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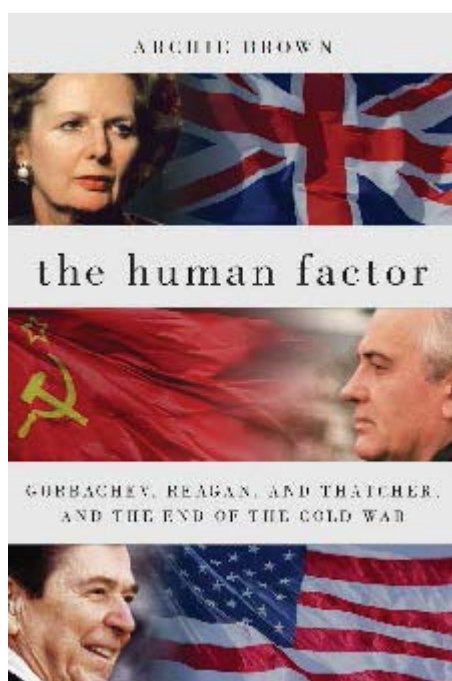
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Book review

BROWN, ARCHIE: THE HUMAN FACTOR. GORBACHEV, REAGAN, AND THATCHER, AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR. OXFORD, OXFORD UP, 2020,

ISBN: 9780198748700 500PP.



St Anthony's College at Oxford University has had a rich tradition in international studies since it was founded at the beginning of the Cold War. The wonderful biography of Raymond Carr,¹ its second dean, published a few years ago by María Jesús González Hernández, allowed us to get to know in detail the ins and outs of that new centre which, in the field of social sciences, specialised in international relations and regional studies, bringing together areas of knowledge which had hitherto been distant within Oxford, such as historiography, political science, economics and law. Since its foundation in 1950, St Anthony's has played an important role in training a new generation of specialists in international relations and regional or *area* studies. Many of the analysts who have nurtured the Foreign Office since the 1960s have been educated at the institution. This centre has not only fed experts and analysts to the main centres of government in Whitehall but has also drawn on them and established strong relationships between its professors and researchers and the centres of decision-making in the United Kingdom. In short, Britain's foreign and defence policy, as well as its post-World War II intelligence community, could not be understood without understanding the role that St Anthony's College and other university centres have played in them.

Similarly, since the 1950s, Kremlinology has been one of the main areas of specialisation of centres such as St Anthony's College. Understanding the strategic thinking of the USSR and the cultural forms that conditioned the behaviour of the subjects and groups that were part of the decision-making process in Moscow became an object of study in itself. A number of brilliant professionals in history, international relations, regional studies, philology, anthropology, psychology and literary and cultural studies devoted themselves to better understanding the functioning of the Soviet Empire, its hierarchies, its armed forces, its internal dynamics and the thinking of its popular strata. Their work served largely to try to anticipate the strategic changes that could take place east of the river Elbe, and to understand and decipher the rationality behind the decisions taken by Moscow and its satellites. Contrary to the usual image of Kremlinology that has become widespread, understanding Russian history, its diversity, the origins of its leaders or the internal ethnic conflicts involved much more work and benefits than analysing the position of each prominent individual in the Party or State during the May Day parades in Red Square.

Among the brilliant generation of Kremlinologists trained at Oxford, Archie Brown has particularly stood out; linked to St Anthony's College since the 1970s, he has been the director of its Slavic studies centre and the vice-director of the institution itself. Trained in the analysis of the Soviet reality, since the wall fell he has specialised in the building of the new Russian Federation and its power mechanisms, for which he has placed particular emphasis on understanding the personal profiles of its leaders in the decision-making process and on building new power networks in *independent* Russia,

¹ González Hernández, María Jesús: *Raymond Carr: the curiosity of the fox. A biography*. Barcelona, Gutenberg Galaxy, 2010.

as well as on the experiences of its elites and the survival of synergies inherited from the previous period.

In the volume he now presents, Brown analyses three key individual actors in the end of the Cold War: Mikhail S. Gorbachev, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, approaching many others in a tangential way. George H. Bush, Eduard Shevardnadze and other key names of the time are also addressed in the paper, thus including a generic approach to the teams and cabinets around them. For Brown, the human factor is an irreplaceable key to understanding the *happy ending* of the Cold War. In fact, he puts it in the hands of his biographical profiles that the chain of events that took place in those years ended in a way generally understood as positive. However, this perception of the importance of the human factor, the individual factor in the final analysis, goes against the structural and necessarily complex analysis of the past. While it is true that, at any given time, the choice of a single decision-maker can be decisive, it is no less true that individuals and their perceptions and interpretations of the world are the product of the structures that illuminate them. In this sense, it is essential to understand these structures as a complex multilevel network in which family, academic, work and political spheres, etc., will necessarily be intertwined. The human factor is important, and probably decisive in many aspects, but personal perceptions tend to share certain overall features with other subjects according to their origin, education, experiences and structures in which a certain individual has been trained and seasoned. We could ask ourselves two questions to test the dimension of the human factor: Would it have been possible to avoid the Cold War with other leaders, would the end of the Soviet Empire in 1991 have been impossible with other leaders, and, finally, would current tensions between the West and the Russian Federation also be the result of that human factor?

The complex relations between present-day Russia and the main Western players, and with its former satellite states, cannot be understood without taking into account the causes and ways in which the Soviet Empire was dissolved and its area of influence dismantled. A subject that has already been analysed by other prestigious analysts, such as Serhii Plokhy, over the last few years.² In this vein, a detailed analysis of the way in which the new independent states were structured internally and their relations with each other, and of the impact the dissolution of the Union had on Russian nationalism, is still pending. The latter was revived by the rhetoric of a *Soviet defeat*³ assumed and enhanced from a wide range of Western chanceries. Its revival necessarily meant that some of the old assurances on which relations between the different members of the Union and its former satellites were based were changed. The dissolution of the Soviet Empire brought, to some extent, the revival of a Russian irredentism that re-read its past, its territory, its leaders and its traditions. As part of these new interpretations of itself and its relations with third parties, Russian nationalism did

² Plokhy, Serhii: *The last Empire: the final days of the Soviet Union*. New York, Basic Books, 2014.

³ Also known as *Russian*.

not hesitate to make the demands for an identity that was particularly linked to the cultural legacy of the Orthodox Church or even the tsarist monarchy compatible, while also claiming the successes of the Great Patriotic War,⁴ of the space race or of great leaders of the past who could range from Peter the Great to Joseph Stalin. This identity and political syncretism had already been tried out in other crisis contexts by Russian nationalism, so that during the emergence of the Second World War Soviet propaganda did not hesitate to print posters calling for general mobilisation against the enemy using icons that were easily identifiable by the Russian population but difficult to live with the Soviet regime.⁵

Following Archie Brown's logic, we should look for the origins of the current tensions in the human factor that facilitated the end of the Cold War. Thus, the very dialectic around the defeat-victory axis could be, in itself, one of the many causes of the current situation. We therefore understand that judgements about the human factor must be made, like all analyses, by measuring its causes and consequences in the short, medium and long-term, assuming its ramifications and possible ambivalences. In the end, what could be seen as a victorious outcome in 1990 could also be the origin of the concatenation of events that led to current tensions. History can give us many examples of this, from the Second Punic War to the Treaty of Versailles. In short, we must consider the need to carry out a prosopographical study on a generation of intermediate and young Party and State officials who directly experienced the dissolution of the Union and the complicated 1990s. These *apparatchik* had a promising career ahead of them in the last years of the USSR and had to reinvent themselves and adapt to the new reality in order to continue with their personal and professional aspirations. These events, in short, marked them as a generation and probably proved decisive in understanding their entire subsequent career. In this respect, we understand that the best example is sufficiently obvious to not require specification. The image of the role of the leaders referenced by Brown that the group we are referring to could have would be very different from what we read in the text. Regardless of which of these visions may be more or less realistic, it is clear that the actors' own perceptions are a determining factor in understanding the rationality or predictability behind their actions. Therefore, understanding the zero-sum dynamic in which relations between the West and the post-Soviet space have been pigeonholed, with particular attention to the Russian Federation, probably requires a review and reinterpretation of events, as well as of what they meant for each of the parties. In the end, for some of the actors this might not have been a total defeat, but only a strategic withdrawal.

In our opinion, probably the most transcendental value of Professor Brown's new study is the need to link foresight studies with historiographic analysis. His work is a good example of the need to vindicate the role of historians in understanding the

4 Núñez Seixas, Xosé Manoel: *El frente del Este: Historia y memoria de la guerra germano-soviética (1941-1945)* (*History and memory of the German-Soviet war (1941-1945)*). Madrid, Alianza, 2018.

5 Calhoun, Gloria: 'Saints Into Soviets: Russian Orthodox Symbolism and Soviet Political Posters'. Thesis, Georgia State University, 2014. https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/history_theses/85

world today and the scenarios of the future that are open to us. Making decisions in the present to move towards the desired future requires a calm reflection on the successes and mistakes of the past.

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