

Mitrovich, Gregory. *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000.

There is a shadowy world of Planners who gather in the hallowed halls of American power to shape the future. If you were hoping for a discussion of Illuminati or Bilderbergers or Freemasons, go to the back of the class. Secret planning sounds like the start of a grand conspiracy theory, but, as we all know, it happens on a regular basis: as it must when powerful nations vie for self-preservation. Gregory Mitrovich's *Undermining the Kremlin*, the latest contribution to the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs series, is an intriguing exploration of the early days of the Cold War as top US strategists plotted "to destroy communist power and end the Soviet threat to the liberal international order without resorting to military conflict." (p. 177) From the Truman administration through Eisenhower's first term, the United States employed "psychological" warfare in an attempt to win the Cold War by destabilizing the Soviet bloc.

While the official US position was, from early in the Cold War, the "containment" of Soviet ambitions, Mitrovich argues that this was generally a public mask for plans that countenanced offensive as well as defensive action. The outlines of the overall strategy, however, were apparent in the Truman administration. Four interlocking aims existed, according to Mitrovich: destabilize the Soviet regime from within by encouraging dissension among state and party leaders; quietly encourage liberation efforts in satellite nations; promote schisms between the Soviets and their allies in China, Yugoslavia and elsewhere; and encourage defections to the West. The plans themselves varied somewhat over time, as international affairs and technological advancement in weaponry forced reconsideration. In particular, the Soviet development of nuclear and thermonuclear capabilities in 1949 and 1953 respectively, caused planners to reconsider overall strategies and, in the latter case, begin searching for compromises that effectively recognized Soviet security interests as legitimate.

The causes of the Cold War and the date of its onset have been fiercely debated by historians for more than three decades. Mitrovich makes an important contribution to the discussion by demonstrating that the United States was engaged in offensive activities well before many scholars have recognized. As he explains: "the United States initiated offensive action against the Soviet block independently of and simultaneously with the inauguration of containment. With the approval of both NSC 20/4 and NSC 10/2 at a time when Marshall Plan aid had only just begun to flow into Western Europe, the Truman administration embarked on an effort to 'compel' the Soviet regime to abandon its international ambitions. There would be no delay: "containment and a 'compellent' strategy would be pursued in parallel, not in sequence." (p. 180) This argument is strewn with potential hazards, given the evolving historiography of the Cold War. The first histories of the Cold War were penned in the early years of the conflict. In that first phase, American government officials and court spokesmen cast the Soviet Union as an expansionist power that a defensive US worked desperately to contain. A revisionist argument, most closely associated with William Appelman Williams and Gabriel Kolko, emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. In it the motives of the United States were called into question by proposing that the US might have been the expansionist power seeking

economic and, perhaps, political dominance in the wake of World War II. Finally, in the mid-1980s, a post-revisionist phase, stemming primarily from the work of John Lewis Gaddis, proposed that it could be true that the Soviet Union was an expansionist power and that the United States took both defensive and offensive measures during the Cold War.

The opening of Soviet and American archives in the last decade has substantially bolstered the post-revisionist position and it has become the dominant paradigm (although the other two schools of thought retain their supporters). Mitrovich casts himself squarely with the post-revisionists. He carefully argues:

America's offensive strategy emerged not from a desire to establish world economic hegemony, however, but from two interrelated fears: that the continued presence of a hostile bloc under Soviet domination could lead to economic chaos and global war and - if neither of those two events occurred - that a long cold war deadlock might either bankrupt the American economy or force the United States to abandon its most cherished democratic institutions. (p. 177)

This is decidedly post-revisionist position but, by pushing the date of American offensive action back to 1947, his research may bring smiles to revisionists as well.

A few problems do crop up in *Undermining the Kremlin*. The first arises from the nature of available source material. This is a book on “planning” and information on “practice” is painfully thin. Mitrovich does point to the efforts to peel Albania and Yugoslavia from the Soviet orbit and the quiet funding of Radio Liberty and other propaganda outlets, but most of the details of covert operations remain classified. At several spots in the book, Mitrovich holds out the tantalizing possibility that future declassification may yield greater information but, for now at least, the archives are closed. This is, of course, a frustration to any scholar and Mitrovich handles the limitation with aplomb.

A second difficulty is somewhat more manageable. Psychological warfare was, as Mitrovich rightly points out, “a difficult concept to define and, consequently, definitions varied greatly.” (p. 191, footnote 4) Nonetheless, the best working definition offered is “any governmental activity short of actual military hostilities” designed to undermine Soviet power. The very broadness of this definition would allow this to be a much longer book if the author so chose. For example, if Walter LaFeber was correct when he proposed that the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan were “two halves of the same walnut,” in as much as each was designed to subvert Soviet aims in the world, both fall under the general heading of “psychological warfare,” as defined here. Mitrovich focuses primarily on the Office of Policy Coordination, the National Security Council, the Psychological Strategies Board and the State Department and does not offer his analysis as a paradigm for understanding all non-military foreign policy. But then neither does he offer much guidance on how to limit the discussion. A tighter definition is in order, even if the participants used the term rather loosely.

The final difficulty lies in the unexplored conclusion Mitrovich offers. His “contention . . . is that these materials (newly declassified documents on American national security policy) do not demonstrate that American efforts to subvert the Soviet bloc were part of a broader effort to establish global hegemony. Rather, the United States was motivated by the desire to promote global stability and prevent the recurrence of economic collapse and world war.” (p. 179) One might look at the evidence Mitrovich has marshaled and question just what the author means by “hegemony.” Surely a nation that actively plots the overthrow of a political and economic rival in hopes of replacing it with a system more in keeping with its own might be accused of attempting to establish a bit of hegemony.

Nonetheless, *Undermining the Kremlin* is a very fine book. Historians of Cold War diplomacy, policy analysts, political scientists and others interested in institutional politics and bureaucratic infighting will find much to digest here. It is a readable and engaging study that offers new insight into the world of strategic planning in the early Cold War. It offers a detailed exploration of how policy is formulated, how it evolves in response to changing circumstances, and on the role of individual actors to shape the fate of the nation. All in all, Mitrovich has made a solid contribution to the field.

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