

Ideas and International Political Change: Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War.  
By Jeffrey T. Checkel. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. 191 pp. Index. Hard bound.

The epochal events at the dawn of this decade--the end of the Cold War, the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, and the demise of the Soviet state--changed the world in which we live; they should also, Jeffrey Checkel argues, alter the way we think about international relations. "How could these changes have come about," he asks, "and what do they tell us about the need to revise the way people have thought about international relations since Thucydides?" (ix).

Checkel argues that ideas must be part of the explanation, but that work in international relations has failed to produce generalizable theories about when new ideas are adopted, and has neglected to specify the causal mechanisms that give ideas their force. He argues that ideas remain latent until a crisis jolts leaders out of their complacency to search for new solutions. In extraordinary times, when "policy windows" open, entrepreneurs have incentives to promote their ideas; and it is their political savvy and personal connections that determine which ideas become influential. The structure of the state plays an important role, as well: "centralized" states, such as the Soviet Union, are relatively impenetrable to new ideas; but once ideas catch hold, they quickly become institutionalized. In "decentralized" states, there is a free-for-all of competing ideas, but entrepreneurs find it difficult to consolidate influence.

Checkel traces the development of Gorbachev's New Thinking to IMEMO, the think tank linked to his key advisors Aleksandr Yakovlev and Evgenyi Primakov; further back, to the development of the "empirical" study of international relations at IMEMO under Nikolai Inozemtsev; and still further back, to the institute's clashes with Stalinist orthodoxy and subsequent rejuvenation under Khrushchev. He makes a compelling case that the revolutionary notions that Gorbachev expounded in the 1980s were present in embryo form much earlier. Indeed, he argues, the ideas needed to reorient Soviet foreign policy were present in the 1960s, but Soviet institutions insulated the leadership from them. In the 1980s, the foreign-policy crisis was more profound, the window was open wider, and the entrepreneurs had closer ties to the top leaders.

This is a provocative comparison, but readers may not find it convincing. It is not clear that the foreign policy crisis was really more profound in 1985 than in 1968, and Checkel's analysis ignores the growing disillusionment with the Soviet economic model. Further, the story that Checkel tells about these two cases does not really turn on these macro-level variables, but on the choices made by Leonid Brezhnev and Mikhail Gorbachev. There can be no doubt that these key players profoundly influenced the course of events: Brezhnev held back the tide of change, and Gorbachev opened the flood gates. Historians will find this neither troubling nor surprising. As a social scientist, however, Checkel aspires to frame his explanations of particular events in terms of general theory, so this is problematic. How can we have a general theory, if the explanation turns on the preferences of the key actors?

Critics of materialist social science will make a rather different criticism. We cannot ignore the study of ideas, because ideas have weight in politics independent of the people who promote them. Some ideas are inherently more convincing than others. Checkel, however, does not ascribe any explanatory power to the ability of ideas to convince. Instead, he argues that ideas become important when the international balance of power is threatening enough to force leaders to search for new strategies, when entrepreneurs have an interest in promoting them, and when their proponents are well-positioned in the bureaucracy. This does not satisfy the idealist

critique. Instead, it suggests that the materialists are right: we need to focus on things like interests, institutions, and constraints, because we cannot theorize about something as unique and unpredictable as a new idea.

This is a very interesting and provocative book, which makes a significant contribution to understanding the origins of Gorbachev's New Thinking. It will be of interest to students of Soviet foreign policy and international relations.

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