

Norman M. Naimark. *Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty*. Harvard University Press, 2019. Hardcover, \$29.95. Paperback, 2023, \$ 19.95.

For decades, the intellectual debate over the early Cold War principally concerned the question of culpability. According to the so-called traditionalist interpretation, Josef Stalin's Soviet Union appeared determined to overrun Western Europe by any means necessary. This threat both necessitated and justified the American involvement that led to the Truman Doctrine, the European Recovery Program, NATO, and everything that followed. By the late 1950s and especially following the outbreak of the Vietnam War, left-leaning Cold War revisionists challenged this interpretation insisting instead that the Soviet Union had possessed no ill intentions towards the West. According to the revisionist interpretation, Moscow's security measures were made necessary by an aggressive even imperialistic American postwar agenda. This intense scholarly debate played out at conferences, in books, and in academic journals and book reviews. While other more nuanced arguments emerged that sought a middle ground between these two schools of thought, a continued consequence was a tendency to distill the Cold War to an inevitable East-West conflict.

In *Stalin and the Fate of Europe*, the distinguished historian and Hoover Institute fellow, Norman Naimark, presents a more complex and multifaceted story of the immediate postwar world order in Europe. Broadly speaking Naimark identifies three separate but interconnected vectors that he considers critical to the European story: the role of Josef Stalin in Soviet foreign policymaking; Central and Western European nations' pursuit of national sovereignty amid postwar chaos and uncertainty; and the emerging Cold War. He connects these approaches to seven country-specific case studies which enable him to tell highly effective stories of the challenges local political leaders faced as they dug their nations out of the wartime rubble and fought to establish sovereign control of their territory and politics. The result is a series of

engaging chapters—most of which could be read independently—that grants both autonomy and agency to local officials. While topics such as the Berlin Blockade and the 1948 Italian elections are well-trodden by scholars, Naimark deserves particular credit for his emphasis on the politicians of smaller nations that have often been overlooked by scholarship. His chapters on Denmark and the Soviet occupation of Bornholm; the Albanian-Yugoslavian crisis; Finnish postwar independence; the Gomulka matter in Poland; and the question of Austria's recovery from its complicated wartime legacy make particularly strong contributions to the historiography.

Naimark rejects the argument that the Cold War was a foregone conclusion. If anything, between 1944 and 1947, few anticipated Europe's coming political division. This allows him to abandon traditional East-West narratives and instead understand European officials on their own terms and in their own time. This is what good history is all about but it is something that has often eluded early postwar scholars who struggle to decouple their arguments from their awareness of the Cold War's coming. In a fashion that is thrilling and often vividly presented, Naimark tells illustrates how politicians from Copenhagen to Tirana and from Helsinki to Rome, and beyond, tenaciously and often ingeniously came to terms with the post-1945 correlation of forces that made the Soviet Union the dominate nation in Central Europe. As he rightly asserts, in this context, it was no small feat for statesmen to establish an independent course. While this development took different forms depending on locale and leadership, one of the book's core arguments is that the reestablishment of sovereignty was made possible by Stalin's hyperrealism. In Naimark's succinct view, "postwar Europe was no place for utopian fantasies" (p. 5). Instead of promoting radical Bolshevik-style revolutions, Stalin's strategy was to pursue a Europe free of alliances or blocs because he believed that the Kremlin could leverage its power more effectively

when dealing with each nation on a bilateral basis. Overwhelmingly, the tactic failed. Of all Naimark's test cases, only Poland turned out in Stalin's favor. Everywhere else, local leaders effectively juggled both circumstances and the increasingly tense state of international tensions to secure more influence than could reasonably have been expected given the balance of power on the continent in 1945. The inevitable conclusion is that while Stalin may have been a hyperrealist, he was never a grand strategist.

The book's larger analytical threads are unfortunately less persuasive than these individual stories. While Naimark deserves great credit for his detailed assessment of the Kremlin's unorganized and often chaotic foreign policies, his cavalier treatment of ideology exposes an unsatisfactory gap in his arguments. Even if he occasionally acknowledges that Stalin maintained long-term ideological objectives of European communization, Naimark never effectively integrates this perspective. Instead, he insists rather naively that Stalin sought good relations with the United States after the war and implies that this only changed after the Marshall Plan. While he never embraces the revisionists' argument that Washington was to blame for the collapse of the wartime alliance, his conclusions about Stalin's objectives are highly debatable. Even if collaboration was indeed the Soviet leader's intention, no scholar worth his salt believes that the diplomatic relationships Stalin imagined were between equals and certainly not that he aimed to embrace the liberal and inclusive wartime the ideals for which the Allies fought against the Axis Powers. Stalin's vision of good relationships were always ones in which Moscow was the dominant power. Similarly unpersuasive is Naimark's claim that Stalin had little interest in fomenting revolutions in Europe. While true in its most simple form, it should be clear that Moscow recoiled from such activist regime change because local circumstances did not allow for this. The fact that Moscow had to choose different tactics in

Western Europe than in areas dominated by the Red Army should not disguise the significance of ideology in Stalin's foreign policy. It is well established that Communist parties and officials across Europe did not operate independently in any traditional sense. Even if they possessed some autonomy to act locally, in the end, they all relied to a greater or lesser extent on the Kremlin's endorsement and funding. This reality deserved far greater attention than Naimark grants it.

These points of discontent aside, this is a book of first-rate research in secondary and primary sources that provides a really engaging contribution to the field. While many of Naimark's local stories will be familiar to scholars of this period, the effective manner in which he puts these stories into conversation with one another and with Soviet operations and concerns provides a unique perspective on early postwar Europe. This in its own right makes *Stalin and the Fate of Europe* well worth reading. The fact that the book is accessible to laypeople while remaining highly relevant in undergraduate and graduate courses only adds to its considerable quality. At a time when Central and Western Europe once again finds itself under threat from Moscow's ambitions, Naimark's book is a timely reminder of the importance not only national sovereignty but also of the continued significance of the United States as a counterweight to the Kremlin's agenda.

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