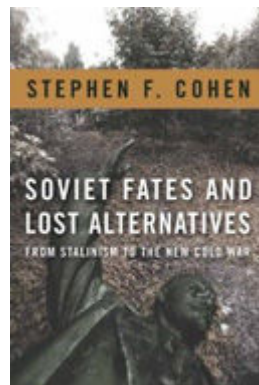


Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives: From Stalinism to the New Cold War

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to thank you all for joining us for what I know will be an extremely interesting discussion about Russia and U.S.-Russia relations.

Our speaker is Stephen Cohen, whose reputation as an astute Russian scholar has only grown with time. His presentation today is based on his recent work, [Soviet Fates and](#)

[Lost Alternatives: From Stalinism to the New Cold War](#). This is a book which you will want to read, digest, and add to your library.

For much of its history, the former Soviet Union strived for greatness, even modernity. Yet, as our speaker writes, at each critical juncture when situations arose and reform seemed possible, either reaction from within or policy failures coming from the West contributed to failure.

Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives is a series of very provocative essays that look at typical moments, key players, and instrumental events that could have turned the tide of history in the former Soviet Union. These essays examine events from [Stalin](#) through [Putin](#) and reveal Professor Cohen's genius for proposing different interpretations and challenging popularly held assumptions about the course of Soviet history, the fall of communism, and the effect of Russia's policies at home and abroad.

By showing that within Soviet society alternatives did exist, our guest puts into question much of the reasoning behind the widespread belief that the Soviet Union was not able to reform and that its breakup was inevitable. In assessing who was responsible, he not only analyzes Soviet leadership, but also considers U.S. policy failures and the role various administrations have played.

Although the tone of U.S.-Russian diplomacy has improved, in the end Professor Cohen advocates for the "blame-Russia-first" concept to be replaced by a partnership of respect before it is too late.

Stephen Cohen is a critical thinker who is known for questioning conventional wisdom. He has concentrated on developments in Russia since the [Bolshevik Revolution in 1917](#), and the country's relationship with the United States. His academic work is described as compelling and profound.

His publications include [Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution](#), [Rethinking the Soviet Experience](#), and [Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia](#). All have won him great respect, not only from those who agree with and support his findings, but also from among those who dispute his conclusions. This in itself is quite an achievement.

Currently our guest is a professor of Russian and Slavic studies at New York University. He also taught at Princeton. Professor Cohen has been the recipient of two John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowships, a Rockefeller Foundation Humanitarian Fellowship, and an NEH Fellowship.

Please join me in welcoming this penetrating observer of Russian politics, our guest this afternoon, Stephen Cohen.

Remarks

STEPHEN COHEN: That was an introduction. If I could get it notarized and take it with me, or take you with me—the only problem with the introduction is that that's pretty much my talk, so we can go right to the conversation.

I'm really happy to be here. I have never been to Carnegie before. Actually, I don't get invited many places anymore, for much the reason that Joanne Myers mentioned. Somebody said to me, when I was happy to be someplace the other day, "As long as you've been around, you ought to be happy to be anyplace."

The other reason I'm happy to be here is that I just finished my course at NYU with 300 students. The course was called "Russia Since 1917." As I look around the room, I'm very happy that everybody here was born before 1991. When I started teaching about Russia at Princeton, I was a relatively young man, and my undergraduates were about ten years younger than me. I was 28 and some of them were 21. So we had some historical reference points in common, and we lived through a lot of intense history during the almost 30 years I was at Princeton.

Now I can't be sure what they have ever heard of. I don't say that as a joke. It's just that it gets harder and harder to teach. You say "[Gorbachev](#)," and there's a kind of, "Yes, I've heard that someplace." So what is autobiographical for us—and as I look around the room, I don't want to include anybody in that "us" who doesn't want to be included—is history for them, and it's no longer clear to me exactly where history and contemporary affairs begin anymore. You always have to keep that in mind. But I think I don't have that problem here.

I want to talk today about American-Russian relations, because that's what is of interest, particularly since President [Obama](#) has reframed the issue. But since it is a book event, I will take just a few minutes to give you a sense of what the book is about and how it relates to the subject of American-Russian relations, which I will then get to.

This book is the first—but it turns out not to be the last, because I just finished another book that is co-autobiographical, with my wife [Katrina vanden Heuvel](#), about our own experiences in Russia—the first sort of intellectually autobiographical book I ever wrote. All the themes in the book are all the themes of my intellectual and personal engagement with Russia that now has been 40-some-odd years.

I became a graduate student in the 1960s. Over the years I have lived there, and seen, studied and written a lot.

These chapters, as Joanne said, are about different turning points in modern Russian and Soviet history, but what unites them is my abiding interest in alternatives—and not just Russian, but that's what I know best. When a society, an elite, a leader, a country come to a crossroads—and that's what history is full of, crossroads—why do they take one road and not the other, especially if this is a fateful crossroad that is going to affect the future of that country and maybe the world?

I first got interested in alternatives growing up in Kentucky. I grew up in a completely segregated small town in Kentucky, where people of my generation took segregation for granted. It was the natural way of things. When you get older, you realize something is wrong. Then a teacher told me that during the Civil War the presidents of both the Union and the Confederacy hailed from Kentucky, [Jefferson Davis](#) and [Lincoln](#).

So I figured if two guys came from Kentucky and took different roads, there must have been a crossroads in racial history in Kentucky's history. So I got interested in it. Then I fell in the hands of Russia when I went to Indiana University to study. But I took that theme of alternatives and crossroads with me, and I have stuck with it all these years. It's about the only thing historical that I write about.

It's a contrarian theme, as is the book, because the idea that there are turning points and roads that didn't have to be taken in Soviet history is not popular in my field and never has been. So I have been something of an intellectual outsider. But I am not alone; there have been two or three of us at any given moment. But it has been a minority perspective that things didn't have to turn out, for better or worse—usually worse—in Soviet history as they did.

Gorbachev came to power, almost exactly, as you all remember—you can't say that in a class of students—almost 25 years ago, in March 1985, as the drama of his reforms unfolded. I see Ed Kline, the president of the [The Andrei Sakharov Foundation](#) there, and Ed and I had worked together with dissidents for many years—when Gorbachev called up Sakharov in exile and said, "Come on home. Go back to work," Ed and I were just looking at each other. This was something one might dream of, but did one expect to see it in one's lifetime. Ed and I did, but not many people did.

The point here is that Gorbachev reintroduced the idea of alternatives. It looked like something was going to

unfold in the Soviet Union that people hadn't expected. So the subject became popular and I became popular with it, briefly.

With the end of Gorbachev, the field, along with the media to a certain extent, reverted to the view that almost everything that had happened, including the end of the Soviet Union, had to happen, either because of the communist ideology or because of the nature of Russia. That was the main division in the field: Are they terribly bad because of communism or are they terribly bad because of Russia? There wasn't much wiggle room to get out of that. But we tried with our students.

So once again, the idea of alternatives isn't popular. In fact, I was reading not long ago one explanation of why the Soviet Union ended. The author, a very eminent senior person, said the Soviet Union died for a lack of alternatives. It's catchy. But if you take it literally, for a historian it's preposterous. There are always alternatives, some good, some bad.

In the book, what I try to do is show that at the most fateful moments in the Soviet Union—the rise of Stalin, which would lead to the Terror, the fall of [Khrushchev](#), which would end the reformation of the Stalin system for 20 years, the end of Gorbachev and of the Soviet Union—at each of these moments there was an alternative. This is not what has become popular—and I actually like it, but I don't do it—what-if history.

What if [Hitler](#) died in a Bavarian beer bar? What would happen? Or what if the assassination of the leader of the Leningrad Communist Party organization in December 1934 [[Sergey Kirov](#)], which set off the blood purges, had been, instead, the assassination of Stalin? Would the same thing have happened?

These are useful to check your own assumptions about what you think causality is.

But I do something different. I take actual, existing situations. Nothing is made up. Here was a struggle, all real issues, moments, people, political forces behind them, segments of society supporting this course or that course. And I ask, why did one and not the other prevail?

I don't want to say that my explanations are persuasive. If you take the reaction of my field, they are not persuasive. But they provoke discussion, and in a field where discussion isn't the most vigorous aspect of the field, I think it's useful. And students at least ask the questions.

Also thinking about alternatives in Russian history gives you some sense of how Russians think about their own history.

When my wife Katrina and I sit down—and we have in Russia since the early 1980s—in kitchens and then public forums and now again in kitchens, this is what people talk about: Why did it happen? Could it have been different? Who's responsible? What are the alternatives? That conversation is useful.

What I do in the book, for example, is in the first chapter I look at a man named [Nikolai Bukharin](#), who was the Soviet state founding father who most of all represented an alternative to Stalin—he was against the collectivization of the peasantry, in a word—in the further development of the Soviet system. I find him in that chapter in prison awaiting trial and execution in 1937.

For those of you who remember [Arthur Koestler's](#) novel *Darkness at Noon*, Rubashov, Koestler's protagonist, was based on Bukharin. At least Koestler thought so; he got some things wrong. But that's how Bukharin was remembered. Now we have discovered archived documents in Stalin's archive that tell us what Bukharin was writing and thinking and doing in that prison before they shot him, for a year.

So I do two things. I go into the cell with the material and I reopen the question of what in Russia is known as the Bukharinist alternative to Stalin. Was it feasible to leave the peasants—82 percent of the population in 1929, when this happened—as free farmers and not herd them into state farms? So I look at that alternative.

Then I go to the other end of this story, because it seems that the forcible collectivization of the peasantry led in some way to Stalin's 25-year mass terror in the country, the political Terror. I go then to the death of Stalin and the moment when his successor, Khrushchev, decides to let the survivors of Stalin's Terror out of the [gulag](#) of prisons, concentration camps, exiles, and go home. Some didn't have any homes to go to. Many had been away too long. But they were survivors.

Katrina and I knew in the early 1980s and later quite a few people who were still alive who had come home in the 1950s and 1960s. They had told us their stories. I wanted to tell their story but use the story in this way.

If Khrushchev took such a daring act, he was serious about the reformation of the Stalinist system. He obviously thought that releasing the victims was a step toward de-Stalinizing the system. And it was, but it also led to

Khrushchev's overthrow. It was just too much and he had gotten old. He was 70. He wasn't in great shape when he was overthrown. But this is what precipitated it. His colleagues had simply had enough. A lot of them were implicated in these crimes.

I ask, what happened to the reformation that Khrushchev began, and why did it have to wait 20 years for Gorbachev?

Many Russians today believe that had the Khrushchev reforms been continued, by Khrushchev or somebody else, it would have reformed the Soviet Union in a way that it would still exist. A separate question.

Then I come to Gorbachev. I have three chapters in the book about Gorbachev's reform. Here I come to three contrarian conclusions, as Joanne said:

The first is, it's not correct that the Soviet Union was unreformable. In five years, Gorbachev carried out reforms that no one thought possible, even those of us who had believed before that it was reformable, to the point of democratization.

Secondly, you can't say meaningfully, in historical terms, that Gorbachev failed, because he did two things of historic importance.

- He took Russia, which had existed 1,000 years as a state, closer to real democracy than it had ever been in its history. I would add, although people don't agree with me, Russia was closer to democracy than it has ever been, because it has been in de-democratization since shortly after the end of the Soviet Union. But leave that aside, that's a remarkable achievement.
- And along with President [Reagan](#)—all credit due—he brought all of us closer to the end of the Cold War than anybody had thought possible.

So to speak of failure is not exactly right. Obviously, he failed in the sense that he lost his country. But he left something behind that was absolutely historic.

I don't think the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991; it was abolished.

I make an argument that to call it collapse misses what actually happened. If you think it collapsed, you expect certain things to happen afterwards. If you think it was abolished in pursuit of property, you would expect other things to happen, which have happened—the looting of the country. But that again is a separate story.

Then that brings me to the topic today and to the seventh chapter of my book, which I call "Who Lost the Post-Soviet Peace?" Had I been cleverer than I am, I would have left it at that, "Who Lost the Post-Soviet Peace?" But I go on to speak of a new Cold War, which a lot of people have objected to.

I can make a case that we have been living in either a new or renewed or continued Cold War since 1992. But it doesn't really matter. It's just that the relationship went south very quickly and very badly. In the book I ask why that happened.

Since it became part of the American consensus that the relationship had gotten bad—and that didn't happen until about six or seven years ago—the answer to why it got bad was one word: Putin. It was good before Putin and it got bad after Putin.

I argue that that's not what happened, that the bad relationship, or the new Cold War, began to unfold in Washington in the 1990s under the [Clinton](#) Administration—all apologies to people who worked for or feel sentimental about the Clinton Administration. But it was a big administration, with lots of people making their contributions, some for and some against this policy.

About 17 years ago, the United States adopted a set of policies that almost inevitably—nothing is inevitable—led to a very bad relationship, and that therefore, because this new Cold War began in Washington, averting it, changing it, had also to begin in Washington. The Russians were simply too aggrieved and bitter, and no Russian leader could have gotten the political support, which you still have to do in Russia, to enact a turnabout in Russian policy.

Therefore, I was very excited when Obama said, when he was running, that he was going to reset American policy. Maybe it was [Biden](#) who first said this, but Obama took it up. I was excited for two reasons. First, I thought he understood that something bad had happened and that American policy had to change course, and that the reset was essential.

It's important at this point, though, to tell you the historical nature of my argument about how things got this bad. [Jack Matlock](#) was [here two months ago](#). He was Reagan's ambassador during the Gorbachev years, and one of the finest ambassadors that America ever had.

Ambassadors are defined by their times, not in the abstract. As an ambassador who reacted to what history required, Jack was certainly among the greatest. You have heard part of this from Jack, because he and I are the only two people in the United States, who speak in public, who have this point of view.

The 40-year Cold War was ended by Gorbachev, Reagan, and President [George H. W. Bush](#) sometime between 1988 and 1990.

There have been a lot of conferences of people who were participants in the so-called end of the Cold War. They disagree whether it ended in 1987, when Gorbachev and Reagan abolished an entire category of nuclear weapons—it has never been done since—in 1988, when Reagan walked onto [Red Square](#)—Katrina and I were there, a horribly hot day in July—and when asked if this was the "[Evil Empire](#)," he said, "No, it's not the Evil Empire anymore"—whether that marked the end of the Cold War, or whether it was at [Malta Summit](#) in December 1989, when the first Bush and Gorbachev said the Cold War was over.

But Reagan had written in his diary when he left office in January 1989, "The Cold War is over." He thought it was over.

Why do I emphasize this? Because it ended, by any count, at least two years before the Soviet Union ended.

Those two events are now conflated in the history books, certainly in the high school history books and to a certain extent in the college textbooks, with implications for what our children understand and what our policymakers think they understand.

The second point is that the Cold War, if it ended, was ended by negotiation, not force of arms, not economic collapse. As [Condi Rice](#), who participated in it—she was then working for [Scowcroft](#), who was the first Bush's national security adviser—wrote in her diary, it ended without winners or losers. That was correct.

It didn't seem to have ended; you will remember what happened in 1990-91. The two sides, Moscow and Washington, actually against what London and Paris wanted—[Thatcher](#) was against it—reunited Germany. That was the epicenter of the Cold War.

Secondly, the first post-Cold War war was the Gulf War, the first war against [Saddam Hussein](#), who had been a client of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's Soviet Union essentially supported Bush's war against Saddam, to drive Saddam out of Kuwait.

So you would say, yes, clearly the Cold War is over. Or so it seems. But then something happened. When the Soviet Union ended in December of 1991, the American political policy-media establishment rewrote the history and declared that America won the Cold War. That has become the orthodox narrative.

The political policy result of that, almost immediately—I speak now of the early 1990s—was now to view Russia, as had emerged from the Soviet Union, as what? A defeated nation.

Since our only paradigm of war remains World War II, policymakers began to think of Russia as analogous to Germany and Japan after World War II, supplicant nations, defeated nations, which had implications for policymaking. This became the revisionist triumphalist view and the basis of American policy under Clinton. It carried on through to [George W. Bush](#). That policy was still in place when President Obama became president in January 2009.

These policies generated what I call the new Cold War and generated the deterioration, very steady, in the relationship. It had the potential to be much more dangerous. I want you to think back to August 2008, to what we call the [Russian-Georgian War](#). I don't think that's what it was. I think it was a proxy American-Russian war. We created the Georgian regime and the Georgian military. We led [Saakashvili](#), wrongly perhaps, to think that he had American NATO support for what he did. He was the first to fire. American military minders were traveling with the Georgian forces.

What did this mean? Those of us who have some memory know that never, except in Cuba, did we ever come so close to an eyeball-to-eyeball military confrontation with Russia. This occurred not in Berlin, not in the Third World where there were proxy wars, but right on Russia's border. We now know—I didn't know at the time, but we now know two things:

- [Cheney](#) presented a plan to Bush urging NATO intervention in the war on the side of the Georgians.
- We also know that the Russians took this seriously enough—at least this is what German intelligence says—to think that if NATO came in, it may go nuclear. Therefore, the Russians rolled their missile launchers into [Ossetia](#), where the war was being fought in Georgia—not with warheads, but to put them in position.

Now, this isn't good. This is very bad. This had all the potential to be a Cuban missile crisis again. Yet nobody noticed.

Whoever you think was to blame—let's say the Russians were to blame, let's say Saakashvili was to blame, let's say God was to blame—the point is that the relationship after the end of the Soviet Union led to this, and it was going to lead to the same sort of thing, maybe worse things, unless American policy changed. This was the situation that Obama inherited when he became president.

So how has Obama done with the reset? How has he done? Has he averted a new Cold War with Russia?

In three respects, he has done very well:

President Obama has established a friendly working relationship with Russian President [Medvedev](#). They have done so on the basis of generational affinity—they are both going on about what young, hot guys they are and how they have to get together and lead the world to a better place—and on their affinity as exceedingly weak leaders at home.

When Obama went to meet Medvedev, he was plunging in the polls. Congress had rebelled against him. He had lost control of his own party. Medvedev, of course, was in the shadow of Putin. So they needed each other. A little foreign policy success, as every American president discovers along the way, is good for the poll numbers, to a certain extent. So they developed this relationship. It's not a bad thing.

Secondly, the general atmosphere has clearly improved. There is less talk about Cold War-like conflicts, less villainization of the other side, and more talk of cooperation.

Thirdly, Obama—and this is the one tangible thing he did—revived the arms-control/reductions process that had existed for 40 years that the second Bush simply jettisoned. Any sensible person would say, good gosh, anything they can do to make us safer in a nuclear world is a good thing. It's a very imperfect agreement, but it's a good thing—better than nothing.

So it seems to me these are all three significant developments. The situation is better than it was when Obama came into power.

But—or, as the Russians say, *odnako*, "however"—the reset, and thus the relationship with Russia, is exceedingly fragile and vulnerable, because five fallacies—or I would call them conceits—that were characteristic of the Clinton-Bush era Russia policy remain elements, to some degree—it's hard to be sure to what degree—of the policy of the Obama Administration.

1) The administration is still meddling in Russia's internal political affairs. This is a no-no among great powers. But we have been doing it in Russia since 1992. Obama still talks about democracy promotion. One feels his heart is not in it, but he has to do it for constituency reasons. There's a State Department budget for it and all the rest.

But the real thing they have done that is a mistake is that they have tried to play, as they put it, the Medvedev card against Putin. "Putin's a bad guy, Medvedev's a good guy. He's our guy. He's our horse. We'll ride him."

- First of all, this is misinformed about the situation in Russia. Medvedev is not even a horse yet. He may become a horse, but at the moment there is only one real horse running in this race.
- Secondly, the Russian political class sees what they are doing and they are resentful. Even [Merkel](#), who is close to Putin, complained to Washington about this, telling them to stop it, that it was demeaning to everybody. But it's a reflex.

2) There is still Washington's presumption that Russia is weak and we don't have to treat it as a great power, and that if Russia wants to be meaningful in world affairs, it needs the United States. This is what we were told by Vice

President Biden on three very publicized occasions. When he went to Georgia, to [Tbilisi](#), right after Obama left Moscow last July with Medvedev, and basically said, "Russia is a spent power. It's a dying nation. We don't have to negotiate with them."

People said, "That's old Joe running his mouth," but it wasn't. It was a scripted speech, and it reappeared two weeks later as an [interview](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*. So this is the position of a powerful faction in the Obama Administration. Is it Obama's position? I have no idea. But it's certainly Biden's position. So it's this view that Russia isn't serious and we don't have to take it into account.

I would argue, however, in fact, that arguably in terms of national security, the United States needs Russia more than Russia needs us.

All the recent great-power skirmishes between the United States and Russia have been won by Russia—Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan. It's not a turf friendly to the United States for the fighting of a Cold War. It's Russia's turf. Leave aside the geography. There's intermarriage, there's language, there's cultural affinity, and all the rest.

3) Something has happened in Moscow that is not noted or, if it's noted in Washington, they don't care. Moscow doesn't really care about us very much anymore. We have become for Russia what Russia used to be for us—a problem to manage, but not a priority.

What matters for Russia? Berlin, Beijing. These are the two most important emerging bilateral relationships in the world, and I don't think anybody told Washington. It's called the Eurasian policy. Russia sits in Europe. Russia sits in Asia. Beijing is in Asia. Berlin is in Europe. This is what we do.

America is not a European country or an Asian country. America doesn't have a policy; it has mood swings when it comes to Russia. Therefore, there's nothing we can do about it. We have to manage the nuclear problem with them, but what do we need them for? They are not even a trading partner of any consequence with us.

There is still the post-Soviet American conceit of the 1990s that Russia cannot have a legitimate national interest that is different from America's national interest. Where we see this most vividly is in the case of Iran. Russia does not want Iran to become a nuclear country. For one thing, Iran might be able to develop short-range missiles that could hit Moscow. It probably would be years before it could put a warhead on a transatlantic missile. They are more worried about it than we are. But Russia has a completely geopolitical problem with Iran.

- First of all, it lives near Iran, and in its other areas, it just sees NATO coming at it. It can't afford another unfriendly country, and a big one.
- Secondly, Russia has about 20 million Islamic citizens of its own. Over the last years, as you all know, from terrorism to civil wars, Russia has had a major problem with violent Islamic radicalism. Not once ever in these years has Iran ever done anything to incite it against the Russian state. It could, easily. But it hasn't armed it, it hasn't encouraged it, it hasn't given it weapons, no intelligence, nothing. That could change. If it changed, it would be a disaster for Russia.

As the Russian foreign minister, [Lavrov](#), says repeatedly—and nobody listens—"We cannot be on the frontline of the war you're creating between two civilizations, because we are part of that other civilization, too." Absolutely true. If we don't like it, blame God. He or she created that geopolitics. But what is Russia supposed to do?

That's why you see this in this tortured act on the sanctions. Let's do sanctions, but sanctions that don't really get the Iranians mad at us. On the other hand, why don't you all do something really tough and keep them from getting a nuclear weapon?

They don't know what to do. There is a struggle and a debate in Moscow about this. But they cannot alienate Iran to the point of hostility. They cannot. Leaving aside all—everybody says, "Oh, they get \$1 billion for every reactor they build." They can build reactors for [Chávez](#) and for India and for anybody. They don't need that money. They can get it elsewhere. It's the geopolitical danger, or non-danger, that Iran represents.

This is where America can't make this transition. Give the devil his due. Russia has a problem. We have to figure out a way, when we are dealing with Iran, to deal with Russia's problem, too.

4) Missile defense. It's in absolute conflict and it has been since the Reagan "[Star Wars](#)" program. The reason I say that these make Obama's reset vulnerable is that in the case of missile defense, they wrote the conflict right into the prologue of the new treaty. The Russians insisted that there be a passage that says that if the United States pursues missile defense in a way that Moscow perceives as a threat to Russia, it can withdraw from the treaty. The senators who oppose the treaty on those grounds are absolutely right about that anomaly.

They are however wrong about one thing. They are saying, how can you have a treaty where one side threatens to withdraw? Did they forget that in 2002, under Bush, the United States withdrew unilaterally from a much more important treaty, the [Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty](#)?

But this is now institutionalized in language in the treaty. So if we push with missile defense, the Russians will withdraw. If we don't, Obama is going to take a beating at home.

5) Most importantly—on this I'll end—NATO expansion. Nobody wants to talk about NATO expansion. I had an unpleasant experience yesterday. I taped an international affairs television show. In the middle of the discussion, the host said, "Missile defense."

I said, "Well, you can't look at missile defense apart from NATO expansion."

He said, "I don't want to discuss that. It's a closed subject. It's over."

One thing I learned from being in television for many years is that you don't argue with the host. If that's what they want to do, they do it.

But that's false. That's wrong. NATO expansion is not over for the Russians. It's a reality. NATO is sitting on its borders. It's not about future NATO expansion; it's about current.

NATO expansion represents the following to Russia: It represents a profoundly broken promise to Russia, made by the first Bush, that in return for a united Germany in NATO, NATO would not expand eastward. This is beyond any dispute.

People say they never signed a treaty. But a deal is a deal. If the United States gives its word—unless we're shysters, and if you don't get it in writing, we'll cheat you—we broke our word. When both Putin and Medvedev say publicly, to [Madeleine Albright](#) and others, "We, Russia, feel deceived and betrayed," that's what they are talking about.

So NATO represents on the part of Russia a lack of trust: You break your words to us. To what extent can we trust you?

Secondly, it represents military encirclement. If you sit in the [Kremlin](#) and you look out at where NATO is and where they want to go, it's everywhere. It's everywhere on Russia's borders.

But there's something even more profound that is a taboo in the United States. NATO expansion represents for the Russians American hypocrisy and a dual standard. They see it this way, and I can't think of any way to deny their argument.

The expansion of NATO is the expansion of the American sphere of influence, plain and simple. Where NATO goes, our military force goes. Where NATO goes, our arms munitions go, because they have to buy American weapons. Where NATO goes, Western soldiers go, who date their women, who bring along their habits, and all the other things. It's clearly, undebatably, indisputably an expansion of America's sphere of influence.

So there has been a tremendous expansion of America's sphere of influence since the mid-1990s, right plunk on Russia's borders, with all the while, every American administration saying to Russia, including the Obama Administration, "You cannot have a sphere of influence because that's old thinking."

The Russians may be cruel, but they're not stupid. In other words, what they say [America is saying] is, "We can now have the biggest sphere of influence the world has ever seen, and you don't get any, not even on your own border. In fact, we're taking what used to be your traditional sphere of influence, along with the energy and all the rest. It's ours now"—again, this idea of a winner-take-all policy.

This is the enormous resentment in Russia. The relationship will never become a stable, cooperative relationship until we deal with this problem.

Does it mean Russia is entitled to a sphere of influence? I don't want to think for Jack Matlock, but Jack thinks yes, depending on what you mean by "sphere of influence." They can't occupy countries. We had a [Monroe Doctrine](#). But the point is that until this is worked out, the relationship will never truly be post-Cold War.

The problem is, it's taboo in America to talk about this issue of who has a sphere of influence, who is entitled to it. I think there are solutions, but you can't even get the question asked. If you can't get the question on the agenda, you obviously can't come up with an answer.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Just dialing back in history for a moment from all these fascinating contemporary issues to the key turning points of 1918 and 1988, [Kerensky](#) and Gorbachev, how do you come down on the interplay between underlying social, economic, and political forces vis-à-vis the influence of leadership and individuals in influencing crucial events?

STEPHEN COHEN: On both sides or just on the Russian side? I don't feel I have the authority to talk about American politics, because you really would have to know a lot about the discussions in Washington and what was going on. But there is a debate among International Relations academics in universities. Did the Cold War end for material, objective reasons or was the end a function of ideas and political leadership?

I take, on the Russian side, the latter view. No Gorbachev, no end to the Cold War, because it was Gorbachev who initiated it with his so-called new thinking. But that's just the beginning of the question.

Now, I should hasten to say that my wife and I have been close with Gorbachev for 20 years. We see him two or three times a year. He has been very kind to us. So I admit a certain bias in his favor.

But the reality is that everybody who has studied it on the Russian side agrees that there was no other leader anywhere in sight who had those ideas. Then the question becomes, where in the world did this guy get these ideas? How did a guy who came up typically in the very nasty Soviet [nomenklatura](#)/Communist Party bureaucratic system suddenly emerge with all these contrarian ideas? I would focus the discussion there.

Reagan is an interesting case. If Reagan hadn't met Gorbachev halfway, nothing could have happened. Gorbachev to this day is giving Reagan credit, full credit.

What we know about Reagan is two things:

- He always hated nuclear weapons, atomic weapons, ever since he first heard about them, even when he was a Democrat.
- Secondly, the "[Star Wars](#)" for him was a way of solving the nuclear problem: You just put a roof over your head and it would never get in. It didn't work.

But you can see Reagan striving to solve the problem of nuclear weapons.

Then there was a woman in the United States who was a friend of the Reagan family, who persuaded Reagan that Gorbachev was a Christian, because he had been baptized. All peasant children were baptized, just in case, during the Soviet regime. But that got Reagan interested in Gorbachev. He said to this woman, "Does that mean he's not a real communist?"

The reality was, he wasn't a real communist, but not for the reasons Reagan thought.

Then Thatcher, who knew Gorbachev a bit, made that famous statement to Reagan: "This is a man we can do business with." So Reagan decided that here was a chance to do something about the nuclear weapons with a person who wasn't a real communist, and herein lay a history.

So you come back to leadership and ideas. Remember that Reagan was fiercely opposed by the majority of his national security team when he was dealing with Gorbachev, and so was Gorbachev.

That's how I kind of come down on this. Obviously, these guys operated in the real world of economics and all the rest. But if you had to choose one factor, that's what I would emphasize.

QUESTION: To ground some of your terrific historical insights into the news of the day, where do you see Russia's position coming from on this question of the [Brazil-Turkey-Iran nuclear deal](#)?

It seems counterintuitive in the sense that Russia bought into the similar deal that we, in fact, bought into a few months ago, of the nuclear swap. Second of all, it might speak to the ambiguity, the dilemma, that you expressed very well concerning Russia's view of Iran and its nuclear ambitions. It just seems an odd position to take.

STEPHEN COHEN: I don't know what it adds up to. What we know is that Russia initially proposed a similar deal, where Iran would send it its spent fuel and get back these rods or something. Then it fell apart. Now these other two countries come up with something that would appear to present Iran in a somewhat conciliatory light, but the

Russians don't seem to be buying into it. [Ivanov](#), who is deputy prime minister, said that he didn't know if you could trust them on this.

I actually don't know, but I accept the fact that there is a ferocious struggle over this whole issue about Iran in Moscow and that it is probably the single toughest foreign policy problem for Russia. Beyond that, I don't know.

I don't even know what sanctions the United States is going to present to Russia and China to sign yet. Do you?

QUESTIONER: No.

STEPHEN COHEN: The rubber hits the road when we see what it is. But it isn't going to solve the problem.

QUESTION: You indicated that there was a promise on the part of the West that NATO would not expand. In an [article](#) in *Foreign Affairs* last fall, [Brzezinski](#) said just the opposite. He said, on the basis of information from the archives that have been disclosed, it's clear that there was no promise made.

How do we, who are not as familiar with what's going on as you and Mr. Brzezinski, make that judgment?

STEPHEN COHEN: Since this is being recorded, I will answer in the most diplomatic language that I can think of. Brzezinski is wrong and he has never been in an archive.

I don't know why he would oppose this. His own protégé, Brent Scowcroft, acknowledges that it happened.

Condi Rice—would we take her word for it? She later became the secretary of state of this aggressive Bush foreign policy. She was party to these negotiations, and she wrote a book called [Germany Unified and Europe Transformed](#). She has three pages on exactly how it happened.

[Genscher](#) was the foreign minister of Germany at the time. He came up with this as a way to bridge the differences between Washington and Moscow about what would happen to a united Germany.

Remember the context. Thatcher didn't want a united Germany. The British were afraid of a powerful Germany. [Mitterrand](#) didn't want it either. But least of all did they want what they called "an unanchored Germany." Remember that expression? Germany floating around, whatever that means, as though you could ever anchor Germany once it was reunited.

So the solution was, how about if we put it in NATO? Obviously, the Russians were not going to buy this. They were going to withdraw their support for unification. So the first President Bush told [Baker](#) to tell Gorbachev if he would agree to this solution, NATO would not move—and Baker motioned one inch to the East. Every participant in those discussions agreed that this happened.

Where it breaks down is the view—and Gorbachev is blamed for this in Russia—that it wasn't codified in a document. So you could take the view that we are all at heart—and I hope there are no used-car salesmen in the room—we are all shysters. Too bad. The Russians didn't sign it; they got just what they deserved. Or we can take the view that the word of the United States in international affairs means something.

That's what happened. I don't know why Brzezinski—I didn't realize he had said that. I don't even know why he wants to get involved on this issue. It might have to do with the legitimacy of bringing Poland into NATO. That may be what is on his mind. But it happened, and rather than deny it, we need to decide what we're going to do about it.

May I take one minute to give you a follow-up to that?

It happened again. You will all recall that after we were attacked on 9/11, one nation, one leader, first and above all else, came to our defense, Putin and the Kremlin. He was the first to make the call to Bush. He said, "George, we're with you. Anything you want us to do we will do."

Then Bush decides to send the troops to Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban. He calls up Putin and he says, "Do you mean it?"

He says, "I mean it. What do you need?"

"We need your intelligence," because the Russians really know Afghanistan. "We could use all the overflight rights."

Putin says, "We'll give you that, and in addition, we'll give you something else. We have something called the

[Northern Alliance](#). "The Northern Alliance is this fighting force that the Russians left behind when they left Afghanistan, Russian-trained, Russian-financed, just in case. Putin says, "We'll give it to you."

So that fighting force, the Northern Alliance, fought for the United States and saved American lives, because Northern Alliance soldiers died instead.

Putin was almost alone on this call, we know now. His national security people's position was, "We'll just stand on the sidelines and watch America bleed to death. We won't help the terrorists, but why should we help the United States after what they have done to us?"

Putin said, "No. The result of this will be, at last, a real partnership with the United States. This is something that they will pay back."

What did Bush do within two years?

He moved NATO a second time closer to Russia and he withdrew the United States from the one treaty the Russians really cared about, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. That was the bedrock of their nuclear security.

After that, nothing we could give Russia, nothing we could say to Russia would make them trust us. They link these two events, the broken promise about NATO and our lack of gratitude of after 9/11, to the fact that we are simply not a reliable, or even an honorable, partner in world affairs.

I don't like my country being thought of like that, in any country. It's a bad thing that has happened. Politically, you have to figure out how to erode this mistrust, which is very institutionalized in Russia, even among the intellectuals. Don't think that it's just the [KGB](#) or the [FSB](#) [Federal Security Service] or the security forces. I would say the majority of intellectuals in Russia do not trust us. The ones we listen to, this little minority, love us to death, but the majority just don't trust us.

QUESTION: Professor Cohen, notwithstanding what you have just said about Putin helping the United States on a strategic level in the early 1990s, I would like to ask you a little bit about his domestic policies. I was reminded of this by the [article](#) in *The New York Times* today about all the journalists who have been beaten up and cowed.

My question is, do you think that had someone else come to power after [Yeltsin](#) other than Putin, what I think is perhaps Putin's attitude towards the United States, towards domestic discontent, towards domestic criticism—might it have been different had someone else come with a little bit more of a liberal point of view?

STEPHEN COHEN: This is a very difficult question for me to answer, because a number of the journalists who were killed were personal friends of myself and my wife, who is a journalist. Katrina worked on a Russia newspaper during the [perestroika](#) years. She got to know a lot of journalists. [Anna Politkovskaya](#), who, most of you know, is the best-known victim, played the piano in our living room a few years ago. We weren't real close, but we were friendly.

How to put this? I have two unmarried daughters. I wouldn't care for either of them to marry Putin. But we have gone crazy in this country about Putin and about the great villain that he is. Some of this is treated in the book.

De-democratization, which is the word used, of Russia began under Yeltsin in the 1990s. The driving force was the giving away of unbelievably valuable state assets to people without any legitimacy. Once the new political class emerged, on the basis of illegitimate property.

Why do I say it's illegitimate? Because every poll in Russia, even today, says that 70 to 80 percent of the Russian people don't think that property is legitimate. That class could never permit real democracy again.

What is real democracy? It has to be a representative parliament or congress. Russia has had centuries of strong executives. It never had an independent sustainable parliament. A representative democracy requires a parliament.

Nobody who has that property, who is a supplicant of that property, who receives rent from that property, who works for the property owners in Russia, is going to favor free elections in Russia, period, end of the story. So they start fixing elections. Some were fixed a little bit—they switched a few votes here—some were egregiously fixed. Some were done by controlling television. Some were done by shooting journalists.

It's all related to property and this property question in Russia. Until the property question is solved, this problem is not going to be solved.

Now Putin comes to power. At first he decides to go to war with the oligarch, the property owners. Then he

decides to move some of that property to his own people. Now the system is even diversified. Other institutional groups are now in on this whole property-sharing/redistribution deal.

I think that in terms of foreign policy, any strong leader out of Yeltsin would have reacted as Putin has. They just had it with us. Putin, all things considered in foreign policy, is pretty good at it.

Anybody who can go and address the [Reichstag](#) in German, even though he learned it as a KGB agent—he charmed Germany. Merkel loves him. A lot of people like him. He's a formidable character.

The question at home that you ask is a harder question to answer. I think temperament and his KGB background do play a role. If you decide that you don't trust the staff you inherited, because Yeltsin left him his staff, and you need people you can trust—and every person who becomes a leader or a presidential candidate in any country wants his or her own people around him or her. It's considered a prerequisite of leadership.

Putin didn't have anybody except KGB people. Since he was a kid, he had been in the KGB. He wasn't an assassin. He was an intelligence officer in Germany. He came back and had a civilian career, but, as he himself said, you are never a former KGB person—but more importantly, all the people he knew and trusted.

So you bring these people in, and their mindset is that you make problems go away rather than solve them. So they are tougher than, let's say—look at the people around Medvedev. They are all lawyers. Putin is a lawyer. But they think in a different set of solutions.

So, yes, had it been another person, other than Putin, it might not have been so repressive. But let me leave you with what I think is a fact.

We focus on the murder of journalists. I believe that the last time Katrina and I counted, which was 2007, more journalists had been assassinated under Yeltsin than under Putin. I'm not saying Yeltsin was "worse" or "better" or anything, just that it's related to the property redistribution which began under Yeltsin. Journalists die because people don't want them to write about their wealth and their corruption. That's the only reason journalists are being killed.

Unfortunately, we are complicit in this. We abetted the creation of this oligarchic system by telling them, "Yes, it's privatization. We'll send our people," and [Larry Summers](#) and [Robert Rubin](#), God bless, sent their people over there to preside over this. Then, when they didn't like the outcome, they blamed it on Russia.

But some people predicted this was going to happen from the beginning. It was too fast, too uncontrolled, too unfettered, too ruthless—too Darwinian, to put it that way. So this is the consequence of it.

All I can tell you is, it could be a lot worse in Russia. Could be worse, and could get worse. But that's what the struggle in Russia at the moment is about, about whether we should get worse or we should get better, in American terms.

JOANNE MYERS: Unfortunately, our time is up. Things could not get better here this afternoon than having you talk about Russia. I thank you very much for coming.

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