The End of the Cold War

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The sudden and surprising end of the Cold War in the late 1980s closed an epoch in modern history. As a superpower confrontation, ideological contest, arms race, and competition for geopolitical influence, the Cold War dominated international relations for forty-five years (1945–90). It shaped the foreign policies of the United States and the Soviet Union and deeply affected their societies and their political, economic, and military institutions. By justifying the projection of US power and influence all over the world, the Cold War facilitated the assertion of global leadership by the United States. By providing Soviet leaders with an external enemy to justify their repressive internal regime and external empire, it helped perpetuate the grip of the Communist Party on power. In both countries, the Cold War compelled ongoing mobilization for war, locking the Soviet Union even tighter into the bifurcated command economy that led to its downfall, while pushing the United States toward a stronger central state and hybrid economic management that produced progress by reducing social inequalities and creating a “social bargain” within reformed capitalism.

In addition to its impact on the superpowers, the Cold War caused and sustained the division of Europe, and within Europe, Germany. It also facilitated the reconstruction and reintegration of Germany, Italy, and Japan into the international system following their defeat in World War II. The impact of the Cold War was especially great in the third world, where it overlapped and interacted with longer-term trends like decolonization and sweeping social and economic changes. The Cold War led to the division of Vietnam and Korea and to costly wars in both nations, and it exacerbated conflicts throughout the third world. During crises, the Cold War’s nuclear arsenals threatened the end of human civilization. In short, the Cold War was at the center of world politics in the second half of the twentieth century.

Debates about the end of the Cold War are inextricably bound up with assumptions about the nature of the Cold War. As Richard Ned Lebow (2000, p. 208) has noted, “the debate about the end of the Cold War is at its core a controversy about the validity of the principles that shaped Western understanding of the Soviet Union and its foreign policy.” Defenders of US policies blame the Cold War on an expansionist and ideologically motivated Soviet Union and argue that victory in the Cold War vindicates US policies during the conflict. In contrast, more critical scholars argue that US policies and actions played an important role in starting and sustaining the Cold War and that less confrontational US policies could have led to the end of the Cold War sooner and at a lower cost.
The end of the Cold War was largely the result of long-term processes, most of which were internal to the Soviet Union. Although we will not neglect long-term processes or Soviet internal policies, our focus will be on the impact of US policies and actions, especially in the 1980s. Following an overview of the key events of the Cold War in the 1980s, we evaluate major interpretations of the end of the Cold War. Next, we discuss some of the sources on this topic that have become available in the last decade and point to new directions for research.

Conventional wisdom in the United States conflates the breakup of the Soviet Union, the collapse of communism, and the end of the Cold War, but these processes, while closely related, were not the same. In long-term perspective, the breakup of the Soviet Union can be seen as the long-delayed result of a process of disintegration of multinational empires that was one of the key legacies of World War I. While that war destroyed other empires, the Russian Empire continued “under new management” as the Soviet Union. Initially unaffected by the end of European colonial empires set in motion by World War II, that process also caught up with the last of the great multinational and colonial empires. In the end, nationalism and democratization proved incompatible with empire, dooming the Soviet Union. Jacques Lévesque (1997) argues that the transformation of Soviet communism was the result of the gradual social democratization of the Soviet elite, a process that had already occurred in other countries. Similarly, Jack Snyder (1987–8) and David Lane (1996) point to shifts in Soviet society resulting from the economic transformation of the Soviet Union that led to changes in the composition and interests of the country’s dominant groups.

As for the more immediate factors that led to the “end of the Communist revolution,” to use Robert Daniels’s (1993) phrase, Jerry Hough (1997) and other Soviet specialists point to the disastrous and unintended consequences of the economic policies initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev. In addition, David Kotz and Fred Weir (1997), drawing on the work of Russian scholars, focus on the defection of a significant portion of the Soviet elite whose continued privileges were threatened by Gorbachev’s reforms, and argue that Boris Yeltsin and his supporters forced the breakup of the Soviet Union in order to consolidate their hold on power in Russia.

**The Cold War in the 1980s**

As the 1980s began, the end of the Cold War seemed nowhere in sight. Following a brief period of relaxed tensions and better relations (détente) in the mid-1970s, that decade ended with a “new Cold War” and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. In Washington, President Jimmy Carter was about to lose his job to Ronald Reagan not only because of high inflation and soaring interest rates, but also because of Soviet-supported revolutions in the third world, the hostage crisis in Iran, and changes in the strategic balance that had ended US strategic superiority.

Warning that the Soviet Union had surpassed the United States in military strength, Reagan intensified the military buildup begun during the last years of the Carter administration, and between 1981 and 1989 added more than £2.1 trillion to the US defense budget (see Arkin, 1989). The Reagan administration also expanded covert action and sharply increased military assistance to pro-United States governments and groups, including anti-communist insurgents in Afghanistan,
Angola, and Nicaragua. The Reagan administration revived the B-1 bomber, continued development of the B-2 (Stealth) bomber, expanded the navy from 450 to 600 ships, and accelerated deployment of the MX mobile missile and the Trident submarine missile system – both highly accurate delivery systems capable of carrying multiple warheads.

One deployment in particular symbolized the new antagonism, and the old misunderstandings. In the fall of 1983, after almost four years of the highest-level alliance negotiations, front-page headlines, and a rising tide of anti-nuclear protest in Western Europe, the United States began placing Pershing II intermediate-range missiles and Tomahawk cruise missiles in Western Europe. In NATO eyes, this upgraded intermediate-range missile capacity was a necessary response and deterrent to the Soviet deployment, beginning in the late 1970s, of hundreds of SS-20 intermediate-range missiles, with highly accurate multiple warheads aimed at Western Europe. In Soviet eyes, the SS-20s were merely a normal modernization of forces, much as NATO had junked its Jupiter and Thor missiles in the 1960s for Pershing I’s – a modernization that actually stabilized deterrence by being more mobile, less vulnerable to preemption, and carrying less total megatonnage. But to NATO, the SS-20s challenged its basic war-fighting strategy, which called for tactical nuclear superiority in Europe to counterbalance assumed Soviet and Warsaw Pact conventional superiority.

The Soviets apparently never considered the political impact on NATO of their deployment. For its part, the Reagan administration had proposed negotiating positions on intermediate-range missiles that sounded serious (“the zero option”), but in reality only offered to trade a NATO bird in the bush (plans for future Pershing deployment) for the Soviet birds on the ground. In response to the deployment of the Pershing II and Tomahawk missiles, the Soviets broke off both the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) talks and Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START).

In part, the vehemence of the Soviet response was due to Reagan’s announcement, in March 1983, of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a technologically ambitious and extremely expensive plan to develop a nationwide ballistic-missile defense system that would deploy weapons in outer space to destroy enemy warheads in flight. As former Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessermertnykh pointed out in a 1993 oral history conference (Wohlforth, 1996, p. 48), SDI violated the whole structure of US–Soviet arms control that had as its cornerstone the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972 by threatening mutual deterrence, which was based on each side’s ability to retaliate against a nuclear attack. Bessermertnykh also noted Soviet fears that SDI had the potential to provide the United States with the capacity and confidence to launch a preemptive nuclear strike.

Reagan, as Frances Fitzgerald (2000) notes, saw SDI in fundamentally moral terms, as a way to prevent nuclear war through defensive means. He seemed not to know or to care whether such a system would likely set off a new arms race, and genuinely wanted to share anti-missile technology with the world. Hardliners in the Reagan administration like Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger embraced SDI from different and multiple motives: to increase defense spending even more; to take the initiative in developing space weapons; and to undercut the existing arms-control framework with the Soviets, whom they believed could not be trusted. In contrast, Secretary of State George Shultz and other top officials saw SDI primarily as a bargaining chip to help bring the Soviets to the table and force them to moderate their
behavior. Congress liked the idea of spending several billion dollars on missile defense every year even if there was little to show for it but jobs and votes. SDI’s Hollywood-originated nickname, “Star Wars,” summed up American public opinion, which was skeptical of the technical possibilities but generally supportive of the idea of defending against an attack rather than initiating one.

Judged on its own terms, without the hindsight provided by the end of the Cold War, Reagan’s foreign policy during his first term might well be assessed, on balance, as a failure, as in the first edition of Raymond Garthoff’s *Détente and Confrontation* (1985). Reagan administration policies and rhetoric exacerbated tensions within the Western alliance and contributed to the strength of a powerful and at times explicitly anti-US peace movement in Western Europe. Reagan’s policies in the third world, especially Central America, also evoked widespread protest, never gaining majority support even in the United States. In late 1986, the revelation that administration officials had been covertly violating a congressional ban on aid to the anti-communist insurgents in Nicaragua (known as *contras*), while simultaneously shipping arms to Iran to gain the freedom of Americans held hostage in Lebanon, led to a serious constitutional crisis, the resignation of several of Reagan’s top aides, and a dramatic decline in public and congressional support for administration policies in Central America. Finally, the mushrooming budget deficits that resulted from increased military spending combined with tax cuts swelled the national debt and led to an inflow of foreign capital that drove up the value of the dollar and contributed to a skyrocketing trade deficit.

During his second term, however, Reagan found a partner, in the person of Mikhail Gorbachev, who could actually produce the movie Reagan had always wanted to make about US–Soviet relations. Soviet-related documentation from Reagan’s first term has begun to be declassified, and it reveals that Reagan secretly sent a handwritten (but staff-drafted) letter to Soviet leader Yuri Andropov only four months after the “evil empire” speech – one in a series of secret Reagan approaches to the three Soviet general secretaries during his first term – suggesting talks and offering “private and candid” communications at the highest level. However, as Reagan later commented, Soviet leaders kept dying on him. Before Gorbachev took office in March 1985, the Soviet Union had gone through three general secretaries in the four years Reagan was in the White House. The deaths in quick succession of Leonid Brezhnev (November 1982), Yuri Andropov (February 1984), and Konstantin Chernenko (March 1985) added even more uncertainty to a Soviet system characterized by secrecy, stagnation, and government by committee.

As Archie Brown (1996) and others point out, Gorbachev took charge of a Soviet Union beset by declining economic performance, a widening technology gap, a demoralized set of elites and Party cadres, an increasingly restless population, and a confrontational relationship with the United States and its allies. To meet these challenges, Gorbachev ordered more investment in the machine-building industries, expecting the kinds of major productivity and output gains the Soviet Union had realized from a similar strategy in the 1950s. He sought to keep his military happy with increased spending on weapons procurement and a free hand, with a one-year deadline, in Afghanistan. When these policies failed to produce immediate improvements, Gorbachev moved to a more radical reform agenda: encouraging open debate on government policies (*glasnost*), economic restructuring (*perestroika*), and
improved relations with the West (new thinking). These policies were linked. Brown (1996), Robert English (2000), and other Soviet specialists have pointed out that Gorbachev hoped that political reform would break bureaucratic opposition to his economic reforms. Similarly, he hoped that a less competitive relationship with the West would permit a drastic reduction in military spending and allow the Soviet Union to devote greater attention and resources to internal renewal.

Gorbachev focused first on arms control. In April 1985, he suspended the countermeasures the Soviets had taken in response to the NATO INF deployments and halted further deployment of SS-20 intermediate-range missiles. In August, he announced a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, and offered to extend it indefinitely if the United States would also stop testing. He also agreed to on-site inspection of Soviet test facilities. Gorbachev met with Reagan in Geneva in November 1985. The two leaders established a personal relationship, and Gorbachev gained Reagan’s assent to a joint statement that nuclear war could never be won and must never be fought. In October 1986 at the Reykjavik summit, Gorbachev offered to remove all SS-20s from Europe and limit the number deployed in Asia to 100, and also proposed a plan to cut US and Soviet nuclear forces in half. As detailed accounts by Fitzgerald (2000), Jack Matlock (1995), and Anatoly Chernyaev (2000) make clear, Gorbachev and Reagan almost reached agreement on eliminating “offensive” nuclear weapons entirely, but Reagan’s refusal to limit SDI to laboratory research, and Gorbachev’s refusal to believe Reagan was sincere about sharing SDI, prevented any agreement.

Following Reykjavik, Gorbachev dropped his previous insistence that agreement on SDI was a prerequisite for progress on all arms control matters and accepted the earlier US “zero option” offer that all US and Soviet intermediate-range forces in Europe and Asia be scrapped. In addition, Gorbachev proposed eliminating shorter-range intermediate forces. These proposals became the basis for the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty signed in Washington in December 1987, the first arms reduction (as opposed to arms control) agreement of the Cold War.

Turning his attention to conventional forces, Gorbachev, in a December 1988 address before the United Nations, announced a 12 percent unilateral reduction in Soviet conventional forces, including a 20 percent reduction in forces west of the Urals. A large part of these cuts would come from Soviet forces in Eastern Europe, significantly reducing the Warsaw Pact’s offensive capabilities. These cutbacks, as well as the proposals on nuclear weapons, grew out of a drastic revision of Soviet military strategy that replaced the previous objective of not losing a war with the West with the objective of preventing such a war. As Michael McGwire (1991) and Gerard Snel (1998) make clear, the new strategy, in contrast to previous ones, did not require maintaining a strategic sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. As Matthew Evangelista (1999) notes, Gorbachev’s speech also ruled out use of force as an instrument of policy and pledged to respect freedom of choice for Eastern Europe.

At the same time that he was moving to wind down the arms race, Gorbachev was also taking steps to end the Cold War in the third world. In February 1988, Gorbachev announced his intention to pull all Soviet troops out of Afghanistan. Negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations led to a series of agreements in the spring of 1988 that called for the withdrawal of Soviet forces by February 15, 1989. Reversing an earlier commitment to stop aiding the Afghan resistance once
Soviet forces left Afghanistan, the Reagan administration announced that the United States would continue to provide aid to the resistance as long as the Soviet Union provided aid to the Afghan government. Soviet forces left on schedule in February 1989, but the war continued for three more years.

Withdrawing forces from Afghanistan not only reassured the West but also helped repair relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Gorbachev also pressured Vietnam to remove its forces from Cambodia, where they had been since 1978. By the fall of 1989, Vietnamese forces had left Cambodia, and in October 1990, the various Cambodian forces reached a peace agreement under UN auspices. The Soviets also phased out their military assistance to Vietnam and withdrew their forces from bases in Vietnam.

In Africa, Soviet and US negotiators helped mediate a settlement linking withdrawal of foreign forces from Angola with Namibian independence. The December 1988 agreements provided for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Angola by mid-1991, and South African acceptance of a UN-sponsored plan for Namibian independence, which occurred in March 1990. South African forces had already left Angola by the time the agreement was signed, and all Cuban troops left by June 1991. As in Afghanistan, fighting continued as the United States continued to send arms to anti-communist insurgents and the Soviet Union continued to aid the Angolan government. In 1990, the Soviets cut back their assistance and withdrew their advisers from Ethiopia, and the Cubans withdrew their combat forces and advisers. After the Ethiopian government fell to regional rebel forces in May 1991, the Soviets evacuated their base in the Dahlak Islands.

Although aided by the changes in Soviet policies, the end of the Cold War in Central America, as William Leogrande (2000) and others have shown, was primarily the result of a regional peace process led by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias Sánchez, which called for ceasefires in each of the war-torn nations of the region, free elections, and the end of all aid to irregular forces or insurrec tionary movements. Helped by millions of dollars in US aid, opposition forces in Nicaragua won free elections in February 1990, which were followed by a peaceful transfer of power. Although fighting dragged on until the early 1990s in both El Salvador and Guatemala, the end of the Cold War helped facilitate ceasefires and elections in both nations.

By early 1989, Cold War tensions had lessened markedly. The arms race was abating and the Cold War in the third world was winding down. Eastern Europe remained under communist control, however. Still skeptical about Soviet intentions and determined to put its own mark on US foreign policy, the incoming Bush administration put relations with the Soviet Union on hold for almost six months as it conducted a detailed strategic review of US foreign policy. President George Bush and his advisers also decided to test Soviet sincerity by focusing on the future of Eastern Europe (see Wohlforth, forthcoming).

Eastern Europe’s communist regimes lacked legitimacy and depended on Soviet support to stay in power. As Gorbachev and his supporters struggled to restructure the Soviet economy and open up the Soviet political system they recognized that using coercion to maintain control of Eastern Europe could undermine their efforts at reform. Moreover, as Andrew Bennett (1999, forthcoming) argues, Gorbachev, his Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, and most of their advisers regarded earlier
Soviet uses of force in Eastern Europe as major mistakes. Economic factors also played a role. As Randall Stone (1996) demonstrates, subsidies to Eastern Europe were a chronic drain on Soviet resources.

Beginning with elections in Poland in June 1989, the region’s communist regimes collapsed over the next six months. With the exception of Romania, the revolutions of 1989 came about peacefully. Gorbachev not only rejected the use of force to stave off the collapse of communist control, but, as Lévesque (1997) shows, at critical junctures in Poland and East Germany, he actively promoted political liberalization.

Germany had been at the center of the Cold War from its outset (see chapter 21), and the division of Germany and especially Berlin had served as potent symbols of the East-West divide. The Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989, and on November 28, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl announced a ten-point plan for the rapid reunification of Germany. Elections in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in March 1990 revealed overwhelming support for its absorption into an expanded Federal Republic. After extensive negotiations, Gorbachev, in September 1990, agreed to German reunification and membership of a unified Germany in NATO.

According to Lévesque (1997), Gorbachev had hoped to preserve the Warsaw Pact as the institutional basis for a negotiated new European security order in which the Soviet Union would play a major role. The collapse of communism in much of Eastern Europe and German reunification within NATO meant, James Davis and William Wohlforth (forthcoming) point out, that the post-Cold War order in Europe would be on US terms and would exclude the Soviet Union. In October 1990, NATO and the Warsaw Pact signed a treaty drastically reducing the size and armament of their conventional forces in Europe, with the Soviet Union accepting deeper cuts in its forces than those required of NATO and the United States. By the time the United States ratified the treaty in November 1991, the Warsaw Pact had ceased to exist, having disbanded in July 1991.

The reunification of Germany marked the end of the Cold War. Even before that occurred, the Soviet nonresponse to the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe had convinced President Bush and his advisers that the Soviet Union was no longer an adversary. Indeed, as Thomas Blanton (1998) has argued, by December 1989, the United States was willing to support Soviet intervention in Romania to prevent Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu from crushing reform forces. The momentous changes set in motion by Gorbachev thus ended the Cold War well before the Soviet Union collapsed and disintegrated in December 1991.

**Interpretations**

In the United States, the prevailing popular interpretation of the end of the Cold War is the so-called “Reagan victory school,” which argues that the Soviets shifted to less confrontational policies in the late 1980s because the US military buildup and political offensive in the early 1980s raised the costs of confrontation and forced the Soviets into a corner from which there was no escape save for surrender. This interpretation (popularized by Schweizer, 1994, 2000; Winik, 1996) begins with a highly critical view of US policies during the 1970s, claiming that the Soviets took advantage of détente and American weakness to take the lead in the arms race and to make
gains in the third world. Victory school advocates claim that Reagan administration strategists, recognizing that the Soviet Union, and especially the Soviet economy, was in deep trouble, developed and implemented a series of actions designed to burden and undermine the Soviet system.

According to this view, US covert action programs in Poland, Afghanistan, Angola, and Nicaragua cost the Soviets billions of dollars a year and forced the Soviets to accept regional settlements on US terms. Similarly, victory school advocates argue that the US military buildup was a purposeful strategy designed to put unbearable strains on an economically and technologically inferior foe. They place special emphasis on SDI, claiming that it convinced the Soviets they could not hope to keep up with the United States in the next phase of military-technological competition. They also claim that US export control programs designed to limit Soviet access to Western technology and US efforts to drive down oil prices and hamper Soviet gas exports retarded Soviet economic growth and cost the Soviet Union billions of dollars. Richard Pipes (1995) even claims that the Reagan administration’s “tough” policies were a key factor in Gorbachev’s selection as Soviet leader in 1985.

Promoted primarily by former Reagan administration officials and conservative journalists, the Reagan victory school, with few exceptions (Gaddis, 1989; Pateman, 1999), has found little support among scholars. Craig Nation (1992), Brown (1996), and Garthoff (1994b) argue that the Reagan victory school greatly exaggerates Soviet strength and aggressiveness at the beginning of the 1980s. Rather than a strong and aggressive “evil empire” on the march, they see a Soviet Union ruled by a sclerotic group of gerontocrats presiding over a stagnant economy falling ever further behind the West, a hollow military bogged down in an unwinnable war in Afghanistan, a dramatic geopolitical imbalance featuring former comrades in China and Egypt as new US allies, and a workers’ revolt in Poland personifying the international proletariat’s rejection of communism. In addition, CIA figures (Firth and Noren, 1998) show that Soviet defense spending throughout Carter’s four years and the first four of Reagan stayed relatively flat.

Studies of détente by Garthoff (1994a), Mike Bowker and Phil Williams (1988), and Odd Arne Westad (1997) agree that US concerns about Soviet strategic forces were overblown and ignored continuing US advantages, and that the Soviet conventional buildup of the early 1970s was, in part, a response to the modernization of NATO forces in the 1960s. They also argue that the third world revolutions of the 1970s were rooted in indigenous developments and regional rivalries rather than being the products of Soviet expansionism.

Research in Soviet records by Westad (1997) and Bennett (1999), for example, reveals that the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan was largely motivated by defensive concerns, including Soviet paranoia that the CIA would somehow recruit the erstwhile communist head of state in Kabul. Similarly, studies by Westad (1996–7), Piero Gleijeses (1996–7), and Bennett (1999) of Angola, and numerous studies of the situation in Central America in the 1980s (for example, Leogrande, 2000), reveal a much more complex story of Soviet involvement than that held by victory school advocates. Finally, documents unearthed by Vojtech Mastny (1998) and others (“New Evidence on the Polish Crisis,” 1998) suggest that the 1980–1 noninvasion of Poland was deeply influenced by Soviet acceptance of their own weakness and inability to police Stalin’s empire in Eastern Europe, thus presaging 1989.
Second, most of the major national security initiatives now identified with Reagan actually began during the last year of Carter’s presidency: a major military buildup, large increases in defense spending, changes in US nuclear targeting guidance, mass procurement of precision-guided munitions, and covert support for the Afghan mujahedin were all underway before Reagan came to office in January 1981. Carter never produced as ringing a phrase as Reagan’s “evil empire,” but some of Reagan’s actions, such as lifting the grain embargo on the Soviet Union, were actually less harsh than Carter’s in 1980 (boycotting the Olympics in addition to the grain embargo).

Recent scholarship also disputes the claim that the changes in Soviet policy were due to US pressure. English (2000) has shown that the new generation of Soviet leaders that emerged in the 1980s had already concluded that the policies of their predecessors were counterproductive and that continued conflict threatened their goal of overcoming the disastrous legacy of Stalinism, reforming their economy, democratizing their politics, and revitalizing their society. English (1997) and Brown (forthcoming) also argue that claims that Gorbachev’s selection was influenced by Reagan’s policies have no basis in the evidence that has thus far come to light. Rather than causing the changes in Soviet foreign policy that led to the end of the Cold War, Brown, English, and numerous other scholars (for example, Garthoff, 1994b; Cordovez and Harrison, 1995; Mendelson, 1998; Evangelista, 1999; Zubok, 2000) argue that US policies and actions delayed, and almost derailed, them by providing opponents of reform with arguments against better relations with the West and relaxation of internal controls. Bennett (1999, pp. 248–9) argues that Gorbachev succeeded in changing Soviet policies in spite of US aggressiveness by viewing US actions as, in part, “a reaction to Soviet policies rather than merely an indicator of the inherently aggressive nature of capitalism.”

It is difficult to assess the efficacy of covert aid to Solidarity with any degree of certainty. Those who see US actions as crucial should reflect, however, on the fact that the Soviets and their local allies in Poland and throughout Eastern Europe had for forty years been unable to extinguish opposition to Soviet dominance. It is also difficult to assess, with any degree of accuracy, the impact of US economic sanctions on the Soviet Union. While it is clear that the Soviet Union suffered a huge drop in export earnings due to the collapse of oil prices in 1986, this came after Gorbachev took office. Moreover, while US pressures and inducements no doubt played a role in Saudi decisions to increase production, the Saudis had sufficient reasons of their own to prefer lower prices. In addition, reduced demand for oil due to high prices, conservation, and use of alternative energy sources, and expanded production outside the Middle East, were more important factors in the price collapse than any concerted campaign by the Reagan administration to drive prices down (see Painter, 1991).

Numerous studies of the Cold War in the third world demonstrate not only that Reagan victory school adherents fundamentally misunderstand the sources and nature of these conflicts, but also that their version of how and why the conflicts ended is seriously flawed. As Richard Herrmann (forthcoming), Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison (1995), Sarah Mendelson (1998), and Bennett (1999) make clear, the Soviets were already moving toward withdrawing their forces from Afghanistan before the Reagan administration stepped up military aid to the mujahedin, and US actions probably delayed a settlement and prolonged the fighting. US aid to
anti-communist forces in Angola and Nicaragua also prolonged the fighting and suffering, and in both cases the eventual settlements were more the result of regional forces than of US actions. As Herrmann (forthcoming) points out, the Soviet-allied Afghan government did not fall to insurgent forces until April 1992 after Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who had displaced Gorbachev and extinguished the Soviet Union in late December 1991, cut off aid. Likewise, the Soviet-allied government in Angola won free elections in October 1992 and is still in power. In Nicaragua, a government of national reconciliation, rather than the contras, replaced the Sandinistas, who remained the largest and best-organized party in the country.

Although the Soviets deeply opposed SDI, at least initially, Garthoff (1994b) and Evangelista (1999) argue that its main impact on Soviet policy was to delay progress in arms control. The Soviets continued research on space-based and other high-tech weapons, but they neither tried to develop their own SDI-type weapons or devoted significant efforts to developing countermeasures against SDI, in part because the United States never developed a workable system. In any event, the Soviets could have countered SDI by building more missiles, a response that would have cost far less than the requisite US countervailing defensive measures. This was economically feasible because Soviet spending on offensive nuclear forces made up less than 10 percent of overall Soviet military spending, as Fitzgerald (2000, pp. 474–5) notes.

Finally, critics of the Reagan victory school point out that there is little contemporary evidence that US policymakers believed in the early 1980s that the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse. Indeed, at the time these same polemists saw Soviet power on the rise, not in decline, and warned that the Soviet Union was about to win the Cold War. As Robert McMahon (1995) has noted, even if these claims were true, such a strategy was reckless since it could have resulted in desperate Soviet responses rather than a peaceful end to the Cold War. Indeed, by the fall of 1983 Soviet leaders seem genuinely to have believed that the United States was preparing a preemptive nuclear attack, a perception heavily influenced by memories of Hitler’s 1941 surprise attack on the USSR (see Benjamin Fischer, 1997). Had the Soviets taken measures to counter the expected US attack, it could have initiated a disastrous chain reaction that would have made August 1914 look like a minor mishap.

While the Reagan victory school has been largely discredited, at least among scholars, the view that “containment worked” and led to US victory in the Cold War is widely held. Advocates of this view, such as Shultz (1993), Matlock (1995), and John Gaddis (1997), explain the end of Cold War by claiming that US policies and actions, in particular the related policies of containment and nuclear deterrence, finally convinced Soviet leaders that their goal of world domination was unobtainable and that trying to achieve it was not only dangerous but also incompatible with the economic health of the Soviet Union. In this interpretation, the policies of containment and deterrence prevented war, held the line against the expansion of Soviet power and influence, raised the costs of competing with the West, and eventually convinced Soviet leaders that communism was not the wave of the future but rather a dead end.

The Soviet Union devoted a much larger share of a much smaller economy to defense spending, thus siphoning off resources needed for economic modernization, and many advocates of the “containment worked” school focus on economic factors. As Stephen Brooks and Wohlfforth (2000–1) and Geir Lundestad (2000), among others, show, Soviet defense and “imperial” expenditures were quite high (analysts
now put Soviet defense spending at 15–20 percent of GNP) and imposed a significant burden on the Soviet economy. By the 1980s the Soviet economy was in serious trouble. Most scholars also agree that a key motivation behind Gorbachev’s foreign policy initiatives was a desire to reduce these expenditures.

There is less agreement over the impact of US policy and actions, however. The militarized command economy of the Soviet Union with its emphasis on the rapid buildup of heavy industry took shape in the 1930s, and the roots of Russian economic backwardness reach even further into the past. While agreeing that the global balance of power was important, Lévesque (forthcoming) also argues that any analysis that sees the changes in Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev as merely a response to changes in the distribution of power “is far off the mark.”

In the end, assumptions about Soviet foreign policy are at the heart of debates about the end of the Cold War. If the Soviets were intent on world revolution and global domination, the main interpretive question is why did they abandon this goal? If, however, they were not trying to take over the world, what were they trying to do and why, and what caused the changes in Soviet policies that led to the end of the Cold War? Answering these questions requires a sophisticated understanding of Soviet intentions, something notably lacking in most of the studies that argue US policies won the Cold War.

Before turning to this question, it is important to remember that US policies also changed. Beth Fischer (1997) has even described the dramatic foreign policy differences between Reagan’s first and second terms as “The Reagan Reversal.” Fischer, Shultz (1993), Matlock (1995), and Don Oberdorfer (1998) claim that the changes in US policies occurred in 1983, before Gorbachev became leader of the Soviet Union. Fitzgerald (2000) and Michael Cox (1990) attribute Reagan’s shift to domestic politics and the fallout from the Iran–Contra affair. In contrast to the Reagan victory school’s emphasis on the hardline policies of Reagan’s first term, critics like Brown (1996, forthcoming) and Garthoff (1994b, forthcoming) praise the Reagan of 1985–8 for “his willingness to enter into serious negotiations and treat the Soviet leader more as a partner than an enemy” (Brown, forthcoming).

Although the end of the Cold War has brought an outpouring of memoirs by participants and the opening of a vast amount of formerly unavailable archival records on Soviet foreign policy, it is still difficult to discern Soviet motives with certainty. Gaddis (1997) and like-minded scholars have seized on recently released Soviet and other communist records to argue that the foreign policy of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes was ideologically motivated and aggressively insecure. (For a discussion of Gaddis’s work, see chapter 21.) Wohlforth (1997) and others have argued that available documents are too limited and ambiguous to draw such sweeping conclusions. As a result, the sources of Soviet conduct, to echo the title of George Kennan’s famous essay, remain a contested issue.

While scholars like Gaddis still see Stalin and his successors as incorrigible ideologues and expansionists, others question the long-assumed links between the Soviet Union’s repressive internal regime and Soviet foreign policy. Michael McGwire (1991), Nation (1992), and David Holloway (1994), for example, highlight such factors as Russian history and geography, bureaucratic differences within the Soviet decisionmaking elite, and the security requirements arising from the Soviet Union’s unique geopolitical position. Geoffrey Roberts (1999), Vladislav Zubok and
Constantine Pleshakov (1996), Bennett (1999), and Mark Kramer (1999) have taken closer and more nuanced looks at Soviet ideology and operational beliefs and the precise nature of their impact on Soviet foreign policy. While there is no consensus alternative view, many scholars have stressed what international relations scholars call the security dilemma, which argues that actions taken by one nation for its security can easily be construed by its adversary as threatening and lead to countermeasures which further reduce security for both sides. Drawing on this insight, McGwire (1991) and Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein (1994) argue that the US policies of containment and deterrence were part of the problem rather than the solution because they increased Soviet insecurity and led to Soviet counteractions. Although the security dilemma affected the United States as well as the Soviet Union, it had especially stark implications for the Soviets. Most of the measures the Soviets adopted to improve their security provoked countermeasures by the more powerful United States and its allies that preserved or increased Western supremacy and thus diminished Soviet security. Seen in this light, the Cold War ended when Soviet leaders consciously took steps to redefine their security requirements and objectives in ways that would allow them to escape the constraints of the security dilemma.

Focusing solely or primarily on Soviet policies and actions distorts the history of the Cold War and its end. As Melvyn Leffler (2000) has noted, the Cold War was a product of interaction. His pioneering work (1984, 1992) stresses the importance of a global conception of US national security interests that emerged during World War II and dominated US policy throughout the Cold War. US leaders sought to prevent any power or coalition of powers from dominating Europe and/or Asia, to maintain US strategic supremacy, to fashion an international economic environment open to US trade and investment, and to maintain the integration of the third world in the world economy in an era of decolonization and national liberation. By the end of the Cold War, the United States had added maintaining access to the oil resources of the Persian Gulf to its list of vital interests.

This expansive definition of US interests clashed with Soviet security concerns and resulted in the Soviets taking counteractions to protect their security. This pattern of action and counteraction was a key dynamic of the Cold War. For example, US efforts to reconstruct and reform the world economy and to maintain a favorable balance of power in Europe and Asia involved the rebuilding of Germany and Japan, prospects the Soviets viewed with great concern. The Soviets responded by tightening their control of Eastern Europe. Similarly, a key element in US containment policy, the strategy of extended deterrence, was predicated on overall US strategic superiority. According to this view, the function of US strategic forces was not only to deter a Soviet attack on the United States, but also to deter possible Soviet advances elsewhere in the world. US strategists believed that strategic superiority was needed to compensate for assumed Soviet conventional superiority in Europe and to discourage Soviet “adventurism” in the third world. Soviet strategists believed that strategic parity was necessary to discourage an attack on the Soviet Union, and the Soviets tried to match each US advance.

The recognition that US policies and actions contributed to Cold War tensions leads to very different explanations for the origins, persistence, and end of the Cold War. Evangelista (1999) and others argue that the Western policies that contributed
the most to the end of the Cold War were those such as Ostpolitik, détente, and the actions of Western peace activists that reduced Soviet anxieties. Similarly, Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry (1991) argue that the “benign” nature of US power, especially compared to Imperial and Nazi Germany, and possession of nuclear weapons gave Soviet leaders the confidence that their basic security needs would be respected even as their power declined. In addition, Zubok (2000) and Snyder (1987–8) point to the passing of the generation of Soviet leaders that had most directly experienced the horrors of World War II, and consequently were almost obsessively concerned with conventional definitions of security. Finally, Leffler (2000) argues that Western successes in reforming capitalism, ending colonialism, combating racism, and avoiding another depression and further fratricidal wars were more important factors in “winning” the Cold War than policies that built up Western military power in order to contain Soviet power and influence.

Sources
The end of the Cold War is replete with ironies, not the least of which is that historians now have available, at least on the Soviet side, more primary sources on the end than on the beginning or the middle of the Cold War. In fact, on some topics, there are more high-level Soviet than US documents available. Ordinarily, scholars have to wait twenty or thirty years before the archives open, at which point most of the witnesses who could provide context, interpretation, affirmation, or refutation of the documents have passed from the scene. But the epochal transformations that centered around the year 1989 brought new, more open political systems to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, not to mention the disappearance of an entire country, East Germany. Enterprising journalists, scholars, former political prisoners, and former officials themselves rushed to open the files, excavate the archives, debate the meanings, and shrink the elapsed time between journalism and history.

This cornucopia of primary sources has reached the public record under a variety of auspices. Much is still missing, and what has been released has often been influenced by political calculations. The greatest bonanzas have come precisely in those countries whose transitions (or “refolutions,” in the incisive phrase of Timothy Garton Ash) led the way to the collapse of communism in 1989 – Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and the former East Germany. The Central European University is bringing out in English a series of four volumes compiling the most important of the new primary sources from communist files on the end of the Cold War (one on the superpowers, and one each on Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia). Similarly, the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, regularly publishes selections from these new sources. But even combined, these collections barely skim the surface.

If there is a single language for aspiring graduate students to learn that would open the greatest variety of primary sources on the end of the Cold War, it would be German. The most open archive in the world today of recent, high-level political and national security documents, ironically enough, is that of the former East German Communist Party (the Socialist Unity Party, known by its German initials, SED). In the interregnum between the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the reunification of Germany in October 1990, the younger generation of reform
communists curried public favor by opening the SED files through 1989 for researchers, thus distancing themselves from and discrediting their elders. Also during this time, East German protesters stormed various headquarters buildings of the secret police, the Stasi, to halt the shredding and destruction of files, and won the East German parliament’s approval for an independent authority to hold these files and make them public.

After reunification, when Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s government attempted to close the SED and Stasi files under the West German thirty-year rule, the Bundestag’s deputies from the East forced Kohl to retreat – not, however, before he succeeded in sequestering the East German Foreign Ministry files. Kohl apparently did not apply the thirty-year rule to his own activities, since in 1998 his Interior Ministry’s Bundesarchiv produced a massive 1,667-page documentary volume on the reunification process in 1989 and 1990 (Kusters and Hoffmann, 1998), with Kohl as the protagonist in dozens of verbatim memoranda of conversations with every world leader from Gorbachev and Bush to Lee Yuan Kew of Singapore.

The East German military files are also open at the archives in Freiburg, and include a complete run of the Warsaw Pact meeting minutes for the defense ministers and the political coordinating committee from 1955 through 1991. Despite the extraordinary detail captured by the East German note takers, the careful researcher will note a German-centricity to these materials that requires balancing by comparing them with the records of other Pact member countries. An international consortium of scholars has established the Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact, which has published a number of revelations including a detailed set of Bulgarian documents on the end of the Cold War (see the PHP website).

While German openness is largely a function of the disappearance of the GDR, the plethora of primary sources now available in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic testifies to the pioneering work of former dissidents turned scholars. In Warsaw, various intellectuals affiliated with Solidarity established a new institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Political Studies (ISP) to study the recent past and the present. In addition, an independent authority, the National Institute of Remembrance, was established to hold, analyze, and release the secret police files. The ISP has reconstituted from the personal recollections of former nomenklatura the files that were destroyed by the Communist Party as it gave up power, including a large collection of Politburo records. In addition ISP scholars and former Interior Ministry officials have compiled and published the complete transcripts of the Roundtable negotiations and the secret meetings at Magdalena that set up the 1989 elections; and the “Karta” archives have opened the complete records of the Solidarity movement from 1980 through 1989.

In Budapest, veterans of the 1956 Hungarian revolution organized the 1956 Institute in the late 1980s to open that censored history and by so doing ease the transition out of communism. Scholars associated with the Institute and Hungary’s National Archives have published an extraordinary array of primary sources on the end of the Cold War. For example, they have obtained, annotated, and published the complete series of minutes from the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party central committee during 1989, and the complete transcripts of the Hungarian Roundtable talks between the Party and the opposition during 1989. In addition, they have obtained
the declassification of the Party Politburo minutes for the entire communist period.

In Prague, Charter 77 activists came back in 1989 to run the Czech Academy of Sciences’ Institute for Contemporary History and to move back to Prague the extensive samizdat collections maintained outside the country since at least the Soviet invasion in 1968. These scholars have published seven volumes of sources on 1989, and have compiled the complete archive of the opposition groups Civic Forum (Czech) and People Against Violence (Slovak), including the audio recordings of their closed sessions during the tumultuous days of the Velvet Revolution in November 1989. An edited collection of English-language transcripts of these recordings is currently in preparation by President Havel’s long-time translator, Paul Wilson. Also available to scholars are the complete stenographic minutes of the Czechoslovak Communist Party central committee meetings.

Primary source availability is much more spotty in Moscow. The “golden age” of archival openness in the former Soviet Union in 1992–3 was short-lived. The most egregious withdrawal from the public record consists of the telegram and cable traffic of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, now completely closed for the dubious reason that releasing the texts would allow the codes to be broken (this has not actually been an issue since the adoption of one-time code pads in the late 1930s). Also, the Kremlin archive of Politburo decisionmaking from Lenin through Gorbachev remains under the Russian President’s direct control and closed to all but a few favored and government-sponsored researchers. Some remnants of the golden age may be found in the Chadwyck-Healey/Hoover Institution microfilm series, especially in “Fond 89,” the court record of the trial of the Soviet Communist Party before the Constitutional Court in 1992. This particular collection has become a grab-bag of selective releases since 1992 on topics like the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 or noninvasion of Poland in 1980–1.

One of the few archival bright spots in Moscow is the Gorbachev Foundation, whose archivist and senior staff have successfully opened their copies of much of the most important primary source material on the Gorbachev period. For example, Anatoly Chernyaev, Gorbachev’s top foreign policy aide from February 1986 through 1991, has generously opened to researchers his notes of Politburo sessions and all of Gorbachev’s meetings with foreign heads of state. The Foundation also plans to publish a complete set of the Politburo minutes of Gorbachev’s tenure, and has already published minutes of Gorbachev’s negotiations with the United States, including the lengthy minutes of the historic Reykjavik summit with Ronald Reagan in 1986.

The primary sources available in English are also enormous. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests by the National Security Archive have produced declassification of thousands of pages of the US Embassy cables reporting on the revolutions of 1989 as well as the briefing books prepared for Secretary of State George Shultz for each of his meetings with top Soviet officials. The interest of Reagan acolytes and former officials in proving that Reagan’s policies “won” the Cold War has combined with FOIA requests from openness advocates to obtain declassification of tens of thousands of pages on US–Soviet relations now available in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Vociferous criticism by prominent officials like Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for
missing the coming collapse of communism has resulted in the unprecedented release by the CIA of 95,000 pages of its intelligence analysis on the Soviet Union. These documents undercut the critics by providing a more nuanced and balanced portrait of the CIA’s successes and failures at the end of the Cold War.

This plethora of primary documentation also allows scholars to use with much greater confidence the outpourings of memoirs from former officials, veterans, and eyewitnesses to the events. Ordinarily, of course, such memoirs must be taken with grains if not entire shakers of salt, given the self-serving rationalizations endemic to the genre. Moreover, memoirs, like oral history, are subject to “contamination,” whereby a participant’s memories of decisions and events have been altered by subsequent events and experiences, and even by reading secondary accounts. Placed alongside the actual transcripts of the meetings described or the actual texts of the documents alluded to, the memoirs no longer have to be relied on for evidentiary value, but rather may be mined more appropriately for the perceptions, atmospherics, and context that only eyewitnesses and participants can provide.

Almost every leader, foreign minister, and top national security aide involved in the end of the Cold War has felt the need to unburden themselves of what they did and saw at the highest levels; so much so, in fact, that some of the best books now available on the period (for example, Fitzgerald, 2000) have constructed their narratives almost exclusively from comparing and contrasting the various memoir volumes. For a relatively complete list of the most useful memoirs, see the bibliography appended to this essay. In addition, Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich (1997) list over seventy Russian memoirs. The best memoir from the Soviet side is Anatoly Chernyaev’s My Six Years With Gorbachev, which presents an unvarnished and often critical portrait of Gorbachev’s actions, and of the author’s own. On the US side, the best memoir remains Jack F. Matlock’s Autopsy On an Empire, which ranges far beyond the subtitle, The American Ambassador’s Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union, to cover the entire period of Reagan and Bush policymaking at the end of the Cold War.

In addition to the primary sources and the voluminous memoir literature, several oral history projects have added new data to the available sources. Princeton University has hosted two major conferences around the tenures of alumni George Shultz and James Baker as Secretaries of State (Wohlforth, 1996, forthcoming); the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Universal History sponsored two separate interview projects, one focused on Gorbachev aides and the other focused on Gorbachev critics and the hardliners who led the August 1991 attempted putsch. In the realm of critical oral history, in which the veterans debate with each other, with scholars, and with the documents, Brown University’s Watson Institute hosted a major gathering in 1998 including key arms control negotiators from both sides of the end of the Cold War; Ohio State University’s Mershon Institute hosted an additional conference with hardliners in Moscow in 1999; and the National Security Archive in 1998 brought together key US and Soviet officials at the Musgrove conference center in Georgia, and followed up in 1999 with conferences in Warsaw, Budapest, and Prague co-organized with the Institute for Political Studies, the 1956 Institute, and the Institute for Contemporary History, respectively.

Even in the midst of this cornucopia of sources, much is still missing. Each of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and no doubt in Moscow as well, managed
to cull, edit, and destroy some of its documentary record before abandoning power – the most prominent examples being General Jaruzelski’s destruction of the Politburo record in Poland and the East German spy chief Markus Wolf’s destruction of the GDR’s foreign intelligence files. In Romania and Bulgaria, where the transition was protracted (in Romania, the post-communists held power until 1996), scholars are convinced that the surviving files have long since been weeded.

Probably the most important missing material is still classified within the CIA, the KGB, and each side’s intelligence apparatus. It is still a mystery, for example, what the KGB was actually up to in each of the Eastern European countries during their revolutions, particularly in the case of the violent collapse of the Ceausescu dictatorship in Romania. Likewise, the CIA’s covert operators have been eager to claim credit for the success of Solidarity in Poland (see Schweizer, 1994), but have denied any release of documentation on their role either in Poland or elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Finally, neither side has released its signals intercepts of the other’s communications during the end of the Cold War.

Scholars may take some consolation in the fact that, while there will doubtless be future volumes that focus on the role of intelligence in the end of the Cold War, these sources are not likely to revise substantially the history currently being written on the basis of the primary source flood described above. This reality stands in contrast to that of World War II, where we now know that Enigma and Ultra and the other code-breaking successes of the Allies played major roles in the decisions at the highest levels. For the end of the Cold War, however, we know from the transcripts of meetings at the highest levels, summits, politburos, and roundtables, how little the raw intelligence seems to have come up for discussion (although it may well have informed the top leaders’ decisions and ideas more than we can tell now), and how little the surveillance capabilities of the communist states seem to have availed them in their final throes. Indeed, in the case of East Germany, it may well have been exactly the overload of surveillance information, a kind of arteriosclerosis, that helped prevent timely intervention by the Stasi to prevent the Party’s collapse.

The ratio of sources to historians working on them is probably higher for the end of the Cold War than for any other period since World War II. Despite this richness, different philosophical and methodological approaches, as well as different political beliefs and commitments, will continue to produce differing explanations for the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, as Wohlforth and Brooks (forthcoming) point out, “in the final analysis no theory or analytical framework can substitute for careful empirical research; and no argument about the meaning of the end of the Cold War for policy and theory that is unsupported by such research will stand the test of time.”

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FURTHER READING

Video

On-line
CNN.com/COLD WAR.

Documentary Collections

Memoirs (US)
MacFarlane, Robert C., with Zofia Smardz: Special Trust (New York: Cadell and Davies, 1994).

**Memoirs (Soviet)**

**Secondary Sources**
Beschloss, Michael and Talbott, Strobe: *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993).