**Gorbachev, Reagan and the End of the Cold War**

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***The Triumph of Improvisation:
Gorbachev’s Adaptability, Reagan’s Engagement and the End of the Cold War***
*James Graham Wilson Cornell University Press 280pp £18.50*

This is one of the better books on the end of the Cold War. Unlike many American accounts, it is not – at least until its very last paragraph – triumphalist in tone. Wilson recognises that Mikhail Gorbachev was by some distance the most important political actor in the dramatic sequence of events between 1985 and 1991. On the American side he rightly identifies Ronald Reagan, George Shultz and George H.W. Bush as the people who mattered most. He is particularly good at giving Secretary of State Shultz his due. Reagan’s policies were both very general and inconsistent, although he genuinely wanted to rid the world of nuclear weapons and to cement peaceful relations with a changed Soviet Union. Shultz gave practical substance to this foreign policy and established constructive relations with the Soviet foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, and with Gorbachev. There were many in the Reagan administration (especially in the CIA and the Pentagon) who viewed Gorbachev as a more dangerous adversary than his Soviet predecessors, because of his ability to woo the West. They refused to take seriously the notions that he would liberalise, still less democratise, the system he had inherited, that he would ever permit the countries of Eastern Europe to become non-Communist and independent and that he would jettison Marxism-Leninism.

Wilson’s main argument is that nothing that happened during the end of the Cold War was planned. Reagan wanted to put an end to Soviet expansionism, as he saw it, through strengthening still further the US’s military defences, but he envisaged a continuing Soviet Union, with whose leader he was willing to sign agreements reducing and eventually eliminating nuclear arsenals. Clearly, it was no part of Gorbachev’s initial project that the East European countries should go their separate ways, that Germany should be united – still less, that the Soviet Union itself should end with separate statehood for each of its 15 republics. Gorbachev developed, though, from reformer of the existing Soviet system to transformational leader, adapting to the unintended consequences, both international and domestic, of the systemic change he introduced.

The main strength of Wilson’s account lies in his use of recently declassified American documents, as befits a historian employed at the State Department. He also uses Russian-language materials, but is not always sure footed on Soviet politics. Thus, he writes of a *Pravda* correspondent ‘widely believed to have close ties to the CPSU and the KGB’. Since *Pravda* was the Communist Party’s most authoritative newspaper, its correspondents were by definition not only CPSU members but of good party standing – and the party, especially in the post-Stalin era, stood above the KGB. Moreover, Konstantin Chernenko was not, *pace* Wilson, chosen as Soviet leader in 1984 because he was a hardliner but because he would restore security of tenure to his Politburo colleagues and leave Andrei Gromyko and Dmitri Ustinov undisturbed in their conduct of Soviet foreign and defence policy.

Errors on points of detail (there are a number) are outweighed by Wilson’s generally balanced interpretation, except in his concluding paragraph, in which he suddenly turns triumphalist. Gorbachev, he says, ‘did not believe that he lost the Cold War. But he did. And because he did, a generation of human beings in the United States, Russia, and elsewhere on this planet grew up innocent of the specter of a nuclear holocaust’. Gorbachev’s vision of a transformed Russia as a co-operative and integral part of a ‘common European home’ is a far cry from the more nationalist, intolerant and belligerent outlook of Russian leaders today. That development can hardly be divorced from NATO’s expansion into the former Soviet Union and the treatment of Russia as if it were, indeed, the loser of a war.

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- See more at: http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2014/09/gorbachev-reagan-and-end-cold-war#sthash.m2eBcWCT.dpuf