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1989 and why we got it wrong

Michael Cox

IDEAS and the Department of International Relations,
London School of Economics and Political Science,
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom

Abstract

The Cold War generated more discussion and controversy than any other topic since 1945. Yet, the possibility that the Cold War might end was neither on the radar of scholars nor of politics and the military. This essay seeks to explain why 'we' got it wrong by focusing in the main on how 'we' in the West understood the Soviet system. Part one thus deals with the Cold War itself and its impact on what came to be known as western 'Soviet Studies'. Part two then looks at the way in which the USSR was understood by an emerging group of new social scientists in the 1970s and 1980s. Part three considers the Gorbachev problem. And part four examines the ways in which the socialist left thoughts about the USSR in the context of the Cold War. In conclusion, I offer reflections on how the generally flawed understanding of the Soviet Union precluded the anticipation of Soviet collapse.

Keywords

Cold War, Soviet collapse, Soviet economy, Soviet Studies, social science, Gorbachev, Socialism, Stalinism

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