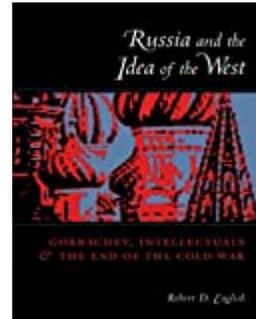




**Robert D. English.** *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. ix + 401 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11059-4.



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## Origins of New Thinking: Ideas and Power

### Origins of New Thinking: Ideas and Power

Robert English has made a significant and original contribution to our understanding of the origins of new thinking in the Soviet Union that came to fruition in the domestic and foreign policies of Mikhail Gorbachev. English has also broadened the focus of the historiography concerning the end of the Cold War by including the role of intellectual forces (represented by the new thinking) as a significant catalyst for the changes introduced by Gorbachev in his negotiations on international issues and his efforts to reform the Soviet political and economic systems.

English initiated his study as a Ph.D. dissertation at Princeton University under the supervision of Robert Tucker and Stephen Cohen, basing his analysis on impressive and valuable sources, most notably Russian-language memoirs, documents, publications and some 400 interviews with over 100 Russian participants. Although a few of the memoirs have been translated into English, most remain inaccessible to any scholar without Russian language skills.

The central thesis of English's study is that an understanding of Gorbachev's policies and the end of the Cold War requires an analysis of the emergence of a Soviet intellectual elite in the 1950s and the evolving ideas of this intelligentsia on Soviet domestic developments along with the relationship of the Soviet Union to its Western adversaries. Without ignoring the important impact of economic decline and the relative decline of Soviet power abroad as well as the role of new leaders like Gorbachev, English successfully insists that the intellectual transformation that emerged in the new thinking intelligentsia contributed significantly to Gorbachev and his policies, with the eventual result in the end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union.

The origins of new thinking start with the impact of the post-Stalin thaw after 1953 under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev through 1964. In response to the relaxation of Stalinist repression on the domestic scene and a tentative opening to the outside world, a new generation of intellectuals emerged. Using an elite-identity framework, English provides a very thorough assessment of new intellectual centers with new access to the West

through publications, travel and Eastern European influences. What emerged and continued after Khrushchev into the Czechoslovakian crisis in 1968 was an intelligentsia in a variety of academic fields and institutes as well as reformist apparatchiks that rejected hostile isolationism toward the outside world, particularly the West, and endorsed critiques of the Stalinist centralized economy. Even after the crackdown in Czechoslovakia and the continuation of Leonid Brezhnev's regime, English notes, the new thinkers rejected the Brezhnev return to orthodoxy in foreign policy, the hostile-isolationist perspective and the push for orthodoxy on the home front. Despite the Kremlin's crackdown on any public criticism, English detects the spread of new thinking across a variety of fields with increasing interest in a Western-oriented market economy as well as in integration with the West in international relations, a process encouraged by Brezhnev's detente negotiations with the West.

In order to provide a reliable context for the emergence of this new group and the limits to its influence, English carefully develops the nature of old thinking, the core beliefs of Stalinism, a synthesis of Russian nationalism, anti-Westernism, and Marxist-Leninist revolutionary precepts. Throughout his study, English notes the strength of these ideas and their chief proponents, the successors to Stalin, who battled to repress the new thinking when it emerged and attempted until the end to put out brush fires of new thinking that persisted after the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and again in the early 1980s before Gorbachev took over as general secretary of the Communist Party in 1985.

A critical challenge that English handles very well is to demonstrate the influence of new thinking on Gorbachev before and after 1985. If this intellectual-cultural factor is to be included with international-domestic pressures and individual leadership, then English must make a persuasive case that Gorbachev came under the influence of new thinking before the 1980s and continued to interact with advisers and new thinking ideas as his views evolved after 1985. English successfully develops Gorbachev's exposure during the early thaw era to new thinking at Moscow State University which produced many of the leading reformers in all fields. As a party official in the Stavropol region, Gorbachev exhibited a reformist orientation, reinforced by exposure to Czechoslovakia in 1968, travel in the West in the 1970s, reading of restricted works on socialism and the West, and the development of close relations with Eduard Shevardnadze in the neighboring Georgian Republic.

When Gorbachev moved to Moscow in 1979 as a Central Committee secretary for agriculture and a candidate Politburo member, he significantly expanded his quest for new ideas, initially with reform economists and then in 1981 with foreign policy new thinkers. He surprised many with the extent of his reading and interest in reforms of Soviet relations with the West and Eastern European socialist countries. With his appointment in 1983 to head the Supreme Soviet's international affairs committee, Gorbachev expanded relations with new thinkers in foreign policy such as Yevgeny Velikhov and Georgy Arbatov and initiated relations with Alexander Yakovlev during a trip to Canada. Yakovlev, who had been exiled as ambassador to Canada ten years before, returned to Moscow to revive the Institute of World Economy and International Relations as a forum of new thinking. When Yuri Andropov appointed Gorbachev to direct a plenum on economic issues, Gorbachev brought in new thinking advisers and ideas to shape a domestic reform agenda with some veiled international implications.

By looking at both perspectives, new and old thinking, as they evolved, English provides a very important sense of contingency in Soviet policy developments in the 1980s as well as an important sense of evolution in Gorbachev's views as he maneuvered under the influence of both groups and also in his dealings with Eastern European allies and the Western powers. English skillfully develops the escalating conflict between Gorbachev and his advisers and the old guard, noting the successful resistance of the old guard to Gorbachev's plenum which was never held as Andropov's health failed and the narrow margin of support in the Politburo for the selection of Gorbachev in 1985.

According to English, Gorbachev soon confirmed the suspicions of the old guard with his bold ideas on domestic-economic reform, military cutbacks, and foreign policy (particularly with respect to Afghanistan and Eastern Europe) where he informed party leaders that the Brezhnev doctrine was dead. Gorbachev, moreover, overrode opposition in the Politburo to the Geneva summit conference which initiated his negotiations with the United States. Yet English notes that Gorbachev and Shevardnadze as well as other advisers still applied a Marxist-Leninist class ideology and class struggle view of international relations. Moreover, they had a major struggle early in 1986 with their new thinking advisers to drop Lenin's view of the world divided by class and to replace it with an integrated world concept. As resistance to his domestic and foreign policies intensified and under the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, Gorbachev

promoted Yakovlev as Central Committee Secretary for Ideology and replaced many Brezhnev supporters with new thinking advisers such as Anatoly Chernyaev as his personal foreign policy aide. English devotes less attention to the “endgame of new thinking” (the 1987-89 period), when he suggests that the “intellectual turn was nearly complete” and “the next two years, rather than the inception or design of new thinking, were the time of its implementation and execution” (p. 223).

Since English’s focus is on the origins and impact of new thinking, he does not devote sustained attention to the historiographical debate surrounding the end of the Cold War. English, however, does offer significantly new insights that increase the complexity of this issue. In rejecting the more simplistic assessments that give most of the credit to Ronald Reagan or Gorbachev, English broadens the perspective beyond the familiar evaluation that examines Reagan and Gorbachev interacting in their domestic environments as well as their engagement on the international scene. Although recognizing the importance of the U.S. containment policy in contributing to Soviet problems as well as to new thinking views on international relations and the role of the Soviet Union,

English correctly notes that most of the new thinking emerged before Reagan arrived in the White House. English also notes that Reagan’s military buildup, strategic defense initiative and more aggressive resistance to the Soviet Union and its allies around the globe may have made it more difficult for Gorbachev and his new thinking advisers to gain power and implement their fundamental changes in Soviet outlook and policies. Perhaps Reagan’s most significant contribution came in his recognition of the possibilities that Gorbachev provided in 1985 and his effort to work with him on almost all international issues with the exception of SDI. Undoubtedly this helped Gorbachev hold off the challenges of the old guard as long as possible on both the domestic and international fronts.

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