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Jonathan Haslam has added another very big book to his list of important contributions to our understanding of twentieth-century history—and it is a provocative book indeed. In *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II*, he presents a stimulating argument about the origins of the Second World War that takes the reader back to the Bolshevik Revolution. In Haslam’s view, historians have for too long underplayed the centrality of the fear of Communism in shaping the decisions of policymakers in the interwar period. In the case of British elites in particular, he maintains that the inclination to appease Germany’s Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler was grounded in the conviction that the fall of Europe’s fascist regimes would lead to the outbreak of Communist revolutions on a global scale. Had they not been blinded by their ideological obsession with Bolshevism and anti-Communist sentiments, he suggests, they would have recognized that Hitler—and not the Soviet Union under the leadership of Joseph Stalin—was the greater threat to peace in Europe. In this case, they would have been better prepared to unite their forces against German expansionism.

Because of its ambitious historical sweep and bold claims, *The Spectre of War* will undoubtedly provide a welcome opportunity for debate among experts on the interwar era in Europe and the lead-up to total war with Nazi Germany. All of the reviewers in this forum praise Haslam for his mastery of previously neglected archival sources, his attention to the perceptions of ministerial officials, the intelligence services, and diplomats, and his emphasis on the importance of diplomatic and military history. Yet, they are divided over both the novelty of his argument and whether it is fully convincing.

Norman Naimark’s assessment is the most laudatory. He commends Haslam for providing “fresh insights into familiar material and new explorations of little-known corners of the diplomatic history of the 1930s.” As an example, he singles out Haslam’s archival findings about the work of western European diplomats to counter Germany’s and Italy’s efforts to meddle in the Spanish Civil War. Naimark’s sole criticism, an illuminating one, is about the book’s title, which he deems “not exactly right.” In his view, a better title would have been *The Spectre of Bolshevism*. This emphasis, he suggests, would have been more directly in tune with Haslam’s central argument about the importance of taking ideology into account in the study of international relations.

In contrast to Naimark’s positive assessment, Gaynor Johnson, Joseph Maiolo, and Carolyn Eisenberg are more critical of the book. In particular, Johnson and Maiolo raise questions about whether Haslam’s approach is as new and innovative as he maintains. Johnson argues that “most students of twentieth century European history do actually seem to understand the interplay of diplomacy and ideology.” In making his point, she underscores the importance of Zara Steiner’s two-volume history of European interwar diplomacy, which she describes as “the nearest thing we have to a definitive history of the period.” Maiolo evinces similar criticisms. He argues that Haslam’s assertion that historians have neglected the significance of anti-communist sentiment in the 1920s and 1930s is “wide of the mark.” He cites the work of a number of historians,

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such as Robert Gerwarth, Paul Hanebrink, Talbot Imlay, and Simon Catros, who, he says, have been equally attentive to this subject. He also refers the reader to his own study of Anglo-Soviet naval armaments diplomacy.

These three reviewers also raise questions about the accuracy of aspects of Haslam’s argument. Maiolo is arguably the most critical. He describes Haslam’s claim “that anti-Communism was not just one but the only factor that counted in British and French decisionmaking” as unconvincing. Moreover, Maiolo deems the argument that the war originated principally in the mistakes of western European elites a “tired assumption.” This claim would only make sense, he maintains, if one ignored the overwhelming evidence that statesmen and policymakers regarded Nazi Germany as their primary potential enemy and committed themselves to massive armaments programs to counter the threat. As a result of these measures, he contends, Hitler went to war “because he knew he was losing the arms race.”

Carolyn Eisenberg finds fault with other parts of Haslam’s account, noting that the “comprehensiveness of the narrative is both its strength and weakness.” For example, she suggests that Haslam’s primary focus on European decision-makers’ appeasement of Hitler causes him to lose sight of other, equally significant factors, such as the heavy weight of 20 million casualties in World War I. “Was the reluctance of political leaders to subject people to a similar ordeal,” she inquires, “only a minor consideration?” Eisenberg also wonders whether Haslam is right in treating the ideology of Bolshevism as a consistently reliable guide to understanding the making of Soviet foreign policy. Pointing to the August 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany as well as Stalin’s ruthless subordination of the Comintern’s operations to Soviet national interests, she poses a rhetorical question: “At what point does behavior of this kind signify reduced, or non-existent commitment to the cause of world revolution?”

Eisenberg’s provocative question about the declining relevance of Bolshevik ideals calls our attention to an ambiguity in Haslam’s use of the word ‘ideology’ in The Spectre of War. Both Haslam and all of the reviewers in this forum refer to the term as if there is universal agreement about its meaning. Yet, what does it mean to speak of a ‘Bolshevik ideology’ or to say that western European elites were motivated by ideological agendas? At some points, Haslam seems to suggest that Bolshevik ideology was denoted by a relatively coherent set of perspectives about a coming world revolution. Thus, he refers to a “Bolshevik creed—or Marxism-Leninism, as we would call it today” which, in his view, “offered the immediate, drastic solution” to many of the world’s problems (2). At other points, however, both he and the reviewers seem to be referring simply to the various beliefs and prejudices that led decision-makers to misinterpret and miscalculate the objectives of their adversaries. Thus, Haslam describes the British abandonment “of any notion of a value-free geopolitics” as an “ideological fixation” which led them to believe that any rapprochement between Hitler and Stalin was impossible (381). Furthermore, at other points, Haslam seems to conflate “ideology” with “ideas.” Yet, the latter are considerably more open to modification than is the former. As I have sought to demonstrate in my work on international communism, the ideas that motivated communists in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were by no means limited to the doctrines passed down by revolutionaries, such as Karl Marx or V. I. Lenin. They were the products of unceasing adaptation to vastly different social and cultural settings in Europe, Asia, and the Americas.5

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Nevertheless, the ambiguity in Haslam’s use of the word “ideology” provides us with food for thought. How or whether scholars use the term is not only germane to the challenge of interpreting the behavior of European and Soviet elites in the past century. It is also relevant to how we seek to explain international conflict today, especially the inexplicable event that has captured the world’s attention in 2022: Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. If we ascribe ideological motivations to Putin, we should be able to link his behavior with a set of relatively identifiable perspectives. If so, what are the components of a Putinist ideology? Conversely, if ideology is little more than a hodgepodge of rough beliefs and biases, then we may not need to use the term to account for his actions. For that matter, it may not be relevant to assessing the contrasting motivations of European and American governments in defending Ukraine against the Russian assault. In this case, what we call ideology may just be another word for the personal ambitions, ingrained cultural prejudices, and misguided perceptions that have frequently driven foreign policy-making in modern times.

Participants:

Jonathan Haslam has just retired as the George F. Kennan Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He is also Professor Emeritus at Cambridge University and the author most recently of The Spectre of War. International Communism and the Origins of World War II (Princeton University Press, 2021).

A. James McAdams is the William M. Scholl Professor of International Affairs and a Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. He has published widely on topics related to the political history and comparative politics of international communism, including Vanguard of the Revolution: The Global Idea of the Communist Party (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017 and 2019). He is currently writing about how political scientists and historians should study political ideas.

Carolyn Eisenberg is a professor of US History and U.S. foreign policy at Hofstra University. Her book, Drawing the Line: the American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944-49 (Cambridge University Press, 1998), was awarded the Stuart Bernath Prize, the Herbert Hoover Library Prize and was a finalist for the Lionel Gelber award. Her new book, Never Lose: Nixon, Kissinger and the Illusion of National Security is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Gaynor Johnson is Professor of International History at the University of Kent, UK. Her most recent publications relate to the history and operation of the British Foreign Office and the use of prosopography as a research tool for international historians. She has also published widely on twentieth century British foreign policy. Her most recent book is Politician and Internationalist: Lord Robert Cecil (Ashgate, 2013). She is currently writing books on British ambassadors to Paris during the era between the two world wars as well as an institutional history of the Foreign Office.

Joseph A. Maiolo is Professor of International History in the Department of War Studies, King’s College London, and co-editor of The Journal of Strategic Studies. He is currently writing a new history of the origins of the Second World War for Cambridge University Press.

Norman M. Naimark is Robert and Florence McDonnell Professor of East European Studies at Stanford and Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution and Freeman-Spogli Institute. He taught at Boston University and was a fellow at the Russian Research Center at Harvard before joining the Stanford faculty in 1988. His most recent book is Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019). He is presently working on a study tentatively entitled, Why Genocide?
Review by Carolyn Eisenberg, Hofstra University

Why did the western democracies respond so ineptly to the aggressive behavior of Adolf Hitler’s Germany and Benito Mussolini’s Italy? Decades ago, this was an important and vibrant subject for students of history. Over the intervening years, it has seemed less compelling or controversial, as the experience of the Second World War has faded from view.  

What has remained is the moral of the story, applied to the Cold War and to subsequent occasions of international challenge: appeasement is a mistake, and early resistance usually desirable.

In an important new book, *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II*, Jonathan Haslam has revivified this disappearing subject. He has given us a wide-ranging study, which discusses the internal politics and external diplomacy of several European nations. For this purpose, he has utilized the government archives from Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Sweden, and Russia. This is an ambitious, intellectually challenging work, likely to re-awaken a critical discussion of a once familiar issue.

At a theoretical level, Haslam takes aim at two distinct trends, each associated with a particular discipline. Among historians, he flags a tendency to neglect diplomatic and military history, or at least a predilection for subordinating it to the study of social history. While for students of international relations, primarily political scientists, he criticizes the habit of considering nations as similar entities, defined by their relation to power and with no regard to their internal conflicts, or ideological preferences.

Haslam has set himself the task of rethinking the history of the 1919-1940 period by situating the diplomatic and military decisions of national leaders within their domestic context. At times, he appears exclusively concerned with their ideology, but his narrative includes social and political developments, which seem as pertinent to the outcome as the key ideas which he chooses to emphasize.

“...The interwar era must be seen as a whole” (9), he insists. The tendency to study appeasement as an exclusively 1930s phenomenon and a too narrow focus on Europe has obscured significant dynamics. In his assessment, the critical factor which shaped foreign policy decision-making throughout the entire period, is the fear of Bolshevik upheaval and the potential aggression of the Soviet state. That apprehension underpinned the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany, and largely explains the behavior of other nations in responding to aggression.

For Haslam, the real story begins in the immediate aftermath of World War I, with the overthrow of the tsar and Russia’s emergence as a revolutionary nation, bent on spreading its doctrine around the globe. While these ambitions were rapidly thwarted, the early upheavals in Germany and Hungary and worker rebellions elsewhere were sufficiently threatening to plant a lasting fear in the mind of many European leaders. On the surface, Britain might seem the exception to the rule. However, Haslam emphasizes the significance of the empire and material interests in China, as an additional reason for fearing Communism. No less than leaders in France, Germany, and other continental countries, British officials in the 1920s dreaded the spread of revolution—a reason for welcoming Mussolini’s ascent to power.

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Although the early insurgencies of the postwar period soon fizzled, “all of a sudden” in the 1930s, “Bolshevism re-emerged as a practical proposition in the heart of Europe and at the gateway to empire” (11). This led to the decoupling of France and England, and the fatal weakening of the French tie to Russia. Against this backdrop, Hitler’s remilitarization of the Rhineland, the Austrian Anschluss, the dismantlement of Czechoslovakia and subsequent acts of aggression in both eastern and western Europe were barely opposed. "Insufficiently understood,” Haslam argues, “is the undoubted fact that throughout the 1930s leading conservative politicians within the democracies not only welcomed fascism into power but thereafter also feared that, were fascism overthrown in Italy or Germany...Communism was almost certain to take its place” (4).

How real was the Russian threat? In Haslam’s view, the Soviet state was relatively weak and embattled throughout this period. Nevertheless, in its desire and effort to disseminate Communist ideology, it was an ongoing menace. The key actor in this regard was not the Russian foreign office but the Communist International (Comintern). By drawing on its records, Haslam highlights the considerable resources and attention, Moscow devoted to this subversive purpose over the course of twenty years.

In venturing this interpretation, the author takes issue with the more conventional understanding of the Joseph Stalin- Leon Trotsky divide, which he maintains has been “completely misunderstood” by historians (ix). The “only real difference between the two in terms of international relations was that whereas on the whole Trotsky believed that foreigners had the capacity to make their own revolutions, Stalin equally firmly believed that foreigners were generally too incompetent to manage it without direct military assistance from the Soviet Union.” Haslam therefore rejects the idea that Stalin’s triumph over Trotsky represented a reassertion of Russian nationalism and a diminished interest in spreading revolution to other places. Although he acknowledges various tactical retreats initiated by Stalin, he believes “the revolutionary objectives set by Lenin were sustained, albeit more cautiously” (7).

In Haslam’s description, Stalin and his terrorized inner circle were convinced ideologues, so rigid in their understanding of the world that after allying themselves with Hitler, they failed to heed the numerous warnings and intelligence reports that a German invasion was coming. He notes that “the Politburo and not just Stalin firmly believed that Germany would not attack before Britain was defeated” (368). In this regard they mimicked the naivete of other European leaders who, for reasons of ideology, failed to appropriately register the extent of Hitler’s ambitions and zeal.

Throughout this compelling narrative, it is difficult to find any European leader who demonstrated wisdom, morality, or even humanitarian concern for the suffering of actual or potential victims. All seem to have been driven by ideological considerations, the desire for personal power, or the preservation of class privilege. None seems to have been particularly concerned with the human consequences of decisions for war or peace. With rare exceptions all the deciders seem to have been a grim, self-serving, and none-too-bright group.

Haslam has written an impressive book, which reflects his wide-ranging knowledge, and his ability to mine sources in several languages. Whether one is convinced by his overall interpretation, there is much of considerable interest in his discussion of specific topics—on the Popular Front in France, the Spanish Civil War, the Hitler-Stalin pact, and the western response to the invasion of Poland.

Yet a question remains about the accuracy of the main arguments. In this regard, the comprehensiveness of the narrative is both its strength and weakness. There are a dizzying number of people, countries and events showing up in this story, making it difficult to evaluate specific claims.

One obvious example is the suggestion that Stalin remained loyal to the revolutionary commitments of the original Bolsheviks. Haslam provides numerous quotations and cites specific decisions to develop that analysis. But what about the instances when Stalin chose the ‘nationalist’ approach—including the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact with Germany. Is this to be considered nothing more than a “tactical retreat” (10) rather than a change of direction? And what is one to make of the obvious opportunism of the Comintern? Haslam provides a host of examples of Stalin’s misuse of the Communist
International, squelching grass-roots radicalism, in the service of Russian foreign policy. At what point does behavior of this kind signify a reduced, or non-existent commitment to the cause of world revolution?

As for the main thesis – that fear of Bolshevism and sympathy for fascism were the driving force behind European appeasement – the author provides ample evidence that this consideration weighed heavily. But was it the only factor that mattered? Does the anxiety about revolution outweigh the other results of World War I, with perhaps 20 million casualties? Was the reluctance of political leaders to subject their people to a similar ordeal only a minor consideration? The economic crisis of the 1930s plainly heightened class warfare in Europe. But did it also cause decision-makers to avoid ambitious undertakings?

Such questions notwithstanding, *The Spectre of War* is a compelling book, which resurrects an extraordinary time, and challenges us to think anew about the failures of political leadership.
Within the historiography of twentieth century international history there are a number of topics on which it would be reasonable to assume that it would be difficult to find a significant new angle of interpretation. Among those is the origins of the Second World War. But find a new angle Jonathan Haslam has done. Indeed, so significant is the new angle and so compellingly is it argued that it makes one wonder why no one has thought of it before. And like all of the best academic arguments, it essential tenet is simple and can be summed up in a single sentence. That the origins of the Second World War and the war itself should be seen as an international response to the fear of Communism and Communist revolution not only in Europe but globally. This theme is explored primarily against the backdrop of the international history of the post-First World War diplomatic and political order. And there can be few scholars better equipped than Haslam to take on such an undertaking, given his status as one of the leading scholars in the world on the history of contemporary international relations. He is also a past master of taking on big picture ideas and reinterpreting them through a thought-provoking and often controversial lens.7

The book is divided into thirteen chronological chapters, with the material being divided into topic chunks that will be familiar to most students of the period, beginning, as one might expect, with the international context of the Russian Revolution. Haslam makes his argument along three main axes. The first is that the lived experience of war and its impact in the twentieth century shaped the way in which ordinary citizens viewed the world and their place in it. This is explicitly articulated in the introduction to the book and is implicit in the remainder. One could argue that Haslam is trying to find a way of demonstrating the role played by ordinary citizens in the seismic political, diplomatic and military events of the twentieth century. He uses the lens of Communism for his analysis for this purpose and not to write what could be termed an ideological history of the international history of the last hundred or so years. He is right to point out that we must look at these events through a broader set of parameters than the traditional lens of Great Power politics, be it the dynamics of the fraught relationship between the victorious powers at the end of the First World War, or the familiar narrative about the consequences of the grievances of the defeated powers. And yes, that must mean that we should look at the impact of Communism as well as fascism and democracy on this period if our understanding is to be complete or more balanced. The long shadow cast by the work of Fritz Fischer and his supporters and detractors still tends to place fascism and Germany centre stage in the narrative, and most undergraduate students of twentieth century international history do not venture much beyond this.8 Haslam’s book provides an accessible, scholarly, and persuasive single-volume corrective to this.

Haslam’s second purpose is to offer a broader intellectual and social context to traditional diplomatic accounts of the key developments that led to the outbreak of the Second World War. This he managed to navigate with great dexterity, illustrating the limitations of these accounts without discounting their value. It is interesting that he specifically defends the work of the British-based American diplomatic historian, the late Zara Steiner, in this respect. Steiner’s two monumental tomes on European interwar history – The Lights that Failed and Triumph of the Dark - both published by Oxford University Press.9 Widely seen as the nearest thing we have to a definitive history of the period, these books also acknowledge that there were ideological and/or intellectual factors that influenced politicians and diplomats to do what

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they did. I agree with that analysis, but I would argue that most students of twentieth century European history do actually seek to understand the interplay of diplomacy and ideology. The study of the Cold War would yield very slim pickings if that was not the case, and most of the leading studies of the early twentieth century also do this well, see, for example, Antony Best’s recent study of Anglo-Japanese relations. 10 The idea that modern diplomatic history writing exists in a hermetically sealed world of what one official said to another and does not consider other factors is a myth and long has been recognized as such. There are always those who will claim that the analysis of a book could have gone further, that more themes and issues could have been covered in greater detail etc. But as any of us who are experienced authors know, we are constrained by a variety of considerations about how far we can take an argument and how many sub-strings and rabbit holes we can consider. Haslam’s book is a major contribution to the historiography of the origins of the Second World War, but I would say that it complements Steiner’s work rather than supersedes it.

The third aspect of the book that struck me is Haslam’s analysis of the British Foreign Office. The diplomatic response of the Foreign Office to the Russian Revolution, the First World War and the peacemaking process that followed it is reasonably well known. 11 It can be couched in many ways, but the word liberal is not one that readily springs to mind when it comes to its institutional culture or its diplomatic strategies. Of course, liberalism is a relative concept; British diplomacy was certainly more liberal than that of the French. It is true that the Foreign Office was reluctant to sanction diplomatic strategies that would entangle Britain too tightly in European affairs. Haslam is right to say that this partly stems from the laissez-faire era of the nineteenth century, where Britain’s influence in the world was based in large part on economic liberalism. But culturally and diplomatically the Foreign Office was, and viewed itself as, conservative. It unashamedly defended its traditions and approaches against most who tried to reform this culture until well into the twentieth century, and beyond the period covered by this book. It should also be noted that another reason why the Foreign Office might have been operating on the margins of British diplomacy during the first three decades of the twentieth century is the growing intervention of other domestic political actors in foreign policy, the office of the Prime Minister, the Board of Trade and the Treasury to name but a few. Most of these incursions occurred precisely because the Foreign Office was seen as old-fashioned, fusty, and staffed by snobbish stick-in-the-muds who were out of touch with the subtleties of modern British foreign relations. Ironically, it is Zara Steiner again to whose work one should refer on this matter. 12

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12 Please see note three.
Jonathan Haslam opens *The Spectre of War* by urging historians to rethink the interwar period. “Our understanding of international relations in the twentieth century cannot be reduced to the simplicity of traditional balance-of-power politics without doing serious damage to the truth”, he writes (viii). Such an approach might have been suitable for the diplomacy of the nineteenth century Concert of Europe, but the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 turned international politics into a conflict of ideas that resembled Europe’s early modern wars of religion and the era of the French revolution. Conflicts were no longer just ‘horizontal’ ones between states but also ‘vertical’ ones between classes. Established elites were not simply preoccupied with the national interest according to ‘rational actor’ models of behaviour, they were defending their class interests too (xiv).

Haslam argues that this two-dimensional approach exposes the central role played by the fear of Communist revolutions to the coming of the Second World War. Although this fear was by no means an exclusive British mindset, *The Spectre of War* makes it clear that the author pinpoints London’s failures as the most consequential in turning war “from a distant possibility into an immediate certainty” (4). Instead of worrying about the rise of fascism, above all the threat posed by Adolf Hitler’s Germany, British elites feared that Bolsheviks would seize power if the fascist dictatorships were de-stabilised or toppled. Moscow did try to export Communism globally via the Comintern, but with mixed results, for instance in India and China. Soviet leader Leon Trotsky believed that foreigners could engineer their own revolutions, but the Kremlin’s leader Joseph Stalin considered them too incompetent to tear down the old order without the help of the Soviet Union. In the 1930s the British inflated the likelihood of Communist revolutions at the expense of concerted diplomatic and military measures aimed at Tokyo, Rome, and Berlin. London did not welcome Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931, but the British preferred Japanese imperialism to Communism in the region. Meanwhile, according to Haslam, Stalin prioritised the defence of the rapidly industrialising and fast-arming Soviet Union to a premature war with Japan.

In Germany, Europe’s largest Communist party alienated its potential centre-left allies in the fight against Nazism. Like Italy’s fascist leader Benito Mussolini before him, once Hitler took power he crushed the Communists, a brutal repression that reassured anti-Communists across Europe and which encouraged elites in London and Paris that a diplomatic understanding could be reached. Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935, however, should have been a warning that fascist ambitions could not be satisfied with negotiations. Although the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations in 1934 and the Comintern adopted the policy of a Popular Front in 1935 to counter fascism and to advance communism, Haslam writes, anti-Communism time and again stymied a united front against fascism. In 1936 British elites and the French right reeled from horror as French Prime Minister Léon Blum formed a Popular Front coalition that included the French Communist Party, and which adopted pro-labour policies. The Spanish civil war, the proxy war waged by Rome, Berlin and Moscow in Spain, and the class conflicts that the war energised, raised fears of Communism. Britain discouraged France from intervening to help the Spanish Popular Front and British elites welcomed General Francisco Franco’s victory as an agreeable outcome that might clear the way for the successful appeasement of Mussolini and Hitler.

As Haslam argues, the illusion of the British that “reasonable” men (261) would make a deal that would unite class interest ‘vertically’ across Europe and keep Bolshevism at bay was shattered by Hitler in 1938-39. The Czechs and the Poles too fell victim to their own aversion to align with Moscow. The Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939 and the destruction of Poland by German and Soviet troops a month later forced London and Paris to declare war on Berlin and some officials in Britain and France (where the communist party was banned) clamoured for war against the Soviet Union too, particularly after the Red Army attacked Finland in November 1939. However, the fear that a long war might plunge Europe into Bolshevism, motivated key members of the British political elite to continue to ‘appease’ Germany and to lobby for the war to end, especially after the fall of France in May-June 1940. Fortunately, by then Winston Churchill had become Prime Minister – “not a moment too soon!” (352) – to stiffen Britain’s resolve. Unfortunately, as Haslam reminds us, Churchill’s cryptic warning to Stalin about the coming German attack in June 1941 failed to have an impact because the Politburo believed that Hitler would never wage a two-front war.
Haslam claims that the formation of the Grand Alliance during the war and its breakdown in the Cold War suppressed for a generation an awareness of the conflicts over Communism that predated the Second World War. He argues that in the 1970s and 1980s, conservative historians (D.C. Watt and Gerhard Weinberg) framed Hitler’s anti-Bolshevism as a device to cloak his aims and beguile European conservatives, and centre-left historians (Eric Hobsbawm) rejected that fascism was in any way a response to Bolshevism for fear of legitimising it (11-13). Although Haslam addresses what he identifies as the shortcomings of both conservative and centre-left historians, *The Spectre of War* often reads like a direct riposte to Watt’s seminal defence of Neville Chamberlain’s foreign policy, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-39*. The author reinforces that impression when he contrasts Watt’s treatment of anti-Communism as a ‘bit’ player on the European diplomatic stage with the greater weight that the diplomat and historian E.H. Carr placed on it (13, 389). “As late as 1939,” Carr wrote, “the British faced the dilemma which had confronted the French seekers for security in 1919 - whether to invoke Russia or the border states of Poland and Rumania as the counterweight to Germany; and once again fear of Bolshevism was one, at any rate, of the factors in the decision.”

Haslam’s assertion that scholars have neglected the role of anti-Communism in the international politics of the 1920s and 1930s is wide of the mark. Among others, Antony Best has traced the origins of the Cold War to the 1920s, particularly to Britain’s encounter with communism in China. Robert Gerwarth emphasised the dynamic of radical revolutions and counter-revolutions across Europe as a key reason why the First World War did not end in 1918. Paul Hanebrink located the roots of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth (a paranoid fantasy common on the right) in the post-1917 turmoil and traces its impact into the 1930s and beyond. Recent studies such as Imlay’s *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940* considered anti-Communism as one of several factors shaping British and French diplomacy and strategy. This reviewer analysed anti-Communism and the limits of the Anglo-Soviet rapprochement of the mid-1930s in naval arms control and the transfer of naval technology from the perspective of both powers. Haslam does cite Georges Vidal’s work on anti-communism in the French army including his *L’Armée française et l’ennemi intérieur*.


14 Watt, *How War Came*.


16 Antony Best, “’We are Virtually at War with Russia’: Britain and the Cold War in East Asia, 1923–40,” *Cold War History* 12:2 (June 2012), 205-25. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2011.569436


1917–1939, but not that of Simon Catros in *La guerre inéluctable*, who analysed anti-communism in the context of the French high command’s assessment of the German threat.

Haslam is correct to point out that the era of the two world wars resembled the Thirty Years’ War of the early seventeenth century. Historians have long seen that similarity. In the 1980s Watt framed Europe in the 1930s as a single political unit torn apart by an ideological ‘civil war’ as destructive as that of the 1630s-40s. Enzo Traverso expanded on that theme in *A feu et à sang: De la guerre civile européenne 1914-45*. Haslam laments the compartmentalisation of history and the separation of the “realm of ideas from the world of events” (13) but he does not engage with the innovative work of transnational historians that links ideas (including anti-Communism) to events. Transnational historians have examined the emergence of fascism as a global event that transcended frontiers, they have taken a similar approach to different types of internationalism, including anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and anti-racism, liberal internationalism, socialist internationalism, and transatlantic anti-fascism in the run up to the war. The book’s relative neglect of the United States and Haslam’s labelling of the Americans as ‘isolationist’ challenges the views of those historians who see the U.S. as the champion of a transnational vision of liberal modernity that successfully confronted the fascist and communist models of modernity in the shape of the global New Deal. Based on this new and innovative scholarship, I would argue that a better

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approach to assessing the role of anti-Communism as a shaper of events would be to locate it in the transnational elaboration and interplay of ideologies, to analyse the global competition between liberal, communist, and fascist visions of modernity, and to map that competition onto the geopolitical rivalries of the 1920s and 1930s.

The Spectre of War promises a fresh perspective on the origins of the Second World War, but just how original is Haslam’s thesis? As he points out, the argument that the ‘appeasers’ preferred fascists to Communists dates to the 1930s. In recent years, he is not the only one to have revived it with an analysis of the primary sources, including the unguarded comments of British and French political elites in diaries and memoirs and how foreign observers, particularly Soviet ones, assessed the influence of class structures on British and French foreign policy. Michael J. Carley, whose work does not appear in Haslam’s footnotes or bibliography, has perhaps done more than any other historian in the English-language historiography to shed light on the interwar diplomacy of anti-Bolshevism as practiced in London, Paris and beyond, particularly in the abortive triple alliance talks of August 1939, and recently in the first of his two books about the interwar cold war. As two distinguished veterans of the same field, working with the same sources, with a shared fascination for the cut and thrust of high politics, it is not surprising that they offer different emphases and interpretations. Haslam is more attuned to the politics of the Comintern, while Carley devotes more attention to how personalities shaped policies. When it comes to the centrality of anti-Communism to the inability of the European powers to confront the fascist challenge, however, their arguments are the same.

Few historians of the period deny that political elites in Europe and beyond despised Bolshevism and feared that the old social order would crumble if war came, especially once the bombs began to fall on the cities. The argument that anti-Communism was not just one but the only factor that counted in British and French decision making and that it prevented the two governments from prudently assessing and acting against Berlin and Rome, however, is unconvincing. That tired assumption that the war originated principally in the fears, flaws and errors of British and French statesmen only looks plausible if one overlooks the enormous body of archival evidence that London and Paris identified the Nazi regime as their ultimate potential enemy and directed massive rearmament programmes against that immediate threat, and that Hitler launch a war in September 1939 because he knew he was losing the arms race.


Review by Norman Naimark, Stanford University

Jonathan Haslam’s latest contribution to the literature on the international history of the twentieth century is a granular, archivally driven, and exciting rendition of the history of interwar European diplomacy. Covering the period from the Russian Revolution of 1917 to the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Haslam’s book also includes developments in the Far East, especially Japanese aggression in China, to the extent that they influence the coming of war. Noteworthy is the way Haslam carefully integrates the role of intelligence services in his narrative of the diplomatic history of the period. He does this without the kind of hyperbole that is too often characteristic of scholars who study the unquestionable place of intelligence in international relations.

This is a very balanced, reasoned, and sophisticated treatment of the period, punctuated with fresh insights into familiar material and new explorations of little-known corners of the diplomatic history of the 1930s. Here I have in mind his fascinating discussions of West European diplomatic efforts to counter Italian and German interference in the Spanish Civil War, the importance of Soviet air power, the interesting story behind the British guarantees to the Poles in 1939, and the poorly understood British initiatives to support the Finns in their negotiations with the Soviets prior to the Winter War of 1939-40. In these episodes and others, the reader profits from Haslam’s multi-archival approach and deft analyses of diplomatic exchanges.

Although the book serves nicely as a state-of-the-art exploration of the interwar diplomatic origins of World War II, its title, *The Spectre of War*, is not exactly right; the book is much more about ‘the spectre of Bolshevism.’ Haslam’s strong and well supported argument throughout the study is that European leaders were driven as much by fervent ideological beliefs about the dangers to their countries of Communism than they were by Realpolitik. In general, he wants to emphasize “the transcendent importance of ideology in international relations” (180). European leaders’ fears of Communism had, of course, considerable justification in reality, given the goals and activities of the Comintern, which they understood was a Moscow-driven organization. Domestic strike movements caused by the economic consequences of the First World War threatened their sense of security. But European leaders of various political persuasions routinely exaggerated these dangers, saw them in terms of potentially imminent revolutions in their own countries, and were willing to tolerate the rise and even dominance of fascism on the continent as a lesser evil than Communism (and sometimes not as evil at all!) Were fascist regimes to crumble in Germany and Italy, Western leaders feared that Communist revolutions would replace them, which, they felt, would be infinitely worse. For British statesmen like Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, Germany was a bulwark against Communism, which, along with England, would rescue the continent from the threat of revolution. This also led Western leaders to underestimate their need for defense spending, while rationalizing their lack of opposition to German and Italian ambitions on the continent.

Most centrally to Haslam’s argument, these views of Bolshevism explain Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement, which had strikingly wide support in the Conservative Party and among the British upper classes and royalty. They also explain the British and, to some extent French, reluctance to come to an agreement with the Soviet Union about reining in Adolf Hitler’s ambitions. The German Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 23, 1939, which gave Hitler the green light to invade Poland, was the most obvious result. One could reason with the Germans, the British thought, but not with the ‘Reds.’ Their ideological blinders also convinced British leaders that the Nazis and Bolsheviks could never come to an

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agreement given their diametrically opposed ideologies. As Haslam appropriately concludes: “This was a grievous miscalculation with untoward consequences” (382).

The anti-Communism of Western leaders also gave the Germans reason to believe that the British and French would not ally with the Soviet Union against them, thus affording them a free hand to gobble up those territories in Central Europe that Hitler believed were his rightful domains. Exaggerated fears of Communism and deep distrust of the Soviet Union in the West also had their effect on Joseph Stalin and the decision-makers in the Kremlin, who already were predisposed to believing that the capitalist countries, above all Great Britain, were out to undermine their legitimacy, deprive them of their rightful place as a great power, and, if they could, bring down their government. The Kremlin’s suspicions about the intentions of their Western counterparts grew more extreme as a result both of diplomatic and intelligence reports about the nefarious and disruptive activities of the British government in the Spanish revolution, where there were reasons to be wary of London’s surreptitious support of the camp of General Francisco Franco and undermining of Moscow’s efforts.

Haslam’s highly critical observations about the failures of interwar diplomacy to avoid the coming of World War II raise a series of issues about how historians should evaluate those leaders and diplomats who were responsible for their nation’s security in this period. We know, of course, what happened: Europe was destroyed in a catastrophic conflict, costing tens of millions of lives and producing colossal damage to industry and infrastructure. In retrospect, the British, French, and Soviet governments could have forged a working alliance that might well have prevented Hitler from pursuing his goals of expansion and domination. But was it so easy to see what was coming in the 1930s? “How was it that so many distinguished and apparently intelligent people managed to get matters so badly wrong?” Haslam asks. Part of his answer is the “overriding and debilitating preoccupation with Bolshevism.” But part is that they were “quite simply naive, and had a deep-seated reluctance to see evil for what it was” (258). These failings are attributed to Chamberlain, Lord Halifax, Sir John Simon, Sir Horace Wilson, and Richard Butler, among many others. Even though Haslam emphasizes the importance of training in foreign affairs, he takes the Foreign Office to task for being “spineless,” “moving at a snail’s pace,” and for missing the German preparations for invasion of the Soviet Union (144, 228). MI6, the British secret intelligence service, does not come off much better under Haslam’s withering scrutiny than the Foreign Office. They were “fools” for believing that Stalin and Hitler could never sign a pact and for thus recommending that Britain not negotiate with the Russians (322).

Haslam’s book led me to think about the contemporary Russian incursions into Ukraine and how few Western -- even Ukrainian and Russian -- experts predicted Putin’s invasion. Haslam’s critique is also relevant to the contemporary threat that China poses to the United States and the West. How serious is it and what should the Western democracies do about it? Is this a threat that will become perilous after several decades or will Beijing pose severe challenges to peace over the immediate horizon? Can we simply ‘ride out’ the dangers, as many thought about the Nazis in the 1930s? It seems to me that there are sharp differences on how to deal with China’s increasingly aggressive posture in the world today among the most astute and experienced foreign policy experts. We will only be able to judge who was right after the fact. Still, reengaging with the diplomatic dilemmas of the interwar period through Haslam’s eyes can only make us wiser in the choices we make.
Here we have a representative sample of very positive but not entirely uncritical responses to my history from fellow historians who are equally convinced of the importance of the period and anxious to see the root causes of events properly situated through multi-archival research. We as enthusiasts for the same cause have so much more of importance in common than the lesser issues of detail that might divide us.

First, let me apologise for the title, or, rather apologise for adopting a title - upon the insistence of the publisher - that does not in the view of more than one critic really fit the book. Norman Naimark is absolutely right in saying that it should really have been called *The Spectre of Communism*. In every other respect his summary of my account could not be bettered. We tend to see events the same way, being steeped in some of the same sources.

Second, in answer to Carolyn Eisenberg, how are we to see Soviet dictator Iosip Stalin? Probably agreement will never be had on this tricky and fascinating question, which is not going to get resolved here. I tend to agree with Lev Trotsky that Stalin was like Napoleon Bonaparte. In terms of the revolution within France Napoleon made full use of the radical changes that seemed to serve the purpose of enhancing the greatness of France and the greatness of Napoleon. He himself, however, was, indeed, no radical. Indeed Napoleon came to epitomise Thermidor, the reaction. But by carrying the revolution through Europe for the expansion of French power he necessarily stamped his continental conquests with a revolutionary footprint in destroying the feudal order and introducing the civil code. It was epitomised in the universal adoption of the metric system, leaving the British and the Americans fiddling around with antique weights and measures; and the British, with the schoolchild's nightmare of calculating pounds, shillings and pence. Without question, the revolutionary changes imposed where the French armies marched fundamentally transformed the face of continental Europe. So Napoleon was subjectively no revolutionary, but objectively certainly so. Thus Trotsky, before Stalin assassinated him, reluctantly accepted that the expansion of the Soviet Union by force of arms in 1939-1940 for reasons of state was nonetheless a "progressive" move because it extended the revolution abroad. This was the main reason, I believe, that the biographer of both Soviet leaders, Isaac Deutscher, could never quite sort out his attitude to Stalin.34

Joseph Maiolo criticizes the book, suggesting doubts about the fact of US isolationism (for which I recommend working through the US diplomatic archives and the Roosevelt papers in Hyde Park), but mainly for the fact it does not cite others who have written something somewhere on the importance of anti-Communism before this book was published, as I myself did way back in 1978.35 Certainly Maurice Cowling also did so in *The Impact of Hitler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.) But Cowling was at the time too quickly dismissed by middle of the road historians as an eccentric old Tory and his footnoting was not exactly helpful.

All I can say in reply to the fact that I have not footnoted Maiolo and many others he cites is that these were not major works on the origins of the Second World War that took seriously the thread of anti-Communism and the reasons for it as an explanation for the failure to stop Adolf Hitler in his tracks before it was too late. And had I cited all the secondary sources of relevance to the war's origins, including obscure articles, I probably would have produced several dozen pages just doing so; and those just on the Spanish Civil War. The book is not an exploration of historiography, even though I necessarily spend a few introductory pages reflecting upon it, but an attempt to revise our understanding of events through

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an extensive examination of the primary sources in the languages I could read. Let me emphasise this important point. Describing British and French policies as anti-Communist is simply not enough; as though London and Paris were simply guided by some unreasoning prejudice. I focused heavily and at length on explaining how the Comintern’s aims and tactics consistently alienated the capitalist Powers and not merely in the 1920s. Attitudes towards Moscow formed and became encrusted in this important decade only to be reinforced by Communist Party activity in France and Spain from 1936. This crucial factor has not, to my knowledge, elsewhere been incorporated as a core explanation for appeasement.

On a personal note of relevance, I particularly remember being firmly instructed at the LSE in 1970 that we could of course by all means read the ‘revisionist’ histories of the Cold War which highlighted US imperialist self-interest as a key motive, but that we should on no account take them seriously. It was a kind of unspoken censorship that loomed over us for many years, a mild form of McCarthyism; even in the late seventies an applicant for a post could be turned down on interview because of suspicions that he shared E.H. Carr’s views on the Soviet Union. I have a distinct memory of surprise and delight at around this time when working at Birmingham University to discover perhaps the most original of the revisionists and certainly the most sophisticated, Lloyd Gardner, had come as a visiting professor. Clearly the worm had begun to turn.

Gaynor Johnson criticizes my references to Foreign Office liberals, arguing that the pre-war Office saw itself as “conservative.” Here we disagree. I take the view of Zara Steiner, whom Johnson cites but does not quote. Conservatives could certainly be found - Orme Sargent being one and Alec Cadogan probably another - but, even before examinations for admission were instituted many of the older generation were nature’s Whigs and the younger men thereafter tended to be left of centre: Lloyd George social liberals, such as Gladwyn Jebb, Harold Nicolson, E.H. Carr, William Strang, Laurence Collier, Nicholas Henderson, Frank Roberts, and, indeed, Quaker and socialist Geoffrey Wilson. Most, however, even if liberal, were fully aware that, had Comintern triumphed, the liberals would have been crushed along with everyone else who sustained the capitalist order. And to say, as Johnson does, that the Foreign Office appeared to operate on the margins of diplomacy is inaccurate, except for the limited but important period of Neville Chamberlain’s occupation of 10 Downing Street, when all power was centralised in headstrong prime ministerial hands by someone with no understanding whatsoever of international relations and with a Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, who was equally ignorant and, though sometimes wavering and therefore a little more devious, had the exact same instincts.

Let me conclude by thanking James McAdams for chairing the roundtable with his judicious remarks.