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*The Making of a Russian Cold War Historian during the Last Years of the Soviet Union*

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H-Diplo asked me to contribute to this new series about the formative years of scholars who do diplomatic and political international history. As I was thinking about my assignment, it occurred to me that I was one of the very few and privileged who grew up and studied in the Soviet Union at the end of its existence, and still stayed in the profession. We were pushed, one may say by the forces of history itself, to deal with such exciting topics as the Cold War and international relations. To explain how it happened, I have to write an autobiographical rather than an analytical essay.

My first formative influence came from the books written by my grandfather Lev I. Zubok (1894-1967), one of two leading “Americanists” in Soviet historical studies in the 1930s-60s. He passed away when I was still a boy, but remained a family legend: an émigré from a shtetl in Ukraine who moved to the United States in 1913, became a student and then a postgraduate student of the University of Pennsylvania, then became a re-émigré to the Soviet Union who worked as an expert for leading Soviet statesmen, such as deputy foreign minister Solomon Lozovsky, ambassador to the United Kingdom Ivan Maisky, and foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov. As a teenager, I took from the shelf of the family library his volume *US Imperialist Policies in the Countries of the Caribbean Basin, 1900-1939*, which was published in Moscow in 1948.<sup>1</sup> At an age when my peers still read about the ‘pirates of the Caribbean,’ I poured over the map of U.S. interventions in the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Nicaragua, read about the construction of the Panama Canal, and learned locations and names that would stick in my memory ever after. In 1977, as a student of Moscow State University (MGU), I decided to follow in my grandfather’s footsteps. Cautious university professors preferred not to teach international relations, however; this field was the exclusive purview of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), the leading school of Soviet diplomats. My Master’s thesis topic, supervised by Professor Nikolai V. Sivachev, was “The Fair Deal of Harry S. Truman and the origins of the Cold War,” with strong emphasis on U.S. domestic politics. Another professor warned me that such a topic might get me into trouble. After all, President Truman was a villain of Soviet historiography, an architect of the U.S. policy of containment of the USSR. If I wanted to write a solid thesis, he said, perhaps I should think of a less loaded subject. I explained that my argument would be that Truman’s foreign policy destroyed the domestic political momentum that favored the continuation of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s progressive reforms. I was at the time under influence of American revisionist historians like William Appleman Williams, Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, and others.<sup>2</sup> More conservative American historians also admitted that the Cold War had a negative fallout on the Democrats’ domestic

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<sup>1</sup> Л.И. Зубок, Империалистическая политика США в странах Карибского бассейна (1900-1939). М. Издательство Академии наук СССР, 1948.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, William Appleman, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, new ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988 [1959]); Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

policies. I remember finding support in a large volume of Alonso Hamby,<sup>3</sup> which I conquered, chapter after difficult chapter since I was still not fluent in English, while sitting in a reading room of the “lab” of U.S. studies, the first of a kind in the Soviet Union.

My supervisor, Sivachev, shaped me in a curious way. I was alienated by his worldview of Party-minded conservative nationalism, yet he did a lot to expose his students to a diversity of views on American history. For all his appearance of orthodox rigidity, he invited to the MGU a remarkable group of American professors, paid for by the Fulbright Program. Their lectures brought much-needed fresh intellectualism. Sivachev also taught me that a decent piece of research must rest on a massive amount of primary sources; this was in contrast to the practice of most of Soviet scholars of the West, who simply referenced secondary literature in their work. At the time, of course, I wanted to party with friends and travel to places; instead I spent countless days in the library reading huge volumes of the *Congressional Record*, which offered invaluable exposure to the art of political debates and the skills of persuasion.

For the information of younger readers, I took my first steps in international history before the invention of Internet and the spread of personal computers. Sources and evidence could only be obtained in special collections or *Spetskhrans* (closed sections of major public libraries). The people who supervised those semi-secret repositories were often relatives of KGB members or Party officials. It was impossible to make any photocopies; with other select students, I sat in reading rooms like medieval chroniclers, covering hundreds of pages with handwritten notes. One can say that in those years I had manually inscribed thousands of English sentences, word by word, into my brain. Aside from my thesis, I also penned a draft article on American foreign policy (I do not remember the exact topic). Sivachev read the draft and said with disapproval: “Some people write before they can even think something through.” I threw that first article into the garbage can.

The greatest impact on my life and career came from my post-graduate studies at the Institute of U.S. and Canadian Studies in Moscow. Later I found in the *Congressional Record* a description of the Institute as a KGB front organization. I cannot find this source now, but I distinctly remember disagreeing with this assessment. My former Institute deserves a better tribute. Its director, Georgy Arbatov, whom millions of Americans knew at the time from his TV appearances, enjoyed personal sponsorship from KGB head Yuri Andropov, but his ambition was to create a think tank that could rival established bureaucracies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), the KGB, and the GRU. Arbatov was not a Cold War hardliner; he supported reforms and was one of those whom Western scholars would later call “Party liberals.” Many years later, I discovered in the Russian State Archives of Contemporary History (RGANI) in Moscow a fascinating file with letters from Arbatov to Mikhail Gorbachev that reflected his reformist ambition to reshape Soviet foreign policy.

After Sivachev’s stern school, Arbatov’s Institute appeared to be ‘an oasis of freedom,’ a much friendlier intellectual milieu. Among my colleagues at the time were future stars of Russian liberal media Nikolai Svanidze, Igor Malashenko, and Oleg Dobrodeyev, iconoclastic journalist Alexei Pankin, deep political thinker Dmitry Furman, economist and writer Nikolai Shmelyov, future ambassador to Washington Vladimir Lukin, and many other fascinating individuals. Some of the older colleagues were witnesses to history: the retired GRU General Mikhail Milshtein had run illegal operations in North America in the 1940s, Valentin Berezhkov was former interpreter for Joseph Stalin at a summit in Teheran, GRU Colonel Valentin Larionov was one of the authors of “Military Strategy” published under the name of Marshal Vassily Sokolovsky in 1962.<sup>4</sup> I shared the office at the Institute with General Georgy Mikhailov from the General Staff, who had been one of the first to interrogate downed American U-2 pilot Gary Powers.

I had no important connections, so my membership in this elite collective was a miracle. Later I found an explanation: the crisis of détente and Soviet foreign policy in 1979-80 made the future of the U.S.-Soviet relations murky, so Arbatov and his

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<sup>3</sup> Alonso Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Военная стратегия. Под ред. В.Д.Соколовского, М. Воениздат, 1962.

entourage decided it was necessary to learn lessons from the recent past. Andrei Kokoshin, my immediate boss at the Institute, assigned the topic of my Ph.D. dissertation: the politics and policies of the Jimmy Carter administration. For balance, another of Sivachev's students got an assignment to study the Republican Right. The underlying assumption was that the old foreign policy establishment of people like Henry Kissinger, National security adviser to Richard Nixon and Secretary of State under Gerald Ford, was being replaced by something less predictable and therefore more dangerous to Soviet security interests. With whom would the Soviet authorities be able to cooperate? Who were all those new people who had come to power under Carter and later under Ronald Reagan? Why did they push for human rights and re-inject anti-Communist and anti-Soviet ideas into U.S. foreign policy?

The elite of the Institute travelled to the West on a regular basis – a special privilege in those days. A select group of a few men (there were no women) worked directly under Arbatov and wrote analytical papers to the Party leadership on security and foreign policy. This brain trust included people of my age cohort. I felt, however, that I was situated outside this “inner” elite, and among those who did not travel abroad and were not Party members. My topic was “historical,” not cutting-edge, and focused on American domestic politics. The latter was a benefit for my future career: after all, foreign policy ‘begins at home,’ and as I studied the intellectual and political backgrounds of members of the Carter administration, I could see that most of them knew very little about the world, but did not hesitate to inject American values and parochial views into foreign affairs. Incidentally, the same did not apply to the Institute's approach to the United States: Soviet ideological beliefs had little to do with our analysis of American realities.

In the first half of the 1980s, the Institute became one of a few non-government channels that received trickles of American visitors, most of whom were aspiring politicians and experts from the Democratic Party. Those people wanted to gain credentials for the future when the political cycle in the United States would swing from the elephant back to the donkey. All of the Ph.D. students and young fellows of the Institute, including myself, worked as “guides” for our American and Canadian guests. This involved resourcefulness, as we had to mediate between high-placed Americans and inhospitable Soviet logistics. It offered a welcome distraction from our research; and conversations with the guests provided a great corrective to our bookish knowledge. Once I was assigned to a highly unusual guest, Henry Winston, Chairman of the Communist Party USA. He was blind and very sick because he had been denied a required treatment during his imprisonment during McCarthyism and the Red Scare. I tried to talk with him about American politics, but quickly found that his views were even more dogmatic than those I could read every day in *Pravda*.

Most of the Institute's fellows were indifferent to any kind of ideology; Arbatov encouraged attention to facts and dismissed ‘theory’ as nonsense. My immediate supervisors, however, thought otherwise. One was Beola Lyuberskaya, who had been trained in law and had briefly worked for the Ministry of Justice after 1953, and helped revise the cases of people killed and tortured under Stalin. She was a neo-Marxist who despised the official propaganda and, in search of theoretical insights, was wont to read Lenin's “theoretical works” with a pencil, along with the works of European left sociologists. Another supervisor was Vladimir Pechatnov, who combined nuanced archival research with a broad understanding of main currents of American history. At ‘the time of stagnation’ in the early 1980s, we had loosely structured work hours and killed off our office hours in long conversations on theoretical, historical, and cultural issues. I remember those days with great fondness.

After Gorbachev introduced *perestroika* and “new thinking,” the Institute became a venue of intense international traffic. The trickle of American visitors became a torrent. In 1987 the Soviet Academy of Science resumed a partnership with U.S. historians on Cold War history, which had been frozen after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The leader of the initiative on the Soviet side was Alexander Chubarian, the head of the Institute of General History. The older cohort of Soviet historians of foreign policy were often former diplomats and intelligence operatives. Arbatov assigned his deputy, the ex-KGB agent Radomir Bogdanov, to participate at a meeting with the Americans in Moscow, which was scheduled for the summer of 1987. Bogdanov, in Soviet hierarchic fashion, delegated the task of preparing a conference paper to me. I had done some background reading before, and my work on the Truman period paid off: I was not a novice in Cold War history. Bogdanov gave me other books that I had not read before. Among them was *The Cycles of American History* by Arthur

Schlesinger Jr; another was *Strategies of Containment* by John Lewis Gaddis.<sup>5</sup> This was the moment when the Cold War captivated my attention and became the focus of my research ever after.

Gaddis's writings clashed with Kolko's version and helped me to systematize my knowledge of the entire phenomenon of the Cold War. Gaddis was Pechatnov's friend and came to the Institute in person in 1988 to present his forthcoming book, *The Long Peace*, and forecast a lasting duopoly of the two superpowers for years to come.<sup>6</sup> Later, after Gorbachev's reforms had brought the Cold War to the end and quickly sapped the basis of Soviet superpower, Gaddis shifted from the analysis of lasting structures to the study of causes of change, both transnational and domestic.

In November 1987, the Soviet authorities allowed me to travel to the United States for the first time. I was included in a group of historians who had talked with American educators about 'Cold War stereotypes.' This trip was a great breakthrough, and I often recall it now, when the stereotypes of mistrust and hostility between the United States and Russia have again unexpectedly emerged today, during the rule of Vladimir Putin. Back then, however, I was among naïve optimists who thought that it was possible, with radical well-meaning policies, to reverse the memories of decades of a 'bad relationship' and confrontation. In November 1988, I was back in the United States with a Chubarian-led group of eminent Soviet historians for a conference at the Ohio University at the invitation of Gaddis. It was structured comprehensively, so that the two sides could compare notes and argue about their interpretations on all major phases of the Cold War. A 'who's who' of U.S. Cold War historians and some practitioners came to Athens, Ohio. The conference did not, however, include any major revisionist scholars.

This gathering shaped my subsequent American career; I met many of my future partners and friends. I also became a mini-star at the conference after saying one phrase: "Everyone knows that it was North Korea that attacked Southern Korea in 1950, not the other way round." The Americans were very excited, because they had never heard this from a Soviet representative and took it as major ideological shift in the Soviet delegation. In reality it was my individual initiative. Inside the Soviet Union, younger scholars were impatient for change. My sudden "fame" led to numerous invitations for visiting fellowships in the U.S., and probably to my successful bid with Kostya Pleshakov for a McArthur Foundation grant to write a book about the Cold War.

I also owe much to the friendship and kindness to the late Martin Sherwin, the historian of nuclear diplomacy who was active in the public diplomacy of nuclear disarmament. We met after one of the "TV-bridges" that used new satellite technology to connect young American and Soviet intellectuals in a virtual space. Marty, who became my friend, introduced me to a group of his colleagues, American Cold War "revisionists," who complemented my historical education. Other scholars who helped to shape my view at the time are Melvin Leffler, who did magisterial research on early Cold War diplomacy, and David Holloway, perhaps the best scholar of global atomic age.<sup>7</sup>

It is remarkable, looking back, that at this time the Soviet documents on foreign policy were completely closed. My source of wisdom remained American publications, such as *Foreign Relations of the United States* and British-American historiography. Soviet publications were of little help: they were outdated, often unsourced, and reeked of propaganda. In 1988, thanks to Andrei Kokoshin, and based upon a request to check on the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva in

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *The Cycles of American History* (London: Deutsch, 1987); John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: a critical appraisal of American national security policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Gaddis, *The Long Peace: inquiries into the history of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> See Martin J Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Knopf, 1975); Melvyn P. Leffler, *The Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: the Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

1932, I gained exclusive access to the archives of the Soviet Foreign Ministry (MID) in the cosy area of Arbat in Moscow. The same Kokoshin asked me to conduct oral history interviews on the history of Soviet foreign and security policies; my interviewee included Georgy Kornienko, who until 1986 had been the deputy to Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. We met regularly, and Kornienko impressed me with his quiet but dogged views on foreign policy.

This was the first time that I realized how much one can learn from so-called “hardliners.” Kornienko told me about “the committee of information,” of which I had never heard before. That was a clearing house of intelligence data created in 1947 for Stalin’s personal consumption. Andrei Kokoshin reached an agreement on my behalf with Yuli Vorontsov, a senior MID official, to allow me to take a look at the materials of this mysterious committee, as well as other MID resources. The documents remained classified and were shipped from a distant storage place outside of Moscow. I entered my notes into a special “classified notebook”; it was stored in a safe managed by a KGB representative. I received this notebook as a personal possession two years later, in 1990, when glasnost and political reforms had broken the old order, and nothing from the Soviet past seemed to be a secret anymore.

My first experience with Soviet documents was a profoundly instructive experience. Their language was “Soviet,” and the phraseology was couched in *Pravda*-like discourse. The selection of facts, however, was strictly verified and based on multiple sources. The analysis and conclusions struck me, an avid consumer of American professional journals on international relations, as rather unsophisticated. At the time, Gorbachev embraced “universal values,” and the stark binaries of 1947-57 that I found in the MID archives appeared to me as reductionist, ideological, and wrong.

After reading George Kennan’s memoirs, as well as American and British historians like Gaddis, Vojtech Mastny, David Reynolds, and Jonathan Haslam,<sup>8</sup> I sided with those who thought that Soviet foreign policy had been groundlessly hostile because of its Stalinist insecurity and ideological lenses. Basically, I adopted the Western orthodoxy that Stalin had launched a Cold War because his regime needed an external enemy. When Arbatov learned about my views, he was unhappy. A Second World War veteran, he could not accept a major Soviet responsibility for the global conflict. In his view, the United States had triggered the Cold War for ideological as well as geopolitical reasons. He said to me: “You will regret later that you are saying this now.” Still, he did not “ban” me from expressing my opinion at international conferences. In the time that passed, I came to appreciate the value of Arbatov’s perspective, although remaining highly critical of Stalin’s and Nikita Khrushchev’s foreign policy.

Another episode that played a role in correcting my early assumptions about the Cold War origins, came a few years later, when I was a fellow at Gaddis’s Contemporary History Institute at Ohio University, and received critical reviews of my article that I had submitted to *Diplomatic History* on Soviet intelligence.<sup>9</sup> My anonymous reviewers, who knew American foreign policy and archival sources incomparably better than I did, wrote that most of the Soviet intelligence estimates were actually on the mark, and that in the countries around the Soviet Union, U.S. policies had been as aggressive, hostile, and scheming as the Soviet analysts feared.

As I look back, the end of the Cold War and the Soviet collapse shaped my formation as a historian in the powerful way that any sweeping historical change does to one’s intellectual and cultural life. I entered the field of international Cold War history “by a set of curious chances,” as an aria in *The Mikado* goes, and was fortunate to become a recipient of American

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<sup>8</sup> Gaddis, “The Tragedy of Cold War History,” *Diplomatic History* 17:1 (January 1993): 1-16; Vojtech Mastny, *Russia’s Road to the Cold War: Diplomacy, Warfare, and the Politics of Communism, 1941-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973); David Reynolds, Warren Kimball, Aleksandr Chubarian, eds., *The Allies at War: The Soviet, American, and British Experience 1939-1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994); Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-39* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> The article was published as: Vladislav Zubok, “Soviet Intelligence and the Cold War: the ‘Small’ Committee of Information, 1952-1953,” *Diplomatic History* 19:3 (Summer 1995): 453-472.

kindness and fellowships. Overall, I was a beneficiary of the absolute hegemony of Anglo-American historiography in studies of contemporary international history. This hegemony contained within itself all of the controversies that defined the field. In the late 1980s, both revisionists and post-revisionists (i.e., the updated orthodoxy school) turned to scholars from the East like myself and added our voices, backed by Soviet archives, to their chorus and their conclusions.

Since the early 1990s I have observed major historiographic attempts to broaden the field and diversify its voices. The first attempt, in which I became a most active participant, involved “a new Cold War history.” Centered around the International Cold War History project at the Wilson Center and the National Security Archive, in Washington DC, this attempt brought breakthroughs and reinterpretations in the grand narratives of world politics between 1945 and 1991, especially the Kremlin’s motivations and specific aims, developments in Eastern and Central Europe, the wars in Korea and Indo-China, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the origins and decline of détente, and Soviet and Eastern European interventions in Africa, Afghanistan, and Latin America. Today this trend flourishes in the Harvard-based *Journal of Cold War Studies*, which is edited by Mark Kramer. Another attempt that emerged by the end of the 1990s was “the global Cold War” spearheaded by Odd Arne Westad and is predominant now in the London School of Economics-based journal, *Cold War History*.

Some believe that this approach has become a new orthodoxy in the field of post-1945 world political history, eclipsing the old bipolar structures of our knowledge about the Cold War. Personally, I think that this approach had added too much water into the bathtub of the field, submerging ‘the baby’ – i.e., the defining forces and issues of that time, such as security, wars, and scientific-technological race. In this changing field, the Cold War has become an obligatory footnote to the studies of globalization, de-colonization, human rights, etc. I see that abundantly available Soviet archives are grossly underused by the new cohort of young international historians. Moreover, the Soviet factor has begun to fade away in the most recent historiography, with the Soviet side being mostly mentioned as ‘the other,’ but not explored. Just as I did back in the late 1980s, young scholars are currently looking for the keys where the light is: often in U.S. and British archives. Ironically, the more the ‘new’ and ‘global’ historians sought to shake Anglo-American hegemony, the more resilient it became.

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