

MILES, Simon: *Engaging the Evil Empire. Washington, Moscow and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War.* Cornell University Press, New York 2020, 231 pages

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Historians, political scientists and security experts studying the Cold War have always been fascinated by the question of why more than four decades of confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union never grew into an open armed conflict. However, the question of the same importance is how it was possible that the rivalry of the superpowers – which had been essential to shaping the postwar bipolar world – rapidly and rather peacefully ended and one of them collapsed and disintegrated in terms of a few months.

The latest book *Engaging the Evil Empire. Washington, Moscow and the Beginning of the End of Cold War* by Simon Miles, an assistant professor in the Stanford School of Public Policy at Duke University whose main research interest is diplomatic and security history, is another attempt to contribute to solving this “puzzle”. As a representative of a younger generation of historians, he is skeptical of the existing interpretations of the Cold War’s end. In his opinion, none of them fully explains the remarkable pace of changes, given what came before – the so-called Second Cold War between 1979 and 1985. Moreover, a standard argument is that at the end of 1970s, détente was dead and with it any meaningful dialogue between the superpowers during the first half of the next decade. Then suddenly things seemingly changed for the better. Surprisingly to many, in solving this “puzzle”, Miles is not focusing on the very end of the Cold War, but rather on the period which he calls “the beginning of the end”. These years corresponds with the already mentioned Second Cold War, namely the last months of James Carter’s presidency and the first tenure of his successor, Ronald Reagan, on the American side, and the final years of Leonid Brezhnev’s rule and a relatively short intermezzo of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko on the Soviet side. In his analysis of the superpower relations between 1979 and 1985, based on an extraordinary primary research in both Western and Eastern archives, Miles identifies three reasons the Cold War ended as it did.

The first key to the rapid and unexpected end of the conflict, as the author says, lies in the events of the early, rather than the late 1980s. He concludes that in the first half of the decade, the Cold War transformed in two fundamental ways:

The perception that the Soviet Union had an edge in the superpower confrontation was replaced by the much more realistic assumption that a balance of power actually favored the United States. As a result, there was a shift from a war of words and back-channel discussions to overt dialogue and spectacular superpower summits. These drifts are closely linked with the second thesis of the book that Reagan's "grand strategy" shaped these processes to a large extent. The US president supposedly implemented the proverbial carrot and stick. The carrot stood for quiet diplomacy which kept the Cold War tensions under control, the corresponding stick was the "peace through strength" concept, as Reagan was convinced that the United States had to rebuild its military strength in order to secure any agreements with the Soviet Union. Therefore, in Reagan's approach a more secure United States would also create a more secure world, deterring Soviet adventurism. This all does not mean that Miles neglects the strategies of the Soviet leadership. On the contrary, based on the Kremlin's intentions, he comes to the third conclusion that Mikhail Gorbachev did not inherit a blank slate when coming to power. The book convincingly shows that Gorbachev and his three predecessors shared the efforts to reduce Cold War tensions in hopes to solve the economic and social problems of their country. This obviously does not mean that the Soviet policy makers completely abandoned the Cold War rivalry. As the author rightly stresses, they just sought to strike a new balance of power, allowing them to compete with the United States more effectively. Such an interpretation basically says that the dialogue between Reagan and Gorbachev after 1985 did not appear out of the blue. Quite on the contrary, it had been preceded by the half decade of engagement which, however, typically remained in the shadows. At the same time, Miles does not miss the important fact that engagement alone did not mean cooperation; for Washington as well as Moscow, the quiet diplomacy was just an intermediate step towards the attainment of their greater objectives, albeit these were changing remarkably in the first half of 1980s.

The book is sympathetic in its moderate volume, demonstrating that the quality of a historian's work should not be measured by the number of characters. Five chapters cover 231 pages in total (index included). Chapter One examines how Moscow and Washington saw the world affairs at the beginning of 1980s, Chapter Two analyses the last two years of Brezhnev's rule (focusing on often ignored back channels of the US-Soviet dialogue), Chapter Three deals with the Andropov era, Chapter Four addresses a short reign of his successor, Chernenko, as well as the frequently neglected efforts to shift superpower relations back to a détente-like basis, while Chapter Five explores the first Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Geneva in 1985. Although the main focus is placed on the events before 1986, we can agree with Miles that the story does not end with the restart of the top-level dialogue between Washington and Moscow. From a certain point of view, it ended neither in 1989 nor with the Soviet Union's collapse, as contemporary foreign-policy mak-

ers still operate in the world shaped by the outcome of the Cold War. The author points out that the experience of the second half of 1980s, when the Soviet Union was trying desperately to stop its decline and maintain its superpower status, while the United States sought to speed this decay still remains in the minds of Kremlin policy makers today. It must be appreciated that Miles avoids cheap cliché in this respect. We can agree with his laconic claim that the Russian regime of Vladimir Putin does not feel nostalgia for the Soviet system – as many committed observers frequently suppose – but for Moscow’s lost international influence at best. Generally speaking, the book’s conclusion titled “Winners and Losers” not merely summarizing the main findings but rather outlining the relations between Washington and Moscow after 1985 is impressive.

Engaging the Evil Empire strengthens our knowledge of the Cold War in one particular way, revealing how the United States and the Soviet Union often misjudged – both intentionally and unintentionally – their position in the world, especially vis-à-vis that of the other superpower. In the introduction, Miles notes that between 1980 and 1985, the real balance of power between the two shifted much less than did their perception thereof. He also asks the important question of why so many US policy makers in the early 1980s believed that their country had fallen behind the Soviet Union at the time, as it later became clear that the Eastern superpower was ready to come apart. This only confirms how problematic Western intelligence analyses and reports were, included those by the CIA. To state an example, in 1985, the agency warned that Gorbachev was *the most aggressive and activist Soviet leader since Khrushchev* (p. 121). At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, the US intelligence community stressed the alleged American weakness and the Soviet expanding influence. Today, we know that the real picture was quite different. This should serve as a loud warning to all historians who are keen to take such types of sources at face value. But the problem was not limited to the intelligence community. As Miles shows, to underrate the American power was a kind of favorite tactic of US policy makers used for their domestic audience during the Cold War. For instance, on entering the White House, Reagan had his analyses pointing to the Soviet enormous economic troubles, similarly to John Kennedy, who two decades earlier knowingly spread a “myth” of the Soviet edge in ballistic missiles.

At the turn of 1970s and 1980s, according to the author, Soviet policy makers concluded that capitalism was in crisis based on the same indicators assessed by the incoming Reagan administration. In this point, however, the question arises if the book eventually overestimates the Kremlin leaders’ confidence in the global position of the USSR at the end of the Brezhnev era. Miles certainly does not miss that Soviet policy makers were not blind to their domestic issues. But he concludes that at the beginning of Reagan’s first tenure they were more focused on the sources of Soviet power. He sees this as a reason, among other things, why they so much sought for a superpower summit at the time – the Soviets hoped to ne-

gotiate with their Cold War rival from a position of strength, anticipating that the perceived gap was likely to close. From the “reaganist” perspective, this happened in the spring of 1983 when the balance of power allegedly favoring the Soviet Union had at last tipped back in the United States’ favor. The shift was illustrated, as Miles argues, by Washington’s willingness to broaden the dialogue with Moscow – the US was supposedly in the position to negotiate while preventing the Kremlin from continuing its worldwide adventurism and thus to remove the critical flaw of *détente* from the 1970s, according to many in the Reagan administration.

But such enormous dynamics rather proves that the claims about the Soviet edge had feet of clay, mostly reflecting either panic or purposeful political interpretations. This could be seen as a weaker feature of the reviewed title. While Miles writes about both “real” and “perceived” shifts in the balance of power between the US and the USSR in the first half of 1980s, he gives no clear answer what was the true nature of this shift. We can argue, for instance, that the shift in the balance of power due to the development of Western military forces, especially high-tech weapons systems, began already before the first tenure of Reagan. One need only look at the changes in the Warsaw Pact military strategy at the dawn of the decade; the alliance was abandoning previous fantasies of a large-scale offensive operation into Western Europe in case of war, acknowledging its own disadvantage. As Miles supposes, even if Gorbachev had wanted to follow Andropov’s strategy after he became General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, he would have played a weaker hand than his former mentor. Did the situation really deteriorate so dramatically over a mere two years for the Soviet Union? Was not it just the interpretation of the balance of power promoted by Reagan and his aides to win domestic support thanks to a narrative that he had raised the country from its very bottom? If the leaders in the Kremlin actually perceived the Soviet Union to be stronger than the United States in 1981, why did they so consider, to state an example, the Western potential response during the Polish Crisis of 1980–1981, resulting in the Kremlin’s rather defensive approach and abandoning the Brezhnev doctrine in praxis? This is where a broader analysis would be useful.

It is fair to say that Miles coped with other difficult tasks well. This is especially true in his approach to Ronald Reagan. He is aware that to many scholars, Reagan remains a simpleton, on whom the nuances of statecraft were lost. Beyond that, as Reagan became the avatar of American exceptionalism, for better or for worse, a historian must deal with not just Reagan the man but also Reagan the myth. Therefore, the author faced a key question: Was the real Reagan the one who wrote to the Soviet leaders privately about his desire for peace, or the one waging a public ideological war and funding military technologies that would enable the US to wage a nuclear conflict, too? Miles concludes that in times of crises, like the shoot-

ing down of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 (KAL007) on 1 September 1983 by the Soviet Air Force, the latter Reagan seemed to be winning out. At the same time, the book shows that Reagan genuinely wanted to reduce the Cold War tensions, albeit on the West's terms. As the author explains, the US president believed that the path to peace lay in verifiable arms reduction agreements, fearing that failing to control nuclear weapons could lead to Armageddon. But he saw the process of reducing that danger as one taking into account the superpower competition, ensuring US superiority and not driven solely by cooperation with Moscow. Therefore, he came with a dual-track approach to the Soviet Union – cooperation and confrontation, negotiation and rearmament.

Miles avoids demonizing Reagan, but at the same time, he does not depict him as an ultimately thoughtful strategist. He stresses, for instance, that nearly a year after the president's inauguration, no comprehensive US foreign policy had been formulated; Reagan just felt he could engage Moscow from a position of strength and he sought to bring the Soviet Union back into the international community on Western terms. Thus, diplomatic engagement was obviously inseparable from his strong public pledges that the United States would continue to lead *the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history* (p.39). The book reveals well how the strategy was incomprehensible on both the domestic and international scene. Given Reagan's harsh public rhetoric, some American conservatives were not able to understand how Washington could negotiate with the Soviets, if they were "barbarians" in the president's words. The fact that much of the Reagan administration's initial engagement with Moscow remained quiet, allowing speculation that the superpowers were not talking at all, combined with Reagan's massive investments in rebuilding US military power raised the concerns of Western policy makers that Washington would not negotiate with the Kremlin. Indeed, at the beginning of 1980s, they were only told by their American counterparts that the two superpowers had talked, but never where and when. It seems that this US strategy still confuses many Cold War historians as well. However, Miles finds out that the superpower dialogue actually proceeded through various mediators, like the US and Soviet ambassadors to both German states.

The existence of behind-the-scenes engagement explains, as Miles stresses, why critical moments in the first half of 1980s – especially the KAL007 tragedy – never gave way to conflagration. What is important is that the book is a valuable contribution to the discussion of how close the nuclear doomsday was in the years of the Second Cold War. The author is rather skeptical in this respect, repeating, among other things, the conclusion of his previous research on the NATO "Able Archer-83" exercise which reveals how reports that Washington and Moscow came close to nuclear war were retrospectively exaggerated. The book also points out the essential problem of some military measures that – in my opinion – could be

easily applied to the Reagan era: To those behind them, such steps seem to be strictly defensive in nature, addressing a perceived unfavorable imbalance, but to the others, the same measures appear purely offensive and threatening. Therefore, we should keep in mind that Reagan's Cold War strategy was not without major risks and despite his effort to keep at least back-channel dialogue alive, it included a non-negligible chance of an unintended escalation. Moreover, as we know today, Reagan's military buildup proved to be largely excessive in the early 1990s.

In the overall evaluation of the book, it is necessary to appreciate, first and foremost, an enormous scope of sources. Miles uses documents from thirty-five archives located in nine countries! He also uses a "pericentric" approach to the Cold War, focusing not only on two superpowers, but also on the roles of their allies. In addition, his analysis is balanced, not considering mostly the Soviet or American perspective, but rather trying to understand both sides' motives. At the same time, it provides very good insight into the situation in the superpowers' leaderships at the beginning of the 1980s. Especially the look at US politics is more sophisticated than usual (at least in the Czech academic circles). The author turns down some deep-rooted clichés like the claims that the superpower relations deteriorated mostly due to Reagan's presidency (in fact, the tensions had been high already at the end of Carter's tenure and Moscow saw the change in the White House as an opportunity), or that Gorbachev's predecessor, Chernenko, was so tragic figure that no Western leader was interested in negotiating with him.

For the sake of completeness, some more questionable aspects of the reviewed title should not be neglected. As was mentioned above, the book is based on archival sources of outstanding volume and scope. This, however, comes with two challenges: Given the relatively low number of pages, interpretation of some documents seems to be rather sketchy. The impression is exacerbated by the fact that even secondary issues are often explained via primary sources, neglecting the literature dealing with them. This applies, for example, to the Polish Crisis in the early 1980s. As a result, some claims by the author are inevitably built on a narrow selection of the available documentation which weakens their conclusiveness and sometimes leads to minor inaccuracies. Also, the reference to Reagan's famous phrase "Evil Empire" in the book's title may seem shallow, as the book actually explains that the famous term was used just once, at a very specific low-profile forum and took on a life of its own later. Despite this minor criticism, it is without a doubt that Miles's book represents a very valuable contribution to the Cold War research and no historian who is interested in the superpower competition in the second half of the 20th century should miss it.