During the forty years that followed World War II, Soviet leaders and elites struggled to preserve and expand the great socialist empire that emerged out of this ordeal. After the historic victory over Nazi Germany, the majority of the Kremlin leaders, party elites, the military, the security police, and members of the military-industrial complex came to identify themselves with the idea of a great power with a central role in the world. The Russo-centric ideas among Russians in the Communist elites and the national feelings of non-Russians (for instance, in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) became integrated into this new collective identity. Although terrible losses and material destruction during the war exhausted Soviet society and generated a yearning for a lasting peace and a better life, these same factors reinforced the growing mood among Soviet elites that the Soviet Union should and could be a global empire.

Documentary evidence on the Politburo’s activities, as well as diplomatic and intelligence documents, reveal that the Kremlin recognized global realities of power and sought, above all, to build Soviet strength. At the same time, the Soviet socialist empire was constructed and defended in the name of revolutionary and anti-imperialist ideology. The promises of Leninist ideology—the global struggle against inequality, exploitation, and oppression; international solidarity with victims of racism and colonialism; radical improvement of the lives of the toiling masses—remained written on Soviet banners and in party platforms. The blend of geopolitical ambitions and Communist ideological promises—the revolutionary-imperial paradigm—guided Soviet international behavior throughout most of the Cold War. Soviet leaders from Stalin to Andropov, as well as the majority of the party elite, foreign policy officials, and security police agents—even the most cynical and pragmatic among them—were always obliged to justify their actions by using general ideological formulas and couching them in Marxist-Leninist jargon.

Joseph Stalin was the most murderous but also perhaps the most cynical and pragmatic of Soviet leaders. He was determined to consolidate the Soviet territorial and political gains made during World War II and to build an exclusive security buffer around the USSR. Until the fall of 1945, he was spectacularly successful: among his assets were the power of the Soviet army, the partnership with the United States and Great Britain, the devastation and weakness of Central European countries, the civil war in China, and the high prestige of the Soviet Union as the primary force that crushed Nazism. Stalin hoped he could achieve his expansionist goals without antagonizing the United States. But the Americans soon proclaimed themselves the guarantors of the free world against Soviet expansion. The Soviet-American confrontation was, from the start, geopolitical and ideological, a clash between two forms of modernity, two ways of life, and two potentially global empires.

The Cold War provided a powerful validation and justification for the Soviet revolutionary-imperial paradigm. Gradually it became clear that, given America’s policies of containment and rollback of Communism, the Soviets had to either dismantle their empire or fight for it with all means at their disposal. Stalin was quick on the uptake: even before the Cold War began, he was seeking to restore his absolute control over Soviet elites and society and extend it over the countries of Eastern Europe. Massive state propaganda, capitalizing on popular feeling, created a wartime home front. Most members of the elites shared Stalin’s perspective that the United States was preparing for another war. As before World War II, Stalin sought to consolidate Soviet elites and society with a series of increasingly murderous purges. Militarism, great power chauvinism, and xenophobia in Soviet society peaked in March 1953, when the Kremlin vozhd suddenly died.

Stalin’s successors quickly concluded that the war with the United States was not inevitable. Acting collectively, they designed a “new foreign policy” with the objective of reducing tensions and ensuring a longtime “peaceful coexistence” between the Soviet Union and Western countries. However, the new evidence does not support the previously held views that the role of ideology declined after Stalin’s death in favor of pragmatic state interests. In fact, the new Kremlin rulers and Soviet elites continued to subscribe to the revolutionary-imperial paradigm, which remained the core of their collective identity.

Several factors reinforced the strength of this identity. First, the collective leadership inherited a great empire from Stalin and was determined not to lose it. In addition to the memories of World War II, ideological and security considerations delegitimized any attempts to argue for Soviet withdrawal from Central Europe. For instance, by 1953, East Germany became in the eyes of Soviet leaders and elites the jewel and a hub of their empire in Central Europe, a valuable geopolitical and ideological asset that the Soviet Union had to maintain at any cost. The Kremlin also sought to maintain an alliance with China with generous assistance and by offering support of Chinese foreign policy ventures. The East German factor forced the Soviet Union to keep a huge military presence in Central Europe at all times, and the China factor constantly pushed the Kremlin to demonstrate its revolutionary credentials and loyalty to the common ideologi-
detente from the position of strength. In was only a cover for the

EPILOGUE They chose East-West detente, although at the same time, they sided with Chi­

cal principles. Even after the Chinese leaders challenged the Kremlin’s supremacy in the Communist camp, Soviet leaders vacillated between improving relations with the United States and restoring the Sino-Soviet ideological alliance. They chose East-West détente, although at the same time, they sided with Chinese and Vietnamese Communists in the Vietnam War.

Second, Kremlin politics favored a leadership that combined flexibility with toughness and pragmatism with ideological correctness. Khrushchev triumphed over Beria and Malenkov, claiming that they were prepared to give away East Germany to the West. And he prevailed over Molotov, arguing before the party and state elites that Molotov’s rigid diplomacy helped to unite Soviet enemies instead of dividing them. Although Khrushchev publicly denounced Stalin, he felt the need to prove he could cleanse the sins of Stalinism from Soviet Communism while selling it globally as an effective alternative to American capitalism.

Third, the economic and military power of the Soviet Union grew rapidly in the years after Stalin’s death. During the 1950s, the Soviet Union became the second thermonuclear superpower after the United States. With the growing power came the temptation to break through the American-made barriers of containment around the Soviet empire and to force the United States and other Western countries to accept an accommodation more favorable to Soviet state interests. Simultaneously, the growth of Soviet capabilities, highlighted by the launch of Sputnik in 1957 and by Yuri Gagarin in space in 1961, enormously enhanced the attractiveness of the Soviet model of modernization among the underdeveloped countries around the world.

Khrushchev’s personal dynamism and ambitions and his periodic, albeit in­

consistent, attempts to de-Stalinize the Soviet system and society became a major engine behind changes in all areas of Soviet life and policies, including foreign policy. At first, Khrushchev’s energy and the “new foreign policy” allowed the Soviets to make significant advances in the international arena. But Khrushchev’s passionate belief in the revolutionary-imperial paradigm, along with the confrontational logic of the Cold War, kept pushing him to tests of will against the United States and other Western capitalist powers. Khrushchev believed that the emerging military equilibrium between the Soviet and Western blocs would force the Western powers to retreat globally. At the same time, he firmly believed that Soviet Communism was the wave of the future. His obsession with the use of nuclear brinkmanship and his ideological messianism explain why the “new foreign policy” quickly changed its emphasis from tension-reduction and defensive pragmatic measures in Europe to risk-taking in Berlin and to exportation of the Soviet economic and political model to the third world. In 1955 and 1956, Khrushchev and the collective leadership successfully destroyed American plans to encircle the Soviet Union. From 1958 to 1962, however, Khrushchev was supporting so-called movements of national liberation and socialist regimes throughout the third world, from sub-Saharan Africa to Latin America. This trend culminated in Khrushchev’s extraordinary and risky decision to protect Cuba by deploying Soviet missiles there in 1962. Only when Khrushchev was confronted with the immediate prospect of thermonuclear war did he retreat, sobered.

The Cuban crisis discredited the practice of nuclear brinkmanship and unrestrained ideological messianism. The new collective leadership that ousted Khrushchev in October 1964 discovered a safer way to promote Soviet interests: negotiations with Western powers and détente from the position of strength. In Leonid Brezhnev’s view, supported by his lieutenants Gromyko and Andropov, détente with West Germany and agreements with the United States would be better for Soviet state interests and for the Soviet socialist empire than applying pressure on West Berlin and continuing the arms race with the United States. Brezhnev was crucial for détente in the Kremlin leadership. He was the first Soviet ruler who built his legitimacy among the elites and Soviet people not only as the advocate of the accumulation of strength and ideological toughness but also as a peacemaker. And he was, unlike Khrushchev, an effective, patient negotiator. Without Brezhnev, the “high” U.S.-Soviet détente of 1972-74 probably would never have taken place.

However, Brezhnev, despite his enormous power, was more a consensus seeker than a decision maker. And he, like his Politburo colleagues and the majority of his political generation, remained a prisoner of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. Although Brezhnev and the Politburo renounced the use of military force for blackmail, they never felt they had enough of it. At the height of their nuclear capabilities, Soviet rulers and the military still believed that the United States remained superior and had policies aimed “at blackmailing them or else defeating the Soviet Union in a nuclear war—a mirror image of how American conservatives tended to view Soviet intentions.”

During the second half of the 1970s, Soviet security and foreign policies were guided not by a coherent strategy but rather by ideological and bureaucratic inertia and various factional and political interests. Despite the arms control negotiations with the United States, the massive Soviet military strategic buildup continued without interruption. And in the third world, especially in Africa, the Soviets again, as in the Khrushchev era, found themselves on a slippery slope of ideological-geopolitical expansionism, in a zero-sum game against the United States.

American neoconservatives claimed that détente was only a cover for the
Kremlin’s drive toward military superiority and victory in the Cold War. They were wrong. Since Stalin’s death Soviet society had been changing; during the 1960s and 1970s, Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization and then Brezhnev’s détente produced the first significant cracks in the Soviet home front. Soviet elites, beginning with the artistic and scientific intelligentsia and ending with some “enlightened” party apparatchiks, began to overcome the legacy of brutal violence and paranoid insecurity. The partial opening of the iron curtain and growing opportunities for international travel and exchange led to a slow diminishing of Soviet xenophobia, militarism, and ideological collectivism. Although the Soviet military, the KGB, and the military-industrial complex remained staunchly hard line, other bureaucracies began to lose their Stalinist edge. Among industrialists and economic managers, there had always been strong support for expanding trade and economic ties with Western countries. Among educated elites, the ability for comparative and free thinking began to grow. A recent study of the Soviet ideological landscape in the mid-1960s detected “a steep decline in the mobilization power of the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the consequent erosion of the ideological basis of the regime’s legitimacy.” A distinguished Russian scholar concluded in another study that by the early 1970s “the national dream that the Communist idea could be realized” was dashed to pieces. Instead of the “strong consensus” of the early 1960s, just one decade later there were “complete schisms” and “real conflicts” that “threatened the very existence of Soviet society.” This trend continued during the détente of the 1970s, and even during the early 1980s, and prepared the scene for the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Soviet ideology remained, in a bizarre way, part of the Soviet way of life, but instead of mobilizing, it produced duplicity, cynicism, and doubts. After the brutal suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968, even the most idealistic Soviet intellectuals lost interest in the ideological message of Communism. The political leadership, bureaucracies, and professional elites began to regard the official ideology as a ritual external to their real mind-set. Ideological dogma remained an instrument of regulating domestic political discourse and delineating domestic politics. It also remained a crucial part of the official collective identity, centered on great power chauvinism, while the increasingly nominal international Communist movement still validated Moscow’s place at the world’s center.

This book confirms the paramount importance of individual leaders in explaining Soviet international behavior. Stalin, in particular, controlled most crucial areas of policy making, especially state security, ideology, and military and foreign affairs. His monopoly of major decisions was striking in scope, but in the end this monopoly magnified the effect of his mistakes and miscalculations and contributed to the onset of the Cold War. Stalin’s successors were much lesser leaders. But their roles, too, were vital, as Khrushchev’s nuclear brinkmanship and Brezhnev’s contribution to détente demonstrated. The disintegration of Brezhnev’s personality, a result of his illness, contributed to the rapid decline of U.S.-American détente and the growing arms race in Europe and, finally, to Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979. This disastrous invasion was the last major demonstration of the powerful inertia of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. The Soviet leaders, alarmed by the prospect of losing Afghanistan to the United States (they underestimated the potential of Islamic fundamentalism), resorted to the use of the Soviet army to bring about a change in leadership in the country. They expected to withdraw troops after a few weeks or perhaps months. Instead, they got bogged down there for almost a decade. The invasion of Afghanistan gave a second wind to the U.S.-Soviet confrontation. It also was a watershed in the history of the Soviet empire. The endless war against the Islamic guerrillas began to undermine domestic support for Soviet expansionism.

In Washington, the Reagan administration hoped to use the Soviet predicament in Afghanistan to force the Soviet Union into withdrawal from the third world. It also applied pressure on Moscow to dissuade the Soviets from invading Poland in 1980–81, when the Solidarity movement challenged the Communist regime in that country. But economic, political, and military pressures from the West only pushed the Kremlin to become a beleaguered fortress and to persevere. Although Soviet leaders secretly renounced the use of military force in Poland, this decision had little to do with American policies. They also preferred to risk more losses in Afghanistan rather than suffer the humiliation of unconditional withdrawal. In the end, the second wind of the Cold War only perpetuated the Soviet confrontational stance and the anti-American component of the collective identity of Soviet elites and the aging Politburo leadership.

It was Ronald Reagan’s luck that his presidency coincided with generational change in the Kremlin and the exit of the Old Guard. Mikhail Gorbachev was the first Soviet leader since Stalin to reappraise drastically the relationship between ideology and Soviet security interests. From a Soviet apparatchik, Gorbachev evolved into an ideological statesman par excellence, but, instead of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm, he came up with his own “new thinking”—a vague messianic formula for integration of the world, an ideology that drew on the ideals of democratized Communism, cherished two decades earlier by many intellectuals of Gorbachev’s generation. The general secretary ended up being closer in substance to Western social democracy than to Marxism-Leninism. Gorbachev wanted to reform the Communist Party, transform Soviet society, and integrate the Soviet Union into “the common European home.” He harbored, however, a number of grand illusions. One was that the Soviet Union would grow
stronger after liberating itself from the Stalinist legacy and the shackles of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. Second was that Western capitalist countries would help achieve this breathtaking project of merging Soviet reformist Communism with a democratic European socialism.

As was the case of previous Soviet leaders, Gorbachev’s leadership played a crucial role in changing Soviet international behavior. At the end of 1988, Gorbachev publicly rejected the ideological rationales behind Stalin’s foreign policy goals and renounced the use of force, the silence about past crimes, and the barriers of isolation that propped up the socialist empire. Within a year, this empire collapsed in Central and Eastern Europe. Two years later, the Soviet Union itself imploded and disintegrated into fifteen independent states.

There was a long road from Stalin to Gorbachev that prepared this amazing transformation. Above all, there was a declining will inside Soviet political and intellectual elites to risk a war. Stalin’s successors began the shift from confrontation to détente in 1953. Khrushchev’s pressure on the West from 1958 to 1962, for all its highly negative consequences, was not driven by purely aggressive aims; in his clumsy way, the Soviet leader wanted to convince the Western powers to end the Cold War on terms acceptable to the Soviet Union. Brezhnev, who had personal experience of World War II, was convinced that the Soviet people deserved a lasting peace. The implementation of détente policies required from the Brezhnev leadership, de facto, a surreptitious retreat from class warfare ideology to ideas of partnership and cooperation with Western powers, despite their capitalist natures. Brezhnev’s détente provided an indispensable bridge from Stalin’s quiet war-mongering and Khrushchev’s blustering to Gorbachev’s ending of the Cold War.

Ideology, it should be stressed again, looms large in the history of the Cold War in general and in the story of the rise and fall of the Soviet empire in particular. Ideological factors contributed to Soviet determination to confront the United States and expand Moscow’s socialist empire, until it became truly global in the 1970s. Despite the decay of its belief system and growing cynicism, the Soviet leadership and elites continued to articulate its international behavior and security interests in both realist and ideological language. But the same ideological factors made the Soviet Union behave in peculiar, even bizarre, ways in the international arena. In particular, outdated or misguided ideological assumptions made Stalin inadvertently trigger the confrontation with the United States and later continue the Korean War. Different, but equally misconstrued, assumptions led Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and other Kremlin leaders to believe that it would be possible to negotiate a peaceful coexistence with the United States from the position of strength. Last, but not least, ideological factors contributed substantially to the Soviet downfall, as Gorbachev, in his messianic fervor, promoted the “new thinking” and rejected the use of force as the essential tool of power politics, even to preserve the state order. In the ultimate historical irony, the Soviet socialist empire, whose foundation was the ideology of revolutionary violence, perished by the ideology of nonviolence.

This book on Soviet international behavior brings out the extraordinary role and nature of American behavior in the Cold War. The United States never accepted the Soviet socialist empire in Central Europe and fought against all Soviet-supported revolutionary movements in Asia, Africa, and Central America. Unlike Western Europeans, Americans provided the USSR very little room for compromises and deals. With the exception of the 1960s and the time of Nixon-Kissinger détente, U.S. administrations insisted that the Soviets change their behavior and even their regime before any lasting accommodation could become possible. The American ideology of political freedom and market capitalism was every bit as global and messianic as Soviet Communist ideology. In this sense, the Cold War developed a zero-sum battle between the two messianic centers—imposing the bipolar confrontational logic onto the world and pushing other countries, movements, and ideologies to the sidelines.

The United States emerged from this epic struggle as the only remaining superpower. But this book should serve as a caution to the Americans, who seem to draw triumphalist lessons from this victory and apply these lessons to foreign policy in other regions of the world. Some American politicians and pundits are too quick to claim that containment of Soviet Communism worked. Those who do so usually have even today only a very vague idea about the country that was the target of containment. Reagan’s overzealous admirers continue to claim that his anti-Communist crusade and SDI won the Cold War. In retrospect, it is hard to see SDI as anything but a bit player in the finale of the confrontation. At the same time, Reagan played a vital role in the final stages of the superpowers’ confrontation. He sensed a historic opportunity in his relationship with Gorbachev and finally seized on it. It was Reagan the peacemaker, negotiator, and supporter of nuclear disarmament, not the cold warrior, who made the greatest contribution to international history.

The United States was also lucky to have an enemy that represented the ideological, economic, and political mirror image of Western capitalism. This enemy was the product of the European search for modernity. In other words, the Cold War was a competition between very distant cousins, who fought over the best way to modernize and globalize the world, not between the friends and foes of modernization and globalization. Some Western scholars and many Russians today believe that Russia had the great misfortune to be a testing ground for an especially vicious and violent means of modernization that promised a shortcut
from economic and social backwardness to modernity and acculturation, rational planning, and social justice. At first, the Soviet version of fast-track modernization granted the Soviet Union a victory in World War II, propelled it to superpower status, and won millions of supporters in the underdeveloped third world. Later, however, especially during the 1970s, it became obvious that the American model of modernization, with its political freedoms, private entrepreneurship, and allures of mass consumerism, was much more innovative and resourceful. With the help of the American model, Western Europe, Japan, and some other U.S. allies (although not all of them) emerged as societies with greater prosperity and quality of life than any in the Soviet bloc. Western Europeans managed to combine the benefits of market with social programs. The developed capitalist countries were also much more successful at economic and ultimately political integration than were the countries of the Soviet bloc.

What mattered in the end was the decline of Communist ideology inside the Soviet empire and among elites and the growing appeal of Western models of democracy and modernization. Contrary to Leon Trotsky’s expectation in 1926 and Khrushchev’s boasts in 1961, the world capitalist train ran at ever-faster speeds. It became gradually obvious to the leaders, elites, and general citizenry in the USSR that the train of Soviet socialism would never catch up with it; rather, it was lagging further and further behind, disastrously. This, in turn, undermined the validity of Soviet ideology and the imperial identity of the most “enlightened” segments of Soviet elites. If the Soviet road of modernization turned out to be not a fast track but a deadlock, why not change tracks? If the socialist empire was increasingly burdensome and generated “afghanistans” and bankrupt regimes in Central and Eastern Europe that needed to be propped up with Soviet subventions, why not abandon this empire? Gorbachev, with his false “new thinking,” represented a futile, but historically understandable, closing of the circle: he wanted to integrate the Soviet anti-capitalist experiment with Western democracy. The rebellious cousin was knocking on the door of a distant cousin, asking for reconciliation.

However misguided, Gorbachev’s “new thinking” ensured a peaceful end to one of the most protracted and dangerous rivalries in contemporary history. The colossal military power of the Soviet Union, amassed for decades, did not and could not compensate for its profound flaws—the erosion of ideological faith and political will in the Kremlin and among influential segments of Soviet elites. Gorbachev and those who supported him were not prepared to shed blood for the cause they did not believe in and for the empire they did not profit from. Instead of fighting back, the Soviet socialist empire, perhaps the strangest empire in modern history, committed suicide.