

Jonathan Haslam. *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II*. Princeton University Press, 2021. Hardcover, \$ 35.00. Paperback, \$ 27.95.

A hallmark of the historian's academic upbringing involves a constant tug-and-pull between agreement and disagreement with existing historiography. Each of us can look back at those encounters with scholarship during our graduate training that pushed us to question convention. In fact, even if we do not agree with every argument or interpretation, it is often the books that challenge norms or force a reckoning with standard explanations that leave the greatest imprint on our intellectual progress. Historian Jonathan Haslam's *The Spectre of War* is such a book. Haslam, formerly of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton and a Professor Emeritus from Cambridge University, provocatively invites a reexamination of the failure to halt the rise of Nazism and in the process a powerful reconsideration of the causes of the Second World War.

Based on extensive research in a plethora of languages, Haslam's study is satisfying old-school diplomatic history covering mostly European affairs during the period from the Bolshevik Revolution to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Comprehensive in scope, it explores Western European diplomatic attempts to grapple with the rise of Communism and fascism during this period. His core argument is that scholars have underestimated the fear that Bolshevism instilled in Western policymakers after 1917 and consequently, failed to properly understand the more lenient response to fascism. To fully understand the interwar period, he insists, it is necessary to recognize that the Bolshevik Revolution did not represent a normal change of political power. Rather, it birthed a political ideology that ultimately harbored the goal of destroying the nation state everywhere. Just as the French revolutionaries in 1789 represented nothing less than an existential threat to the existing political order, so too, did the Bolsheviks in 1917. This belief permeated western diplomatic perceptions of Russian policies and in many

respects justified the alarm with which capitalist powers viewed Communist revolutionary activities in Hungary, Poland, Germany, Italy, and beyond during the 1920s. The Weimar Republic's feeble political and economic structures, as well as the general chaos caused by the Great War made obvious the danger of revolutions across the continent. Long before the Nazis came to power, western European diplomats sought to come to terms with this Bolshevik threat. As a result, the eventual appeasement of Hitler cannot be understood simply as a reaction to German rearmament but must be interpreted within the broader scope of the capitalist powers' interwar period concerns.

To make these arguments, Haslam highlights two avenues of interpretation that strike this reviewer as of particular significance. While neither is quite as original as he portends, collectively he delivers these with greater clarity and persuasion and from a much more impressive and varied source-base than preceding scholars.

First, Haslam persuasively makes the point that in spite of what conventional scholarship has often asserted, "the revolutionary objectives set by Lenin were sustained, albeit more cautiously, even under Stalin." What distinguished the Stalin era from Lenin and Trotsky's more aggressive push for world revolution was "degree and opportunity" not "principle" (pp. 7-8). Whatever timetable Stalin operated on – something that remains a matter of debate – many officials in London, Paris, and elsewhere, rightly believed that Moscow's agenda posed a clear and present danger to the very idea of the West. The result was that no alliance with the Soviet Union was possible, not even to contain Nazi Germany.

Haslam's second, but related, point is a clarion call for scholars to pay greater attention to the importance of ideology. In contrast to most diplomatic historians who view *Realpolitik* as the master key to the twists and turns of twentieth century international affairs, Haslam bluntly

insist, that “through the lens of classical realism...the international relations of the interwar period actually makes little sense.” We have to appreciate the peculiarity that despite the Soviet Union’s “demonstratively weak offensive military capabilities,” it seemed “all threatening because of the power of its ideology.” If anything, the Comintern’s tactics and Moscow’s agenda caused real concern in the West in the 1920s and this only escalated in the mid-to-late 1930s due to the Spanish Civil War and a broad range of Popular Front operations across Europe. In contrast, despite their appalling political convictions and social organization, fascist Germany and Italy, were considered members of the “club” of normal states with which others could reason (pp. xii-xiii, 84, 129-130). In Haslam’s view, the reason for this perception, was that many in the West understood fascism principally as a method of domestic state operations rather than a system possessing ambitious foreign policy objectives. As long as Hitler’s ambitions were limited to reversing the Versailles order that many now incidentally saw as a failure, this combination of the explicit Bolshevik threat and Germany as a geographical bulwark against the Soviet ideological peril, gave Berlin more or less *carte blanche* to interfere in Central Europe. Far too late in the game did the West realize the significance of this miscalculation.

At times, Haslam becomes a little too enthralled with his own logic. His insistence that Bolshevism was the only western barometer for action or decision-making in the interwar era hardly passes muster. Particularly, the absence of the Great War’s long shadow is the book’s single greatest weakness. After all, the generation that dominated diplomatic decision-making from 1919-1939 included not only veterans but also many men who had been too old to fight in 1914, and were now saddled with the guilt of that war. These were men who wanted to avoid another war at all cost and it does detract from the book’s persuasion that Haslam never explores this psychology when explaining appeasement.

This minor criticism aside, Haslam makes a major contribution to a crowded scholarly field. As importantly, one can hope that his work will trigger a much broader scholarly reassessment of Communism and those political and academic apologists that emerged on its behalf after the Second World War. After all, hovering underneath Haslam's logic is the fact that both the misguided appeasement policy and the subsequent victory against Hitler's horrifying regime ensured that after 1945, the evils of Communism were either forgotten or reduced in significance. The result has been that while the war permanently discredited fascism, Communism continues to enjoy periodic revivals among youth movements, academics, and leftwing progressive politicians. The existential threat to the West that Haslam highlights has by many long since been forgotten. Nothing illustrates better the difference in memory than the manner in which the names of German concentration camps can be evoked—and rightfully so—as signs of ultimate evil but the names of Soviet Gulag camps—to our shame—remain forgotten. Haslam reminds us that to believers in democracy, far left radicalism posed as great a threat to democracy's survival as did the far right. During the interwar period they miscalculated the threat since it was Hitler, not Stalin that endangered Europe's immediate survival. But after the Second World War, Stalin and his operatives were ready to relaunch precisely the kind of efforts Haslam describes, and had it not been for the United States Cold War intervention, including the Marshall Plan, that agenda might well have succeeded. Only great scholarship provokes debates so beyond its formal scope. Haslam has written a book that deserves to be read widely.

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