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Marc J. Selverstone, *Constructing the Monolith: The United States, Great Britain, and International Communism, 1945–1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, £36.95/$49.95). Pp. 318. ISBN 978 0 674 03179 1.

In a field as crowded and contentious as that relating to the start of the Cold War, it is hugely difficult to say anything original. The events are so widely known – and the varying interpretations so frequently discussed – that finding room for a new reading is fiendishly tricky. Nevertheless, along with that other hotly contested space, the Vietnam War, the origins of the Cold War continue to be a popular area with scholars and publishers; each year several major studies emerge on this period, which inevitably adds more fuel to perennial debates and compels scholars to deliberate further what caused the struggle between Washington and Moscow.

Undaunted by this, Marc Selverstone's new book wades into the topic by uncovering a little-discussed area: the intellectual and strategic construction of a Soviet monolith that took place in Britain and the United States in the immediate post-World War II era. Between 1945 and 1950, Selverstone argues, officials in Washington and London undertook detailed discussions of the threat posed by the Soviet Union and, more importantly, whether international communism (and, more specifically, the Soviet bloc) was a monolithic structure controlled by the Kremlin. Toward the end of this period, he writes, any nuanced discussion started to fall by the wayside as intellectual currents and events moved officials toward accepting the idea of a Soviet-controlled communist monolith. "That emergent vision of a highly coordinated, conspiratorial, malevolent force became encoded in the image of a 'Communist monolith' – arguably the most dominant representation of international communism during the height of the Cold War" (2).

The importance of this argument is self-evident: if, for example, US and British officials discerned tensions in the Soviet bloc in the early Cold War period then there was surely the potential to try and widen that gap and erode the cohesiveness of Moscow's empire. Equally, a concerted study of the way that these patterns developed provides important new details on the origins of the Cold War. Two of the burning questions that confront scholars of this period are why did the Cold War start, and why were greater efforts not made to avoid it? With its detailed discussions of what precisely US and British officials thought about the Soviet Union and the way, moreover, that this process evolved, Selverstone's book provides an insightful account of the reason why diplomacy was not utilized to prevent the deterioration of east–west relations. At no point during this period did British or American officials perceive there to be an obvious advantage to utilizing diplomacy with the Soviet bloc, or adopting measures aimed at breaking down the developing impasse. Furthermore, an ill-judged attempt to try and broker disharmony behind the Iron Curtain might well prove self-defeating. And if there was no practical policy reason for adopting this position, there was certainly no rationale for conveying mixed messages in public either. Indeed, as the period covered by the book develops, it became less likely that American or British officials would consider downplaying the omnipresence of the communist monolith in its public messages.

This examination of evolving thoughts regarding international communism is most successfully detailed in the chapter dealing with Yugoslavia, when Tito's break with Moscow compelled strategists on both sides of the Atlantic to consider the prospect of using this as a tool to drive a wedge between the Kremlin and its satellites. Little examined in existing accounts, the Yugoslavian incident serves as the hinge point in Selverstone's analysis – the moment when Western views of international communism began to harden. Tito's very public falling out with Stalin led to an intense discussion – as would also happen in later years, especially in the 1950s, when the Eisenhower administration deliberated the merits of "roll-back" and "liberation" – as to whether the US should work to exploit this tension in the fabric of the Soviet bloc. Instead, US officials determined that to do so might only strengthen the communist monolith; working to exploit Soviet–Yugoslav tensions, it was suggested, could lead to a hardening of Moscow's position. Thus one official even suggested a policy of "general indifference" – the "less attention the government and press paid to Yugoslavia, the better". The impact of this, Selverstone astutely notes, was a narrowing of the domestic debate: "Such a prescription made some sense with respect to the practice of foreign policy, but it might also have stifled a valuable conversation at home about the nature and prospects of international communism" (115).

Following this missed opportunity – and the subsequent abandonment of a so-called "wedge strategy" – the Western view hardened inexorably. By 1950, and particularly after the Soviet bomb, the fall of China and the outbreak of the Korean War, an entrenched Cold War mentality was in place on both sides of the Atlantic, which portrayed all communists as reading from the same pamphlet, elided prevailing doubts about the dangers of such an approach and actually benefited British and American policymakers in terms of forming a political consensus within which to develop their policies. In fact, this development had become all-pervasive by 1950:

> Although numerous observers in both countries would comment on fissures in the Communist world, practically all of them did so from a monolithic perspective, interpreting schismatic movements as a residual development rather than a primal condition of the Communist lifecycle. Hardly anyone in a position of responsibility assumed that Communist parties were "born free" of the Soviet pull. (222)

The transatlantic development of this intellectual construct, therefore, marks an important point in Cold War scholarship. For it demonstrates that, often independently of each other, key figures in Washington and London were thinking along similar lines when it came to debating the nature of international communism. Moreover, it provides a clear depiction of the Western construction of the Cold War – based on long-standing traits in British and American societies, and bolstered by appraisals of developments in Europe and Asia – that resulted, in 1950, in the solidification of a dominant Cold War mentality. Finally, it provides an understanding as to why US – and, to a lesser extent, British – officials outlined the communist threat in such alarmist terms, both publicly and in private. Eventually, the acceptance of a communist monolith was the path of least resistance for analysts in both nations.

Notwithstanding these achievements, however, there are elements of the book that work less well, or which could have been further developed. First, there is unevenness evident in the balance between the American and British sides. Selverstone is authoritative on both sides, and provides a compelling description of the way that both nations undertook this process. Nevertheless, the British angle is explored in less detail than is the American side – with it feeling, at times, as though a paragraph or two on British developments has been tagged on rather than forming an integral part of the narrative. To be sure, this may well have been unavoidable and there may simply be fewer available sources on the UK side, but it is a notable feature of a book that, in spite of its subtitle, it is much more of an "American" tale. That, of course, is not necessarily a problem. Yet in presenting it as a "comparative study" it would have been useful to have more of the British side in there. By the same token, it is also intriguing how rarely British and American officials seemed to discuss the themes they were investigating with each other. Only on a few occasions does Selverstone detail an Anglo-American discussion about views regarding international communism. Again, this may have been deliberate – indeed, Selverstone states early on that he intended to couch "American and British efforts at driving wedges within their respective evaluations of the bloc they were trying to bust" (5) – but it would, I think, have been helpful to provide more details of how these analytical efforts were permeating into higher-level Anglo-American discussions.

There are also a couple of areas where further expansion would, if not absolutely necessary, have provided interesting further details. By casting his net so firmly within the ideological sphere, Selverstone's study tends to cover many of the familiar touchstones regarding the Cold War (the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin Airlift, the fall of China, Korea). Once more, this is inevitable given the book's central argument and, without question, is a crucial part of the approach. Framing this intellectual development within the context of the emerging Cold War, after all, is of the utmost importance here. In doing so, however, the author occasionally misses the opportunity to examine, or consider, other elements of the nascent Cold War that may well have further developed his framework. An obvious example is Germany. East–West disputes over what to do about Germany in 1945–46 were one of the major causes of the Cold War, yet make little more than a fleeting appearance here. The same is also true of NATO, which despite its importance in firming up the US military commitment to Europe is little discussed in the book. Examining issues such as these would have enabled Selverstone to situate his analysis within a broader context – detailing the impact of emerging strategic events on developing American and British ideologies.

The final point I want to make – and which, like the others, is more to do with wanting more than taking issue with what is there – is that it would have been beneficial to take this model further. Once the monolith was established, after all, it had enormous implications for the way that Western officials viewed the Cold War world. To a certain extent, Selverstone does take his analysis further: throughout the book, astutely utilizing important new texts that have emerged in recent years, he demonstrates the importance of events in Southeast Asia in this evolving view of global communism. There, as Mark Atwood Lawrence has detailed, a clear progression was in evidence – which, by 1950, saw the Truman administration accepting the fact that the French struggle in Indochina was a war *against* communism rather

than *for* European imperialism. The events in this region, moreover, provide a double-edged bonus for Selverstone's argument: not only does the developing situation in Indochina provide further evidence for the way that British and American officials conceived of communism, it also opens up a natural discussion about China and its role in the global communist movement following Mao Zedong's victory there in 1949. Even so, I would like the book to have taken this line of analysis further with respect to the developing world. In the 1950s, as is well known, the underdeveloped areas of the world quickly became much more important to both Moscow and Washington. But this had been coming for a number of years beforehand. What would have been interesting, therefore, would have been to have had more information on the extent to which analysts in London and Washington considered these areas when the concept of a communist monolith was being developed. The Southeast Asian example is of obvious importance here; had analysts in the West been more willing to consider Vietnamese nationalism as an independent branch of communism then, just maybe, the situation there would not have panned out as it did and resulted in the tragedy of the Vietnam War. Beyond this, though, it would be interesting to know whether said analysts considered the possible implications of their conclusions for the developing world in later years. Although, as Selverstone argues, the greatest impact of the "monolithic framework" may have been on "domestic affairs" (221), it also had a profound effect on the peoples of the developing world. When, in the 1950s, US officials began to appraise emerging nationalist movements in the Third World – and, more often than not, ascribed any anti-US position among them as being communist-inspired and responded accordingly – its roots lay in the policy discussions that had taken place several years earlier. And even if these officials did not consider the broader implications of "creating the monolith," their failure to do is also noteworthy.

Asking for more, when an author is pressurized by publishers' limits and word allowances, is somewhat indulgent. But it is also testimony to the expanse of ideas that Selverstone has succeeded in opening up. Beautifully written, thoroughly researched and thought-provoking, *Creating the Monolith* should serve to reinvigorate discussions about the origins of the Cold War that had previously been in danger of becoming stale and repetitive.

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