

2016

Review of Garthoff, Raymond L., *Soviet Leaders and Intelligence: Assessing the American Adversary during the Cold War*

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[Turnbull on Garthoff, 'Soviet Leaders and Intelligence: Assessing the American Adversary during the Cold War'](#)

Review published on Sunday, December 11, 2016

Raymond L. Garthoff. *Soviet Leaders and Intelligence: Assessing the American Adversary during the Cold War*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015. 160 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-62616-229-7; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-62616-228-0.

Reviewed by Brian Turnbull (University of Kansas) **Published on** H-War (December, 2016)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Raymond L. Garthoff sets out in this book to provide needed insight into the role intelligence played in Soviet leaders' decision making toward the United States throughout the Cold War. As a former ambassador to Bulgaria and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst, he is in a unique position to do so. His experience comes through with interesting anecdotal accounts of conversations with his Soviet counterparts, but does not form the empirical core of this work. The primary research for this book comes from intelligence and Cold War literature in both Russian and English. Many of the English works will be familiar to students of intelligence or national security studies. As a student of this literature myself, I have already read similar arguments and conclusions in other scholarship. Contrary to what the reader may initially expect from the title, intelligence played a minor role in influencing the perspectives and decisions of top Soviet leaders, and when intel did manage to gain an ear it was often counterproductive and even dangerous. Many factors created an environment where leadership disregarded or totally ignored the intel produced—a political environment that rejected or even punished views counter to the status quo, perspectives dominated by Soviet ideology, a focus on “active measures” and operations at the expense of analysis within the intelligence apparatus, and attempts by intelligence leaders to influence the political situation by modifying or suppressing intel.

Garthoff takes a strategic perspective by focusing exclusively on the four primary general/first secretaries of the Soviet Union: Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, and Mikhail Gorbachev. A chapter is dedicated to each, with a chronological walk-through of how each leader's perspective shifted over time and how this shift altered the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States. This approach lends a “Great Man” flavor to his argument that is further reinforced by the apparent lack of any real influence on their own decision making outside of their personal interpretation of events and first-hand experience with US leaders. While it is well established that general secretaries had an enormous, relatively unconstrained personal influence on Cold War relations between the two superpowers, the lack of any real analytical attempt to go beyond explaining this relationship in terms of the men involved takes this book down well-trodden avenues. The reader finishes the book wanting more explanation, particularly of the causal connection between the personal experiences of the Soviet leaders and the formation and modification of their perspectives. Garthoff takes us through the adaptation of perspectives to contemporary events, but we have to take his opinion for granted. More empirical support for these connections would have been enormously beneficial and would have provided valuable new information for the field. Admittedly, such information may be impossible to obtain. Garthoff couches

Citation: H-Net Reviews. *Turnbull on Garthoff, 'Soviet Leaders and Intelligence: Assessing the American Adversary during the Cold War'*. H-War. 12-22-2016.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/12840/reviews/156437/turnbull-garthoff-soviet-leaders-and-intelligence-assessing-american>
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many of his assertions in the biographies of these leaders, which may be the best available sources, but in turn this reliance relegates these aspects of the book to more of an analytical literature review.

The historical walk-through approach results in the large majority of the book being dedicated to a straightforward historical progression of Soviet leadership, leaving little room for actually establishing the role of intelligence. Again this likely stems from the lack of real influence intelligence had in top leadership circles, but I finished the book still not having a detailed understanding of the relationship between Soviet leadership and the intelligence community. Garthoff does provide some nuggets, particularly with regard to the interaction between the KGB chairman Yuri Andropov and Brezhnev, which are interesting, but the work would have benefited from a greater focus on the intelligence apparatus. Instead, the near exclusive focus on leadership brings the analysis around to the intel world only on the rare occasion Soviet leadership interacted with the KGB or GRU (*Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye*, or Main Intelligence Agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces), interactions that appear to have had no real effect. Garthoff does provide some insight into the counterproductive role played on occasion by the intelligence community, such as the continual exaggeration of American capabilities and threat, and even false alarms on impending nuclear attacks, which ironically may have been the most influence the intelligence apparatus ever had on decision making.

The main conclusions that are drawn from this book are the surprising lack of good intel available to both Soviet and American leadership. Garthoff does provide a thorough account of the many failings by intel agencies on both sides to keep their leaders well informed on the adversary. He spends much less time discussing the American intelligence community, but the information he does offer may run counter to the initial understanding of many with regard to US intel capabilities during the Cold War. Finally, the most useful and novel conclusion presented by this book is his discussion of the early shift in Soviet thinking across much of its leadership to the pursuit of a relatively peaceful coexistence with the United States. My own understanding put the earliest real shift toward a less aggressive stance vis-à-vis the United States during the Brezhnev détente era, but Garthoff illustrates a substantial change in thinking as far back as Khrushchev. Furthermore, attempts by Soviet leaders to shift toward a more peaceful relationship were often thrown off track by aggressive posturing by American administrations, another facet that is often glossed over in the American intelligence literature. These conclusions are well supported and provide what appears to be Garthoff's main theme in this work. In fact, the reader would be better prepared if "intelligence" was left out of the title entirely, and the focus left on the Soviet leadership's assessment of the American adversary.

Regardless, Garthoff provides a thorough description of key events within the Cold War and the influence of Soviet leadership on the progression of the USSR-US relationship in a concisely worded book that would be useful for those without a great deal of experience in intelligence or Cold War literature. For those better versed, many of the arguments in this work will be familiar, but the discussion of the genuine effort on the part of Soviet leadership in the pursuit of more peaceful relations between the two superpowers may be both novel and valuable.

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