

May 30 2008

Zubok, Leffler...

LSE Ideas

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Since fellow IDEAS blogger Nick Kitchen has started us off with a post on IR theory, I'm going to take the liberty of writing on of the first posts from the history side of our humble office on Aldwych.

The two most awaited items in Cold War history this past academic year were Melvin Leffler's *For the Soul of Mankind* and Vlad Zubok's *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. Both books have received their share of attention, reviews, and each became the subject of an H-Diplo roundtable discussion. Both books are ambitious efforts to bring together existing cold war scholarship with the authors' on research. Yet both authors clearly see themselves as doing the work of cultural interpreters. Zubok does this more directly by offering English language readers a view not only on the evolution of Soviet elites from the Stalin era to the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also on their interaction with other cultural phases and phenomena – dissidents, bards, *shesteditanyki*, nationalists, separatists and so on.

Both books also do a good job of illuminating some of the more complex statesmen of the Cold War era. Leffler, for example, gives a very helpful introduction to Reagan's personality and the shaping of his political views, as well as on the in-fighting within his administration and how it affected US-Soviet relations in the 1980s. Zubok, who has already contributed to a better understanding of Stalin, Khrushchev, and their contemporaries as well as Mikhail Gorbachev, brings out Leonid Brezhnev in a way that none have attempted.

Brezhnev's name is normally associated with *zastoy*, the period of stability and stagnation in the Soviet Union. As for foreign policy, he is remembered for such costly adventures as the invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979). His apparent ill health and mental decline in the late 1970s and until his death in office in 1982 make it tempting to dismiss him as a figure-head more interested in collecting cars and medals than in making policy. Without denying his failures as a leader, Zubok highlights Brezhnev's singular contribution to *détente*, his obsession with preventing nuclear war and his genuine efforts to reach out to US leaders. Most importantly, he was willing to face down the opponents of *détente* and arms reduction within his own ruling elite.

That having been said, it was disappointing to see how little we learn about someone as important and enigmatic as Yuri Andropov. Although biographies of Brezhnev's successor have proliferated in Russia, few are serious works. Even the best, by the former dissident Roy Medvedev, leaves much to be desired. More on that later...

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