finally sanctioning local communists' taking power. Mastny's analysis of Eastern European

developments—what depended on Moscow and what on local initiatives—is particularly insightful. However, his explanation of purges within communist parties as misdirected response to American subversion remains as yet merely hypothetical.

While Stalin was put on the defense in Europe, stubbornly refusing to make concessions, in China he had obtained what he wanted from a 1945 peace treaty with its nationalist government. In 1949, however, he was presented with an unsought victory of Chinese communist guerrillas. After the feared American intervention did not follow, he could no longer veto North Korean's desire to repeat the Chinese success. Pushed by Kim and Mao, Stalin hesitantly left the decision to them and withdrew Soviet advisers from the future war zone, lest America be provoked. When, unexpectedly, the United States moved in and was locked against the Chinese “in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time,” the USSR kept its involvement as minimal as possible, for its main interests were in Europe.

Overall, Stalin's foreign policy is described as “incoherent in its whole” rather than “inexplicable in its parts,” opportunistic rather than guided by utopian ideology or by the idea of world communism, and also susceptible to serious mistakes. The biggest ones, besides the miscalculation in Korea, were Stalin's conflict with his Balkan alter-ego and staunch imitator Tito, and his desperate opposition to the division of Germany, which led to the Berlin crisis. Obsessed with security problems, Stalin maneuvered trying to avoid both, a military conflict with the stronger adversary and the loss of superpower status. He got the Cold War instead.

Soviet international activity decreased during the ailing dictator's last two years, but a carnival of nightmarish events continued within the country. Soviet internal policies are much less susceptible to rational analysis, plus, unfortunately, Mastny did not make

the best choice among available sources. He relies too much on the older body of conspiracy theories about intrigues inside the Kremlin, but recent archival studies have made their unconstrained fantasies obsolete. Had he consulted, for instance, an important book by Gennady Kostyrchenko, which is now also available in English, he would have been spared a number of mistakes and unjustified guesses, including such strange ones like the statement that the anti-Jewish campaign ended abruptly in January 1949 or the assumption that Beria continued controlling the security police during post-war years.

Despite sufficient evidence to the contrary, the image of the Soviet threat figured most prominently in Western public discourse, intensifying at exactly those moments when the USSR was at its weakest, such as after Stalin's death in 1953. This prompts a number of important questions for Cold War historians: How and why did such misperception happen? What did it contribute to the enfolding conflict?

Could it be that the imagined threat thwarted a real one later? Mastny mentions some of these questions in the introduction, but, rather than taking up new possibilities for discussion, he falls into an old trap of looking for someone to blame while having a predetermined answer. Of course, this must be Stalin, even if no longer as the evil Manichean demon, then at least as a fallible dictator who did not live up to his image of the living God and, through mistakes and miscalculations, produced the Cold War that was not in his interests. The field of study has been traditionally dominated by political rather than scholarly criteria. Mastny's book does make a first step away from the Cold War mentality, but there is still a long way to go to part with its preconceived worldview.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Alexei Kojevnikov. Review of Mastny, Vojtech, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. January, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1631>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.