

# INSIDE THE KREMLIN'S COLD WAR

From Stalin to Khrushchev



Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov

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## Preface

We were not even born when Joseph Stalin died in 1953 or even when Nikita Khrushchev denounced his crimes in 1956. The main characters of this book had all either died or been cleansed from the Kremlin before we began to read. By the time we started school the worst crises of the Cold War were over. The world had become more stable. But this very relative and fragile stability of what John L. Gaddis would later call the Long Peace was in fact a time of globalization of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry.<sup>1</sup> We were growing up with the full understanding that we could die at any moment in a nuclear blast. We learned to look for an *Enola Gay* in the skies even before we learned to brush our own teeth. Soviet middle schools would hold civil defense classes in which ludicrous survival skills were taught in preparation for all-out war. Although still half believing in Santa Claus, we were already very skeptical of gas masks and bomb shelters. We suspected that chloride cyanide, which our teachers informed us has the scent of bitter almonds, would somehow penetrate the clumsy mask and that we would be buried alive in the so-called safe havens in the basements of our apartment houses.

Our parents would frown and tell us not to worry so much about war. And yet what we overheard of their conversations reinforced our fatalism. The adults favored a very cynical nuclear age joke: What should you do in the event of nuclear war? Don't panic, just wrap yourself in a white sheet and crawl to the nearest cemetery. Having attended a lecture on the international situation, our mothers would discuss with our fathers whether they should sacrifice buying a new dress for the sake of getting a stock of canned food in case of "you know what."

The names of those who had shaped the Cold War from the Soviet

shore—Stalin, Molotov, Khrushchev, Beria, and others—were taboo in the Soviet Union, for they had sinned against the Communist party. They reached us as ghosts in jokes, in old folks' stories, in books and magazines from the attic. Some magazines contained the gross political caricatures of Truman, Acheson, Eisenhower, Dulles, Adenauer, de Gaulle. Those names meant almost nothing to us. The name of John Kennedy still carried some sentiment. Our parents were saddened by his premature death, just as they would be saddened by the death of his brother Robert Kennedy, in 1968.

Very soon we learned that the places of our birth, Yalta and Moscow, were the two scenes of the most dramatic moments in the annals of the Cold War. In the czar's palace in Yalta in February 1945, Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill, the three quarrelsome leaders of the Great Alliance, decided the future of post-World War II Europe and Asia. Yalta was also the only town in the USSR to boast a street named after an American president, FDR, and that gave us a hint of the Soviet concept of the "lost chances" of the mid-1940s. In the Kremlin in Moscow in May 1962 Khrushchev ordered missiles sent to Cuba. When a thermonuclear crisis was provoked in October, he sat in the Kremlin many days and nights, cursing, trying to locate on a textbook-sized map where exactly his vessels were in the Caribbean and to figure out what John Kennedy in the White House was really thinking.

When Soviet tanks overran Czechoslovakia in August 1968, we were too young to know much about the Cold War, even though our parents' friends, having visited Prague during the Soviet invasion, would furtively display photographs of Czech girls in miniskirts posting anti-Soviet leaflets on the walls.

As we grew up we discovered how influenced our flamboyant youth was by international tensions. Unfazed, we would watch our first girlfriends assembling Kalashnikov machine guns; we just worried whether they would manage in twenty seconds, the time required for passing a civil defense exam. Compulsory military training brought us to the Military Department of Moscow State University once a week, after which we would go drinking with friends. During class we would mark the victorious offensive of the Soviet platoons (which we were to command in the event of war) on the maps of West Germany—and read Thomas Mann or Goethe during the break.

By the time we reached our teens we could probably be classified



as “anti-Soviet elements”—just as the vast majority of the generation born in the 1950s were. Our lack of real knowledge about the complexities of the Cold War was compensated by a firm belief that the Kremlin just could not have been right, be it concerning the Berlin blockade in 1948 or the invasion of Hungary in 1956.

When we graduated from Moscow State University in the early 1980s—at the same time Soviet troops became mired in Afghanistan—and began work at the Institute of U.S. and Canada Studies in Moscow, the Cold War ghosts fully caught up with us. During the Afghan War we were not drafted into the “army in the field,” though we will always remember the look in our mothers’ eyes on the nights we would receive routine Cold War check-up notices from the local military registration offices. We were lucky and went through the Afghan tragedy unharmed. Instead of being conscripted into the army we were given access to the “special collections” of Moscow libraries with their impressive selections of Western books on the Cold War. The Institute of U.S. and Canada Studies itself was a kind of intellectual preserve created to supply the present and future leaders of the USSR with advice about the *realpolitik*. This pragmatic and infinitely cynical think tank gave us a good grasp of Soviet policy-making. Some of the veterans of the Institute had at one time briefed members of the Stalin leadership. Past and present blurred there. Having been exposed to these former Soviet intelligence agents and the Brezhnev elite, as well as Western colleagues, we finally decided to write this book. Of course the days of glasnost, initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, proved to be a catalyst for our work: we wanted to contribute to the new freedom in our professional capacity.

Now we realize that two-thirds of our lives passed under the shadow of the Cold War, which, along with the Soviet Union, has come to an end. Yalta in the Crimea is now a territory being disputed between Kiev and Moscow. New leaders in the Kremlin, with their anti-Communist ardor gone, are talking about the unfriendliness of the United States and wondering whether there will be a new Cold War. Yet at the same time Russia’s most closely guarded archives are reluctantly opening their doors a bit, and the survivors of those forty years of confrontation have begun to publish their memoirs. Diplomats, KGB operatives, generals and functionaries of the Communist party are bringing forth the submerged outlines of the Soviet giant.

This book is our personal inquiry into the Kremlin’s view of the

Cold War. Growing evidence from the Russian side can help us to understand what shaped the behavior of the Soviet monolith toward the world, its confrontation with the United States, and its expansion in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Although there have been monumental and comprehensive studies on how Stalin and his successors managed Soviet foreign policy, most of them predate the era of glasnost, and only very recently have a group of scholars begun to digest the materials available from the newly opened archives in Moscow.<sup>2</sup> A major, long-awaited book on Stalin by General Dmitri Volkogonov is disappointingly elusive and cursory in its description of the Soviet tyrant as a statesman and a Cold Warrior.<sup>3</sup>

This book is unique not only in its scope and focus but also in its content, style, and approach. Each new revelation from Soviet, East European, and Chinese archives makes it starkly clear that the history of the Cold War must be reexamined. Although the question remains as to what extent the Eastern archival findings and studies will affect the established assumptions about U.S. participation in the Cold War, there are no doubts that the history of Soviet foreign policy and the people who made it has to be rethought.

No author, as yet, has attempted to look at the Soviet view of the Cold War through the background and actions of both Stalin and his principal lieutenants and successors. Using newly declassified materials, we attempt to penetrate the Kremlin by exploring the background, psychology, motives, and behavior of Soviet rulers from Stalin to those who replaced him, and to better understand the world they helped create.

The “human factor,” a favorite term of Mikhail Gorbachev, is the least understood and explained element in the history of the Cold War. Understanding means not only using keen analysis but also acknowledging barriers between diverse cultures. Knowledge of the Russian language is not enough: one needs to read between the lines of the most secret documents—to see and feel as those who had produced and consumed them. Understanding also requires a certain compassion and empathy with Russian historical roots and experience; an ability to understand imponderables such as “revolutionary faith,” “nationalism,” “patriotism,” “memories of war”; a sensitivity to fine distinctions between fanaticism and cruel cynicism, between fear for life and hunger for power, challenging audacity and hubris, evil character and spineless cowardice.

This is a tall order in itself. But it is made even more challenging by the task of translating these perceptions into a totally different cultural language, for a foreign audience with a different national experience and attitude to political leadership. The task of making personalities in the Kremlin, their mindsets and experiences, understandable to a broader audience of Americans, not just to the initiated coterie of Kremlinologists, is daunting.

This is the first book by historians of our generation schooled under the Soviet system but with some exposure to the West. Our studies of American politics and culture at the Institute of U.S. and Canada Studies in Moscow led us to look anew at the Soviet foreign policy establishment. We viewed the old archetypes and stereotypes with skepticism. We learned that, along with the “hard power” of spheres of influence, bombs and missiles, there was the “soft power” of fear and suspicion, distorted perceptions that had driven both sides, the West and the Soviet Union, to continue the Cold War.

We began to work in the Soviet archives in the days when the only documents available were those describing the style of furniture in Soviet embassies. We could peruse at ease the files entitled “Sea Lions and Conventions on the Protection of Sea Lions.” Since then, however, innumerable declassified files with “Top Secret” reports from the embassies, KGB and military intelligence, along with resolutions of the foreign ministry, the International Department of the Party Central Committee, and even the Politburo itself have been opened to scholars. Still, many doors closed in our faces, sometimes literally. But the major thoughts and objectives of the Soviet leadership in the Cold War are definitely clearer now. When we discovered a locked door, we were discouraged, but consoled ourselves with the words of Confucius: “To distinguish knowledge from non-knowledge is actual knowledge.” Now it is time for the new Russian historians to bear judgment on the Cold War and those in the Kremlin who waged it.

At various stages of our research we received assistance and help from many individuals and institutions. Our gratitude to them is immense. In addition to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, we would like to mention the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, and Amherst College’s Loewenstein Fellowship in the Social and Political Sciences.

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With all that said, any deficiencies, weaknesses, errors of facts and judgments in this book are entirely our own.



# Inside the Kremlin's Cold War



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# Prologue: The View from the Kremlin, 1945

Soviet Russia has been looked upon as the very incarnation of all evil; hence her ideas have assumed the quality of the devilish.

Erich Fromm

Late on the morning of June 24, 1945, the golden clocks on the Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower chimed and everyone in the Soviet Union with a radio listened to those familiar sounds. The great Parade of Victory was about to begin. All along Red Square and the area surrounding it, victorious troops in decorated uniforms, with captured Nazi banners, in formations and in the turrets of tanks, all perfectly still, waited for a signal to march. Thousands of people crowded into the guest stalls. Suddenly, thunderous applause spread through the crowd as the ruling State Committee of Defense emerged from the Kremlin and began to climb the stairs of Lenin's Mausoleum. It was this group that had replaced the Communist Politburo during the four years of the most devastating war in the world's history. Leading the others, walking at some distance from them, was Joseph Stalin, the head of the USSR.

In just a few years the same leaders who celebrated the triumph over Nazi Germany would clash with their former allies, the United States and Great Britain, in a costly and protracted struggle. To understand how the Soviets perceived a conflict with the West, one has to understand what happened in the deep recesses of the Kremlin. Joseph Stalin and his lieutenants were rulers of a special type—tyrannical, cruel, and certainly loathsome in many ways—who defined their legitimacy in the terms they themselves set and harshly imposed on



the people of the USSR. Nevertheless, in 1945, with the defeat of Nazi Germany still fresh in everyone's mind, these men were united in victory with the people they ruled. The Kremlin leaders and their regime experienced their golden hour representing the triumphant forces of history. They carried on the legacy of Russia as the savior of the world, a legacy willingly shared by millions of their countrymen. In order to understand the Cold War from the Soviet perspective, one must understand the importance of that moment and the larger historic legacy of Russia and the Russian Revolution, vindicated by the victory of 1945.

The Soviet worldview had been shaped by a history that was dramatically different from that of the West. The legacy of czarist history, the Bolshevik revolution, the Civil War, and the experience of World War II all contributed to a unique Soviet perspective. Another, important factor that significantly shaped the Soviet perspective was that Russia represented not only a nation but also a distinctive imperial civilization. One could argue that, with the exception of the period of the Mongol yoke (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries), Russia has always been an empire. And even during the Mongol interlude, when its land had become a province of a grandiose nomadic mega-state, Russia still remained in the imperial framework. The traditional imperial legacy was an insurmountable obstacle to Russia's becoming an "ordinary" nation-state. Despite their intentions to build a brave new world from scratch, Russian Communists simply could not break with the imperial mode of thinking.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the fifteenth century the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome had emerged; two previous Romes had fallen, for they had sinned, and (after the collapse of Constantinople) it was now time for Moscow to be the eternal keeper of the Christian faith. This Russian messianism became the spiritual backbone of the expanding Russian empire, which perceived itself as nothing short of sacred. After the revolution of 1917, however, Soviet Russia assumed the responsibility of spreading the Marxist message. Now, as the keeper of the Marxist faith, it would emancipate mankind rather than Orthodox Christianity.

History gave the Russians more concrete reasons to see themselves as saviors of the world. Russians credited themselves with having rescued Europe from two invading powers—the Mongols in the thirteenth century and Napoleon's army in the early nineteenth century.