



The Cold War

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Martin Walker is a journalist who writes like a wise historian, combining a first-hand feel for what it was like to live through the Cold War period with a shrewd, scholarly overview of its causes and consequences.

Walker appreciates the dangers of the American/Soviet rivalry. He acknowledges its devastating impact on Europe as the “last and greatest of Europe’s civil wars.” Yet he also calls the Cold War a “in the end, a resilient and predictable system for the preservation of human civilization.” Unlike some recent commentators, he does not dismiss the Cold War as some kind of colossal mistake that one side or the other should have been prudent enough to avoid. The Soviet Union’s collapse, he argues, seems inevitable only in retrospect, and the West’s fears of Soviet tyranny and expansion were not unfounded.

Walker maintains a fine balance between considering the geopolitical concerns of the Soviet Union and the United States and the personalities of leaders such as Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Harry S. Truman. His account of Yalta, especially of Roosevelt’s effort to reach an accommodation with the Soviets, is enthralling. He writes equally engaging chapters on the West’s development of a “containment” policy to counteract the spread of Soviet-style regimes, the rise of new leaders in the 1950’s, the launching of Sputnik, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the age of detente, the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev, and the Soviet Empire’s disintegration.

Throughout his study, Walker never loses sight of the fact that although the Soviet Union and the West represented opposing ideologies, they employed similar political and military tactics and exercised power in accordance with the dynamic of modern, competitive nation states.

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