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The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War. By Archie Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; pp. 3512. £25).

In his latest contribution to the history of the end of the Cold War, Archie Brown sets out to answer a deceptively simple question: “What exactly *was* the Cold War and *why* did it end in the way it did *when* it did?” (2). In Brown’s answer, the Cold War is defined as, above all, a political and ideological conflict whose ending hinged on Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev’s leadership. Implicitly ranking the key leaders at the time, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher comes out second as the leader with the foresight to identify Gorbachev’s qualities and to act as a “bridge” to US President Ronald Reagan who comes across the least favourably of the three. The book is broadly organised into three sections: first, a series of portraits of Gorbachev, Thatcher, and Reagan that traces their intellectual development; second, a more chronological retelling of the end of the Cold War; and finally, a thematic analysis that ends with lessons for the present day.

For academic audiences, Brown re-centres the story of the end of the Cold War on developments within the Soviet Union and on political factors. “While there are many contributory causes of the end of the Cold War,” he writes, “it occurred when and how it did due to a combination of leadership, power, and ideas – most specifically in the Soviet Union.” (291) For all intents and purposes, the Cold War was on track to end when Gorbachev rose to power in 1985. Gorbachev’s willingness to learn and adapt, his vision and adept manoeuvring around the constraints on his power, altered the course of history.

Brown’s argument provides a compelling rebuttal to US-centric and “triumphalist” explanations that betray a lack of understanding of the Soviet context and that read history backwards to suggest that Western countries compelled the Kremlin’s actions. Brown especially dismisses the notion that Reagan’s military build-up and his focus on the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) crippled the Soviet economy and thus forced Gorbachev’s hand to seek diplomatic accommodation. This tendency to focus on US actions and internal dynamics continues to dominate US historiography of the Cold War. Similar patterns exist in the retelling of the Vietnam War wherein the United States “lost” because of domestic exhaustion, for instance. Much like the Polish tendency to overplay the role of Pope John Paul II’s moral leadership in the ending of the Cold War, Brown suggests these triumphalist explanations are more a product of national narcissism than an objective analysis of the facts.

Brown also provides a counterpoint to a quintessentially American view that economic factors have a life of their own and structurally ushered the end of the Cold War.

The idea that market forces are not amenable to political control as a matter of *fact* rather than of *choice* is a product of an ideology that gained ground in the 1980s under Reagan. Brown persuasively shows that political choices drove economic changes, both domestically and internationally, and not the other way around.

More than that, in weaving together and juxtaposing portraits of Gorbachev, Thatcher, and Reagan, Brown reminds us of the importance of leadership, of “that vision thing” as George HW Bush called it, and of trust in the international sphere. Brown uses the word “trust” no less than 135 times in the text.

The title of the book, the “human factor”, draws on Gorbachev’s repeated use of the phrase to emphasise the importance of inter-personal relationships. Reagan’s credential as an arch-conservative provided room to manoeuvre and drew him close to Thatcher who, in turn, used her influence to convince Reagan that Gorbachev was different and worth engaging with. This is also a story of how trust was built and nurtured amongst the three.

Each of the three leaders, however, had to work within structures, including a military-industrial complex in the United States and the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, in the United Kingdom where financial interests in the nuclear program slowed Thatcher’s support of disarmament initiatives. They had to navigate what was possible within their respective bureaucracies, be it the party apparatus in the Soviet Union or conflicting agencies in the US system of government, as well as the changing constellation of characters within their governments. Staff changes are described in meticulous detail as are the rivalries amongst advisors. However, Brown concludes that, while these structures influenced the timing of decisions, they did not fundamentally alter the direction of travel once the three main leaders were in place.

Brown’s narrative is peppered with anecdotes that add texture to our knowledge of this period. At times, as in his retelling of Thatcher’s frustration that the Foreign Office had chosen silver hairbrushes for her official gift to Gorbachev despite the fact that he was “completely bald” (195), he injects great humour. At others, as in his retelling of the failed coup against Gorbachev and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, he infuses the narrative with drama and gripping suspense even if the details are already familiar.

Ultimately, Brown’s latest contribution does not represent a radical departure from his oeuvre or provide ground-breaking new findings for historians. It does, however, refocus attention on leadership and political vision at an interesting time, not least with Donald Trump’s departure from the White House. All three leaders in Brown’s book were consequential in that they left their country and the world profoundly altered. Amongst the

many colourful leaders of the last decade – from Angela Merkel to Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin and Trump - one wonders who historians of the future will see as most consequential, whose legacy and vision will have the greatest impact on the contours of international politics in the decades ahead. In particular, one cannot help but think that Trump's erosion of trust will be with us for a long time yet.

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