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Rethinking Cold War history

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John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997. ISBN 0 19 878070 2

Around the time in the mid-1980s when Mikhail Gorbachev was in line to become leader of the Soviet Union, John Lewis Gaddis had a clever idea. Looking at the Cold War as a period of extended superpower stability, he discovered not a war but a 'Long Peace'. The term earned him a great deal of scorn. What about the constant confrontations? What about the countless people that had died, directly or indirectly, because of the Cold War around the globe? Gaddis retorted by pointing out that previous conflicts of similar intensity in the European context would have issued in actual war. The Cold War did not, and so it really was abnormal. In his new book, he finds abnormality of a different kind. The Cold War was odd because it lasted so long.

The celebration of the bipolar system, our long period of stability, was ill-timed. For Gorbachev was about to end 'the Long Peace', and a good act it obviously was. This is now often, but too hastily, referred to as 'the Soviet collapse'. One is given to understand that the new leadership was merely putting the best possible construction on things by closing up the empty shop and declaring bankruptcy. Time will show, I think, just how contingent an event it actually was. Gaddis's 'rethinking' here, however, is not concerned with the 'end', but with the more conflictual period until the Cuban Missile Crisis was over. Thus he is reopening all the inflammatory issues of historiography which he thought largely settled when he launched his 'Long Peace' pitch. From the early 1970s onwards, he had indeed made his reputation in diplomatic history by situating his work squarely in the cool air of empirical adjudication; a voice of reason, seemingly, beyond the political passions of traditionalists and revisionists. As a 'post-revisionist', he proved a prolific, tireless synthesizer (he has in fact never written a typical monograph). Thematically, his focus was national security. He was less interested, consequently, in the moral implications of the Cold War and who was to blame for it than he was in statecraft and the scope of security claims. To exaggerate a bit, he wrote history from the subject position of a national security advisor. All these qualities of his work—adjudicating, synthetic, massive, geostrategic—made him appealing outside the confines of diplomatic history proper. His view was clear, historically grounded and readily available for appropriation. Policy intellectuals could understand the dilemmas he outlined, while international relations theorists could place his accounts in a frame of quasi-scientific reason. He was the one historian even pundits read.

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Yet it was not a one-way street. Gaddis himself interacted with these outside worlds and took elements from them, especially IR theory. The Long Peace argument, for example, was chiefly a historical elaboration of Kenneth Waltz's theorization of bipolar stability. Diplomatic historians, however, were less enthusiastic. Nearly all probably felt discomfort about his connection to the IR world, radically separate as it is from diplomatic history in the US academy. Some, not all leftists, also derided Gaddis's work as 'orthodoxy plus archives'.

The characterizaton was unfair. It may well, however, stand as a description of his new book, which represents a view largely similar to that of the US State Department, *circa* 1955, with (some) archival underpinnings. The move has already proved popular within the old internationalist centre, whose attitudes it reflects. In a recent editorial memorializing that glorious spring of 1947 when 'Washington rose impressively to the occasion' and 'summoned life from the ashes of Europe', the *New York Times* also found occasion to laud what it called Gaddis's 'brave early attempt' to write a history of the period based on the new evidence. The bravery of the book presumably resides in taking on the task of writing about something that is still a bit blurry and subject to revision; but the point of editorial and book alike is obversely that 'we now know who won'. The politics of the work might fit the present *Times*, but the IR audience will, I think, be less receptive to its style of argument, while diplomatic historians will find disagreeable Gaddis's return to the perspective of the 1950s.

The title suggests that now indeed we really do know. Readers expecting an inventory of great revelations will be disappointed. The rhetorical 'we now know' is repeated throughout the book (as though we didn't know before); but there is less there than meets the eye. The publisher, telling us that this is Gaddis's 'masterpiece', also says that it is overflowing with news. A more accurate judgment can be found in a recent work by Vojtech Mastny concerning Stalin's foreign policy, appearing under the imprint of the very same publisher: 'the greatest surprise so far to have come out the Russian archives is that there was no surprise'.[1] What you saw, in short, was largely what you got, images of mysteries and enigmas notwithstanding.

Gaddis himself, of course, knows better than his publisher. He is a first-rate historian who likes to argue, not to compile. Soon it also becomes clear that he is less interested in the 'we-now-know' trope than in interpretative reassessments, where he has real novelty to offer. To be sure, there *are* new materials about critical events which Gaddis, like all historians, reads in his own way since 'evidence' is never transparently clear. Thus we get an intriguing account of the Korean War from the vantage point of the interplay between Stalin, Mao and Kim Il-sung. Recent emphasis on that war as a Korean *civil war* is replaced unambiguously by a story about the Northern attack on the South and the internal dialectic beween the three Communist leaders. Stalin's green light to Kim and the subsequent anxieties and divergencies on the Communist side are foregrounded. This is valuable. It is 'diplomatic history' of a gripping kind. But it is not the whole story. Stalin probably gave his permission only because he thought, erroneously but not unreasonably, that the United States considered Korea beyond the realm of intervention. Making this, moreover, into a 'Communist story' reduces Korea once again to a simple staging area for geopolitical action by outside powers.

[1] Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (New York, 1997), p. 9.

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We also get a detailed history of the Cuban Missile Crisis, about which one thought everything had been said. Not so. The enormous volume of testimonies about this crucial moment are brought together and revamped into a superb analysis of the various actors involved. Khrushchev's missiles were not mere strategic balancing. They were put there as a measure of his strong support for the Cuban Revolution. Even after their withdrawal, the Soviet leader always thought the confrontation had been successful, because he had prevented the expected destruction of Castro's regime. Gaddis also accentuates, rightly, that John F. Kennedy was more of a dove than commonly thought, aware of the immense dangers and quite willing to compromise. On the paradoxes and ironies of nuclear weapons, Gaddis tends otherwise to be at his best, mainly, I think, because it is a game that does not involve simple oppositions of good and evil.

His *overriding* history, however, is about American democracy fighting Soviet authoritarianism (his preferred term, interestingly, over totalitarianism); and in that sense this is less a book of revelations than an ideological one about ideology, retelling the familiar story of the Cold War as a struggle between good and evil. Within such a frame there can be no place for ambiguity. Thus the 'new evidence' must fit exceedingly well to make the narrative convincing. This is where the ideological optic creates problems. Take, for example, the central question of Germany in the immediate postwar period. The impression is given that Stalin, maximalistically, had planned for the integration of Germany into the Soviet sphere of control and that Western policies and the ensuing division of the country were merely a function of that initial gambit. The 'new evidence' to support this story is extremely thin. The most recent work on the subject concludes, on the contrary, that permanent division was a Western idea. Another account, intensely hostile to Stalin, says that he had no preconceived notions about Germany and was more interested in Poland.

Gaddis, by contrast, chooses not to talk about what the Soviets themselves said was important in resolving the German imbroglio: denazification, demilitarization, and decartelization, on the one hand; reparations to the devastated Soviet Union, on the other. These, one would think, were not small matters for the Soviet leadership. Gaddis is not interested in such topics, because he wants to push the story about democracy and authoritarianism, into which framework they do not easily fit. The United States installs democracy, and the Soviet Union authoritarianism, in their respective parts of occupied Germany, thus essentially reproducing their own domestic systems. American benevolence, says Gaddis, 'reflected democratic culture', which, habitually alien to coercion, allows for 'a wider and more cacophonous range of voices'. This then in turn serves to 'create a buffer against bullying, smoothing out disparities of raw strength and providing recourse against the arrogance these can bring'. All of which merely mirrors, of course, the stabilizing effects of 'the free exchange of commodities'.

I note these pleasing commonplaces chiefly for their rhetorical charge. It is atypical. Gaddis's stylistic strength is otherwise his relentlessly reasonable tone, the seamless argument. More substantially interesting is the thesis that Stalin and his cohorts (especially Mao) were not only authoritarians but also 'romantics'. It is not an epithet that comes readily to mind when one thinks of Stalin. Nasty, brutish, cunning, lots of horrible things; but *romantic*? I think not. However, Gaddis seems to mean nothing more than that Stalin really was a Communist, doctrinally bound,

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and so not capable of seeing reality for what it was. Stalin was led astray by his romantic attachment to Communism. The gap between Stalin's actions and the 'real' interests of the Soviet regime would otherwise be incomprehensible. After him, this romanticism became a perverse sort of sentimentality within the Soviet leadership, 'geriatric over-exertion', a futile attempt to find revolutionary roots long since lost. Hence, for example, Khrushchev's commitment to Cuba.

Ideology, as Terry Eagleton says somewhere, is something the other guy does. Communists have ideology, Americans have 'habits' and maybe some 'ideas'. Curiously, in view of the explanatory importance he accords it, Gaddis has little analytically to say about Soviet ideology and Marxist-Leninist strategy. The only American, meanwhile, who appears to come within the vicinity of ideology is John Foster Dulles, whose views on colonialism are described as a mixture of 'American exceptionalism, Wilsonian internationalism, Christian moralism, geopolitical opportunism, and historical determinism' (p. 168). Good thing, then, that this crusader was kept largely under control by the much more sensible Ike. The characterization of Dulles appears in Gaddis's chapter on the Third World, where the American leadership is taken to task for chasing devils where none were to be found, or at most small and manageable ones. Falling into Vietnam was 'feckless stupidity'. But we should not, Gaddis argues, criticize this syndrome too harshly. The 'nightmares' seemed real at the time.

One might think, then, that there was something ideological, indeed even 'romantic', about the American mind that served to induce these nightmares. But what Gaddis is after is not really romanticism, or even ideology, but the notion of utopian transcendence. Stalin, contrary to his realist appearance, turned out to believe in the ultimate transcendence of revolution and, thus imprisoned, he completely misread the West.

What is wrong with this corrected image is not that Stalin thought history was on his side or that he misread the West. It is the idea that Stalin had one iota of utopian consciousness. Jean-Paul Sartre argued long ago that Stalin understood Marxism-Leninism not as a philosophy but as a strategic frame. Henri Lefèbvre, with equal insight, called it Stalin's language of decision. And the object of action and decision was to preserve the Soviet Union and Stalin's regime. This would serve the long-term interests of historical transformation and, theoretically, everyone on earth. In the meantime, one had better preserve what one had with the utmost vigilance and ruthlessness. Geopolitically, this was not an offensive posture and did not exclude 'deals' with the West. On the contrary, the whole edifice of Stalinist strategy was based on the idea of doing deals with 'progressive' bourgeois parties and nations. About this project there was was nothing romantic whatsoever and precious little utopian transcendence.

Reinventing the Cold War as romantic ideology of the other side is reinventing the polarity of good and evil. It is also, as mentioned, to reinvent the orthodoxy of the 1950s. Perhaps there is an element of atonement in all this. Gaddis is making up for geopolitical sins he committed in using the apparently amoral language of neorealism. Even in those days, however, Gaddis thought the origins of the Cold War lay chiefly on Stalin's side of the fence, because of his extravagant security claims, his clumsiness at international statecraft. To geopolitical deficiencies are now added, as we have seen, not only the figure of Stalin the authoritarian romantic but also Stalin the embodiment of evil, the embodiment of the very principle of the

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Cold War itself, the man who carried on a cold war even within his own family. Conceptually, that combined move does two things for Gaddis. It allows him to explain why Stalin and the Soviet Union acted against its own interests; and it renders unnecessary any questions about the role of the United States in the proceedings. The United States and the West, in short, could never have concluded any acceptable agreements with such a dictator and regime.

The argument deserves a closer look. Every explanation of the Cold War that centres on blaming Stalin does indeed have to face the simple fact (no one disputes it) that the Cold War was not in his interest. Enter, therefore, the theory of Stalinist blunders, be it in the form of excessive security demands, faulty ideological lenses, personal paranoia or all of the above. This is certainly arguable. In his crude reductionism and brutality, Stalin blundered a great deal. But he knew (on economic grounds if nothing else) how extraordinarily powerful the West was and that conflict was out of the question. Was this then a regime with which agreement was *inherently* impossible? It is enough to think ahead a few years in the narrative to see how implausible this position is. For, surely, precisely such a geopolitical arrangement (whatever one might think of it) was to be struck with a dictator whose revolutionary credentials were much more convincing than Stalin's and whose personality was every bit as excessive as the Georgian's. In the early 1970s, American geopoliticians went to Beijing and paid homage to the enemy of their enemy, the very man who had unleashed the most astonishing case of revolutionary utopianism in the whole postwar era, namely, the Cultural Revolution. The American move worked, I think, to the mutual satisfaction of both powers.

One might object that, in various ways, the situation was historically different; but in that case the atemporal language of moral reasoning would have to be abandoned. If agreements are possible even for a country of 'democratic culture', then the question one should go on to ask (at least) is whether the Cold War perhaps was in the Western interest. Was there, in other words, something about the US 'security claims' and 'ideological blinders' that might have led this same West to see the severance of diplomacy with the Soviet Union as a highly practical way of resolving the thorniest of all problems, the problem of how to get the United States finally into the world on a sustained basis and to recast the vast preponderance of military-industrial strength in the world under its hegemony? The justification for this was readily available because of World War II: the world would not be really secure until every criminal regime of size had been stamped out, and the United States would have to lead that struggle or succumb. As utopian a vision as one will find anywhere, it was also enormously effective.

Gaddis, on his part, now thinks the West had won the Cold War already by the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviet regime as a model was declining, if not dying. The West was winning. Peculiarly, it would take decades before anyone, Ronald Reagan actually, challenged the bankrupt Soviet regime. How could this be? The answer, of course, is that the Soviet Union had the capacity to compete in one area, in matters military, especially in nuclear weapons. What might then be called the Fairly Long Peace after 1962 preserved the Soviet Union abnormally long because of nuclear weapons.

I think this is historically wrong. The Soviet system entered its period of real stagnation only in the 1970s and could probably have hovered on for a long time. But Gaddis seems not to see where his logic is carrying him. If the military

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dimension kept the Soviet Union in business, perhaps it had not actually been in the Western interest to militarize the division of Europe and build countless encircling military alliances around the 'Communist bloc' in the 1940s and '50s. When the Cubans (the only real adherents of what used to be known as 'proletarian internationalism') went to Africa in the 1970s to defend the Revolution against South Africa and others, I recall Andrew Young shrugging it off. It didn't much matter, he said, because in the end we make Coca-Cola and they don't. He was American ambassador to the UN then; not, as now, the proud mayor of the City of Coca-Cola where the Coca-Cola Olympics recently took place. The power of the commodity would have erased the Soviet Empire long before Ronald Reagan's posturings became the political mainstream.

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