

Book Reviews

Arbel, David, and Ran Edelist. *Western Intelligence and the Collapse of the Soviet Union, 1980-1990: Ten Years That Did Not Shake the World.* London: Frank Cass, 2003.

One of the strange ironies one encounters as your ordinary working academic is that very often it is the best undergraduate essays that are the easiest to criticize, find fault with, and pinpoint the errors. The very precision and clarity of the author's thought and writing makes critical analysis easier. While, on the other hand, the very worst essays are the hardest to shape any coherent critical response to because the very incoherence means one hardly knows where or how to begin. Unfortunately, David Arbel and Ran Edelist's thick volume on Western intelligence on the collapse of the USSR - or lack thereof - falls into the latter category of essay. The book is an almost unreadable mass of sweeping generalizations, unsupported assertions, barely relevant side roads of tendentious narrative and wholesale self-contradiction. The finished product is so incoherent that it is nearly impossible for a reviewer to know where to begin.

The passion for irrelevant side roads can be explained in part by the way in which the authors want to argue their case. Essentially, their underlying thesis - as far as it can be discerned from a sort of blunderbuss blast of judgmental announcements throughout - is that the West over-estimated the robustness of the Soviet system chiefly because of a tendency to demonize the USSR and exaggerate its threat. In part, they argue this is because of political agendas, such as defence budgets and party political platforms (neither of which is an intelligence matter), partly because of sincere estimative errors resulting from worst case thinking, and partly because of a genuine ideological demonization by both sides. Had the idea been framed in such terms, no doubt a coherent narrative account might have emerged, but instead we are treated to side journeys, such as an overview of the three-way Pentagon-CIA-Sam Adams row over Viet Cong strength estimates during the mid-1960s (it would be pedantic of me to point out that this lies well outside the 1980-90 time frame of the book), or a vaguely Joycean encounter with the thoughts and feelings of a Soviet nuclear bomber pilot patrolling NATO airspace during the icier years of the late Cold War.

Arbel and Edelist spare no opportunities for judgmental, albeit rarely defensible, pronouncements. For example, they repeatedly denounce the Cold War maneuvering and posturing as "insane" and then provide detailed descriptions of the very rational decisions that gave the participants little other choice. This leads to the problem of consistent and repetitive self-contradiction. A detailed survey of their logical inconsistencies would probably run longer than the original text, so perhaps one brief example will suffice. In their chapter on the putatively exaggerated Soviet threat "myth," they start with two pages pronouncing with almost scriptural certainty and block quotations that Soviet defence doctrine, first, did not exist, there was only ideology and sloganeering, and second, the non-existent doctrine was wholly defensive. (pp. 50-51) For the remainder of the chapter, by way of evidence, they then blithely give examples of how offensive it

actually was, such as the fact that until 1984 exercises the Warsaw Pact "had carried out only offensive manoeuvres," (p. 54) deployed SS-20 missiles which in turn prompted the NATO deployment of Pershing and cruise, (p. 55) plus the explicit adoption of a doctrine of pre-emptive first strike. (p. 61) Having been informed that there was no real Soviet military doctrine, we are then told by the authors that "until the 1980s, Warsaw Pact plans indicate aggressive intent based on Soviet military doctrine, set out in 1939 and unchanged ever since. This doctrine stated baldly that the Red Army must carry the war to the enemy's territory." (p. 58) They even go so far as to invoke Sokolovsky's doctrinal, *Soviet Military Strategy*. And so the non-existent doctrine, it seems, was neither merely sloganeering nor defensive, nor even non-existent. The point here is not the debate about the Soviet threat, but the slap-dash approach to drafting and articulating the issues which is pervasive throughout the entire volume.

The approach to intelligence adopted by the authors is even more given to distortion and misrepresentation. It is a long-established truism that intelligence is about capabilities and intentions, and certainly not about crystal-ball gazing. And yet crystal-ball gazing is precisely what the authors evidently want. This may, in part, be explicable that both authors are Israelis, one (according to the back flap blurb) a former intelligence officer. As a result, it may not be surprising that they are tempted to subscribe to an unrealistically heroic view of what intelligence ought to be. Nonetheless, the temptation to glorify myths is not an excuse for such a poor understanding of the working intelligence machinery in government as is displayed by Arbel and Edelist. They rail against the fact that, when the USSR collapsed against almost all expectations (especially Soviet) "there were no public calls for the resignation of the heads of intelligence agencies, nor was their responsibility ever investigated." (p. xi) Intelligence communities "failed to disseminate the fact that the balance of fear had put nuclear attack beyond the realm of the possible," (p. 2) which is unsurprising in that this is a judgment (or rather, opinion) and not a fact in the formally logical sense; moreover, it was not impossible given both the Reagan era verbiage about winnable and limited nuclear war, plus the Soviet pre-emptive first strike doctrine referred to above, as well as the close calls in 1962 (Cuba) and 1983 (RYAN/Able Archer), both of which receive close attention in later portions of the book. We are also told that "In the nuclear world, there is no room for intelligence assessment that leaves key questions open," (p. 21) which leaves one wondering what kind of intelligence the authors think can be expected. Proclamations like this set a tone for the rest of the book which is completely unrealistic, and attributes to intelligence agencies some sort of supernormal abilities to grasp retrospectively, self-evident truth and to somehow shape policy in a fundamental, world-shaping way.

Historical detail is also treated loosely. For example, Director of Central Intelligence William Casey is described thus: "Dubbed 'Mr. Intelligence', he had a wealth of operation experience and a good grasp of the business of intelligence processing." On the other hand, Stansfield Turner, they dismiss on the grounds that he "had no intelligence background, and lacked the spark that could make gray intelligence work a stimulating intelligence game." (p. 213) Casey, of course, had barely a handful of years of operational experience with the wartime Office of Strategic Services, and then had no further professional involvement with intelligence apart from a year on the President's

Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) until his appointment as DCI in 1981. Turner, on the other hand, had had a prestigious naval career which had put him in contact with the intelligence community, at least as a consumer. It is also worth remembering that he may not have been seen as charismatic, but his was the task to shepherd the CIA through the difficult years after the Church, Rockefeller, and Pike commissions. This is the kind of flagrant and unapologetic inaccuracy one does not really expect to see in this day and age when intelligence personalities and events, especially in the United States, are so clearly documented and publicly visible.

After an almost randomly detailed account of intelligence in the second half of the Cold War, the book closes with a no less tendentious account of the failures leading up to the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States which, besides lying well outside the time frame the book is supposed to focus on, has nothing to do with the question of why people failed to predict the collapse of the USSR.

On the whole, Arbel and Edelist have served only to confuse the evaluation.

Philip Davies is Deputy Director of the Brunel Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, Brunel University.