

SOVIET-AMERICAN CONFRONTATION: POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTION AND THE ORIGINS OF THE COLD WAR. By *Thomas G. Paterson*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973. xiii, 287 pp. \$12.00.

Revisionist historians continue to attempt to convince us that the responsibility for the breakdown of the wartime alliance and the emergence of the Cold War lies with the United States—not with the Soviet Union, with the nature of the international system, or with various other factors. This book adds to that effort by looking closely at the economic component of American policy. It tries to show that Washington consciously used its new economic power as an important element to force Moscow into making major concessions over East Europe and over other issues dividing the two wartime partners. The author avers that when this attempt failed, the United States fell back to coercing its Western partners into an economic-political-military alliance against the perceived Soviet threat, and constructed—on the basis of an ideology of peace and prosperity—an economic system that in reality was a cover for the capitalist quest for free trade, foreign investments, and raw materials.

The proof of these assertions is not found in references to the Leninist theory of imperialism or even to Marxist classics, although these are surely the sources of the author's ideas. Rather, Paterson quotes selectively from a wide range of official American documents, memoirs, personal papers, and contemporary publications. Because his research is so extensive and because the Marxist-Leninist thesis is plausible within the bounds of its own categories of discourse, evaluation of the thesis must center on the character of his assumptions, the degree of intellectual completeness of his inquiry, negative evidence, and the strength of alternative explanations. On all these grounds this reviewer found Paterson's thesis unconvincing, and was thus compelled to dismiss the volume as a tissue of quotations strung together to illustrate a set of *a priori* ideas. These are hard words to fasten upon an author who has done a great deal of work; a few examples, keyed to each of the above categories of evaluation, can serve to illustrate the nature of the problem.

Paterson assigns to American policy a degree of consistency and clarity which is not supported by an examination of the history of the immediate postwar period as a whole. The author asserts that American power was overwhelming, that American officials knew it and used it in an unrestrained manner to forward a series of coherent goals (mostly economic), that they acted in a manner which "shocked" both allies and opponents, and that Soviet protective reaction and the Cold War was a natural result. However, the author fails to differentiate between clear policy goals and murky policy moods. Most of the time (and it is these periods to which the author devotes the least analysis), Washington was muddling from one crisis (always perceived as not of its own making) to another. Such policy initiatives as the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, described by Paterson as key initiatives in Washington's plan for world economic domination, were, in fact, reactions—creative to be sure—to perceived needs to resist Soviet advances in Europe and elsewhere. Moreover, American power was hardly overwhelming in the military sense: nuclear weapons could be threatened but not used, and the United States had so disarmed itself in conventional strength (the most rapid and thoroughgoing such instance in history), that by 1949 the army could not even successfully defend the continental approaches to North America. Even if it were

shown that American “power” was supreme in some aggregate sense, it does not follow that this power was dominant in detail, geographically, or in regard to various elements of power. A war-weakened Soviet Union was still capable of dominating all of Europe with a military of 4.5 million, at a time when no West European military force stood in its way, and the small American establishment was widely dispersed. Finally, the author fails to realize that power is situationally defined, so that in any given instance there is no such thing as total national power measurable by any set of economic or other indicators.

Paterson shares with other revisionists an equally important error in approaching matters by analyzing American data and motivations alone. He fails to treat the Soviet side, and thus denies any possibility of writing history as it was, that is, a complex interactive process, in which no one possesses enough of the facts, and usually lacks a clear grasp of his own or his opponents’ purposes. Moreover, by investigating only domestically-generated American actions, he denies himself insights available from a systemic perspective that, among other things, would permit the observer to interpret history as a series of unavoidable mistakes, that is, as a Greek tragedy. The interpretation of the Cold War cannot be pushed quite that far, because both America and Russia did, on occasion, pursue policies with full knowledge of their unacceptability to the other side. But evidence of some planning does not mean that all American policy was merely a manifestation of capitalist acquisitive proclivities, or that the Soviet Union did not engage in aggressive acts to which Washington could only react defensively. Lacking a larger perspective, and presuming (with Marx) a natural harmony of popular interests domestically disturbed only by a villainous class enemy, Paterson extrapolates directly to the international sphere: the United States—capitalist and, therefore, reactionary—was the sole disturbing factor; the Soviet Union—socialist and, therefore, progressive—was merely attempting to protect itself against a predatory America. Postwar history does not support this characterization of the facts.

These problems lead Paterson to deviate from a balanced approach in several other respects: he overestimates American presumptions of the political utility of offering postwar reconstruction loans to the Soviet Union, in terms of expected concessions in East Europe and elsewhere; he also artificially separates the goals of Western economic reconstruction from the emergence of the Cold War in the strategic and military sense. Causation was exceedingly complex, and only a history like Adam Ulam’s suggestive study, *The Rivals*, portrays events in proper perspective. Finally, there is no testing of alternative hypotheses or conscious attempts to falsify his own thesis, two standard and powerful ways of convincing readers of the veracity of one’s work. Multiple quotations can be found to defend the equally plausible and equally extreme thesis that economic questions played no role at all in the emergence of Soviet-American confrontation, while the idea that the Cold War was the inevitable product of the contact between vastly different cultural-political systems (to quote just one alternative hypothesis) is entirely unexplored.

Lest this review end on too negative a note, it must be admitted that Paterson is a “gentle” revisionist in the sense that, while his thesis is no different from that of Kolko, he is much more patient and inquiring than some others. Rather than engaging in a fierce polemic designed, from the very first, to draw up sides and invite counterattack, he invites the reader, in a scholarly and gentlemanly manner, to consider his ideas on their merits. This opens up the possibility of a constructive dialogue among students of the post-1945 period that could well prove creative and mutually informative.

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