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Vladislav Zubok, Constantine Pleshakov. *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. xv + 282 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-45531-3.

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Open Up the Documents, Let the Games Continue:

Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov have written the most influential book to date using recently available Soviet documents on Soviet Cold War policies under Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev. Zubok has become quite familiar to Americans as a personable, regular commentator on the “Postscript” sections of the CNN “Cold War” program during which he offered perceptive and judicious observations. As a Senior Fellow at the National Security Archive at George Washington University, and active participant in the Cold War International History Project, Zubok has been at the center of the opening and publication of Soviet Cold War documents and emerging reinterpretations of not only Soviet leaders and policies but also the larger, emotional issue of Cold War responsibility.[1] Pleshakov has written several works of fiction, an essay on Sino-Soviet relations, and is currently teaching at Mount Holyoke.[2] Despite complaints about the absence of reliable primary sources on Soviet policy, American scholars have found it sometimes impossibly difficult to adjust their assessments accumulated over thirty or forty years.

Zubok and Pleshakov came of age in the Soviet Union after the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and graduated from Moscow State University in the early 1980s. They joined the elite Institute of U.S. and Canada Studies which they describe as a “pragmatic and infinitely cynical think tank [that] gave us a good grasp of Soviet policy-making” (p. xi). After Mikhail Gorbachev arrived in 1985 and initiated glasnost, Zubok and Pleshakov turned to a study of Soviet policy, moving

from innocuous documents on furniture styles in Soviet embassies to significant documents from the Soviet embassies and foreign ministry to the International Department of the Central Committee and Politburo. Although the authors had access to some documents from the Archive of the Russian President, most records of Stalin and his successors were not accessible including Politburo minutes and correspondence among Soviet leaders.[3]

The central interpretive thesis of Zubok and Pleshakov to guide understanding of Soviet foreign policy in the Cold War is a revolutionary-imperial paradigm, a “symbiosis of imperial expansionism and ideological proselytism” (p. 3), that joined an imperial nature and interests from Russia’s past and present with communist revolutionary aspirations that fused Russia’s messianic legacy with Marxism and Leninism. Zubok and Pleshakov explore the shifting nature and components of this paradigm in a series of chapters that begin with Stalin’s perspective with victory in hand in 1945, through Stalin’s policies in the Cold War, to the efforts of his subordinates and successors—Vyacheslav Molotov, Lavrenty Beria, Georgi Malenkov and Nikita Khrushchev—to implement their own versions of this influential paradigm. Although the authors move away from this paradigm in their discussions of specific Cold War crises such as Stalin’s views on Germany or Khrushchev’s handling of relations with China and Mao Zedong, they make an effort in each chapter to link their analysis to the paradigm. “Ideology was neither the servant nor the master of So-

viet foreign policy,” Zubok and Pleshakov conclude, “but it was the delirium tremens of Soviet statements, the core of the regime’s self-legitimacy, a terrifying delusion they could never shake off” (p. 275-76).

In reviving the role of ideology in shaping the perspective of Soviet policy makers and in providing primary documentation of Soviet leaders from Stalin to Khrushchev expressing an ideological perspective in conversations with Soviet and other communist leaders, Zubok and Pleshakov have significantly redirected the perspective of American Cold War specialists who for decades have found it difficult to accept what historians of the Soviet Union have usually recognized as an essential interpretive premise. “Ideology is back”, notes Nigel Gould-Davies, in a recent assessment on the role of ideology in the Cold War that carefully suggests the need for evaluations that distinguish between personality, ideology and culture. According to Gould-Davies, “ideological states seek power to spread their domestic system rather than to enhance their own security.... They define security in terms of the expansion of their domestic system and threat in terms of the expansion of their adversary’s domestic system.”[4] In his recent study of Stalin’s policies in the Cold War, Vojtech Mastny also revives the central importance of ideology although he tends to emphasize how Stalin used ideology as a means to power and security for his regime.[5]

What does this revival of ideology contribute with respect to understanding Soviet policy? Stalin is the most significant and most difficult challenge for Zubok and Pleshakov with respect to the imperial-revolutionary paradigm. In two chapters on Stalin and one on Molotov and another on Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s chief “trumpeter of the Cold War” as Central Committee head of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda and the International Department, Zubok and Pleshakov push the published and primary sources including German language publications as far as they will go to demonstrate that Stalin from the 1920s on came closest among Soviet leaders to implementing the imperial-revolutionary paradigm mixed with his sense of inferiority and xenophobic suspicions toward anything foreign. Stalin’s lodestar “was the promise of Communist revolutionary universalism combined with the necessities of survival for the Soviet Union....” (pp. 11-12). Zubok and Pleshakov have not found a “master plan” for a communist world in the Soviet archives and recognize that flexible tactics characterize all of the Soviet leaders. As Stalin surveyed the scene in 1945, the authors portray him as prepared to postpone the revolutionary side of the paradigm

in order to consolidate the new Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe and wait for the inevitable postwar capitalist economic crisis and falling out of the Western capitalist powers, something that Molotov kept looking for into the 1980s.

On the issue of responsibility for the ensuing Cold War, Zubok and Pleshakov resist the temptation “to lay total blame for the Cold War on the delusions of Stalin and his lieutenants” (p. 276). On the one hand the paradigm predestines Soviet expansion and Stalin’s xenophobic regime would limit any cooperation with the West but the authors note the extent of Soviet sacrifice to defeat Hitler, the necessity for time to reconstruct a devastated western Russia, and reasonably successful cooperation with the West after 1941 (pp. 6-7, 33-35). The authors do suggest that Stalin’s interest in cooperation with the West was “always on his own terms” and when the United States and its Western allies moved to promote economic recovery with the Marshall Plan and bring the Western zones of Germany into their coalition Stalin launched a counteroffensive that backfired in Europe and approved a North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950 that blew away the remnants of the Yalta system of cooperation in Asia along with a new revolutionary offensive with Mao’s China. Yet the authors include other factors on the responsibility issue, noting the impact of power politics, “choices of U.S. and British policymakers, and the deeper causes of hostility and mistrust between dictatorships and democracy ...” (p. 276).

Zubok and Pleshakov’s assessment of Nikita Khrushchev dominates the second half of their study and poses a significant challenge to revisionist assessments of Khrushchev and his chief Western antagonist, John Kennedy. According to the authors, Khrushchev is trapped in the legacies of the results of Stalin’s contributions to the revolutionary-imperial paradigm and represents a very unstable mixture of attitudes: a desire to escape from the undesirable legacies of Stalin on the international and domestic scene, a desire for a grand accommodation with the United States, enthusiasm for third world revolutionaries like Fidel Castro, a willingness to engage in nuclear bluff and blackmail, and a dangerous propensity for spontaneous decisions with considerable risks (pp. 182-94). The interpretation is probably closest to Adam Ulam’s assessment of Khrushchev which left out only the Soviet leaders genuine enthusiasm for the successful advance of communism through new leaders in the third world.[6] In contrast with the authors’ presentation of Khrushchev as a very dynamic and dangerous challenge to Kennedy, revisionists led by Thomas

Paterson and proteges of Paterson and Walter LaFeber in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* devote very little attention to Khrushchev and focus instead on what Paterson defines as Kennedy's overall failure in his doomed quest to "win the Cold War." The challenge and opportunities posed by Khrushchev do not merit a separate chapter in the collection, and Frank Costigliola's essay that discusses the Berlin crisis admits that Khrushchev precipitated the Berlin crisis but offers little analysis of the Soviet leader's strategy before and during the Berlin Wall crisis.[7] The pursuit of victory is not necessarily undesirable and, as many observers failed to note in 1991, victory was the original objective in George Kennan's containment strategy (either a change in Soviet international behavior and/or an erosion of the Kremlin's ability to hold its sphere in Eastern Europe), although Kennan probably did not anticipate a total Soviet collapse. Since the revisionists want to portray Kennedy as a most aggressive Cold Warrior, the Zubok and Pleshakov analysis of Khrushchev as a sometimes impulsive gambler precipitating crises contradicts the central slant of their interpretations.

Zubok and Pleshakov's reemphasis on the role of ideology and its impact on the issue of responsibility has had the most impact in challenging and shifting American views of Stalin and Soviet diplomacy in the Cold War. American historians since the 1960s have minimized the influence of ideology on both sides of the Cold War. Revisionists since William Appleman Williams have recognized Stalin's communist rhetoric—"To use the language of Wall Street, Stalin was a bull on communism"[8]—but placed little significance on it as they focused on U.S. expansion in pursuit of an economic Open Door, or to rebuild capitalism in Western Europe, or to head off revolutionary nationalism in the Third World. Post-revisionists like John Lewis Gaddis devoted more attention to the impact of the international system, i.e., the power vacuum in Central Europe, and the role of a variety of factors from domestic politics, bureaucratic imperatives as well as misperception and miscalculation. One response to the release of Soviet documents is to deny their significance and refuse to reevaluate the issue of responsibility the Cold War. "No amount of new documentation 'revealing' that, sure enough, Stalin was a brutal totalitarian will change the fact that the Cold War emerged and escalated as a result of mutual conflict, misperception, and excessive militarization in the midst of a fluid and fearful international environment," announced Walter Hixson, for "all efforts, including the triumphalist or vindicationist ones of recent years, that attempt to blame the

USSR more or less exclusively for the Cold War can be dismissed as parochial nationalism, albeit parochial nationalism armored with footnotes from the corrupt bowels of fin-de-siecle Moscow." [9] A second response is to shift the perspectives, as Anna Kasten Nelson does in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay, in which she portrays the orthodox view as putting full blame on the Soviet Union whereas "revisionists emphasized the dual responsibility of the United States and the Soviet Union, and described American foreign policy as a search for global economic hegemony." [10] Nelson has conveniently moved the revisionists into the post-revisionists perspective, which is reflected in part in Hixson's comments above, and promoted post-revisionists like John Gaddis to the old orthodox perspective. "It is time to move on," complains Nelson, "... but many of today's authors are still rehashing old debates." When new documents emerge on a global phenomenon that dominated half a century, should not historians review the documents and reevaluate the old issues?

John Gaddis and Melvyn Leffler have responded more directly to Zubok and Pleshakov's revolutionary-imperial paradigm for understanding Stalin's Cold War policies. In his recent *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* which he initiated as a series of lectures at Oxford in 1992, Gaddis embraces the new research in Soviet documents by Zubok and Pleshakov and others and refines his post-revisionist perspective to give more influence to their revolutionary-imperial paradigm and to place more emphasis on an unavoidable Cold War as long as Stalin was in the Kremlin. [11] In his masterful review essay, "The Cold War: What Do 'We Now Know'?", Melvyn Leffler directly challenges not only Gaddis but also Zubok and Pleshakov's paradigm and interpretation of the origins of the Cold War. After minimizing the revisionist emphasis on primary U.S. responsibility for origins of the Cold War in one clause—revisionists "assigned the United States a share of responsibility for the Cold War"—Leffler describes Gaddis as abandoning post-revisionism and moving to the traditional interpretation by emphasizing revolutionary ideology as Stalin's lodestar. [12] Leffler apparently has been influenced by Zubok and Pleshakov as well as Mastny's study to accept ideology as shaping Stalin's perspective but prefers the more familiar revisionist lodestar, security: "Soviet actions in eastern Germany and Eastern Europe, though ruthless and counterproductive, might not have been a consequence of Stalin's revolutionary fervor, or an imperial/revolutionary paradigm, or an inbred irrational paranoia. They might have been a result of his quest for

security.”[13] In reverting back to a defensive, security focus, Leffler minimizes the findings of Zubok and Pleshakov and incorrectly accuses them of ignoring the impact of Western policies on Stalin and his successors. Although Zubok and Pleshakov correctly focus on the new Soviet documents and assessments of Soviet leaders, they do note the impact of Western policies, most notably the development and use of the atomic bomb, the Truman administration’s efforts to work out a satisfactory settlement over the disagreements concerning the Yalta agreements on Eastern Europe and Stalin’s policies from Poland to Bulgaria, and the critical impact of the Marshall Plan and Western policies on Germany (pp. 40-46, 48-52, 94-98, 103-108). In fact, the authors further undermine one of the original revisionist positions on the origins of the Cold War—most notably that Truman launched an offensive on Eastern Europe that intensified Stalin’s suspicions and prompted him to move towards Stalinization in this area. Instead, as Zubok and Pleshakov point out, U.S. protests and requests on Eastern Europe in 1945-1946 did not produce much of a lasting reaction in the Kremlin.[14]

Open up the documents, let the games continue: instead of dismissing or resisting the new documents, American historians should revisit old battlefields with understanding and humility—we will all be wrong on some issues—and profit from the new documents and studies such as Zubok and Pleshakov’s stimulating study, Gaddis’ reworking of his influential post-revisionist studies into a new master narrative, and Leffler’s rebuttal based on a masterful review of the current literature. There are many issues to explore, most notably (1) Molotov and Khrushchev have been interpreted more thoroughly than Stalin as we wait for much more primary sources on this key figure; (2) why did the U.S. effort to reach a settlement with Stalin at Yalta and Potsdam fail?; (3) the central dynamics and interaction of the Cold War should receive more comprehensive assessments along the lines of Gaddis’ synthesis as we are able to integrate the concerns and perspectives of both sides; (4) the outpouring of documents on the Kremlin’s relations with its allies have already considerably enhanced our historical understanding in this area and projects and journals such as the Cold War International History Project will only continue to provide new insights.

Notes:

[1]. See also Vladislav Zubok, “Stalin’s Plans and Russian Archives,” *Diplomatic History*, XXI, No. 1 (Spring 1997), 295-306. Zubok has a forthcoming book of essays

on Soviet behavior in the Cold War from Stalin through Gorbachev. Readers and students of the Cold War would have benefitted from a complete bibliography in the work under review.

[2]. Constantine Pleshakov’s essay is in Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963* (Palo Alto, 1999).

[3]. See Ilya Gaiduk, “Stalin: Three Approaches to One Phenomenon,” *Diplomatic History*, XXIII, No. 1 (Winter 1999), 124-125. As a senior research fellow at the Institute of World History and deputy head of the Center for the Study of the Cold War at the Russian Academy of Science and author of *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago, 1996), Gaiduk is very familiar with the limitations and opportunities in Soviet documents.

[4]. Nigel Gould-Davies, “Rethinking the Role of Ideology in International Politics during the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, I, No. 1 (Winter 1999), 102-103.

[5]. Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (New York, 1996), 3-24.

[6]. See Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-67* (New York, 1968), 572-689, and *The Rivals: America and Russia Since World War II* (New York, 1971), 286-313.

[7]. See Thomas G. Paterson, “John F. Kennedy’s Quest for Victory and Global Crisis”, 3-23, and Frank Costigliola, “The Pursuit of Atlantic Community: Nuclear Arms, Dollars, and Berlin,” 25, 37-38, 42-46, in Thomas G. Paterson, *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* (New York, 1989). Paterson does refer to Khrushchev’s “bellicose rhetoric” and “an alarming speech in which he endorsed anti-imperialist wars of national liberation”, and Costigliola does note that the “Russians precipitated crises over Berlin”.

[8]. William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York, 1972), 215.

[9]. Hixson made this statement in a response on H-DIPLO, April 12, 1999, in a favorable assessment of Arnold Offner’s SHAFR presidential address, “‘Another Such Victory’: President Truman, American Foreign Policy, and the Cold War”.

[10]. Anna Kasten Nelson, “Illuminating the Twilight Struggle: New Interpretations of the Cold War,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 25, 1999.

[11]. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking*

Cold War History (New York, 1997), 29-31, 290-292.

[12]. Melvyn P. Leffler, "The Cold War: What Do 'We Now Know'?", *American Historical Review*, CIV, No. 2 (April 1999), 503. If you have read revisionists for over thirty years from William Appleman Williams to Lloyd Gardner, Walter LaFeber, Gabriel Kolko, Thomas Pater-son and their many Ph.D. proteges, the phrase "a share of responsibility" catches your attention and your memory of ancient battles even as you enjoy Leffler's synthesis of

the post-Cold War literature.

[13]. *Ibid.*, 512-513.

[14]. See Leffler, 512-521.

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