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Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War, and Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism

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Gleason, Abbot. *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995. 307pp. \$25

Powers, Richard Gid. *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism*. New York: The Free Press, 1995. 554pp. \$30

“Shooting wars” are marked by battle lines, exploding ordnance, and movements of armies and navies. The Cold War, by contrast, was a contest between contrasting ways of life, fought with ideas on the battleground of the minds and hearts of men. It opened with an April 1945 prediction by a French communist close to the Kremlin that relations between the United States and the Soviet Union would worsen. It ended effectively in February 1990, when the Communist Party of the USSR formally abandoned its monopoly over Soviet politics and consigned itself, as Ronald Reagan had predicted, to the dustbin of history.

The intervening forty-five years had seen a conflict protracted beyond any other in U.S. history; complex beyond any simple explanations for its existence; and massively expensive in terms of resources spent and lives lost in its peripheral flashpoints, such as Vietnam. The Cold War was a defining phenomenon for U.S. global leadership in this century, and its history continues to affect our relations with much of the world. It also profoundly divided American society. These

reasons make it important to have as complete an understanding of the Cold War as possible, with all its complexities, and with all its heroes and villains.

These two works, the first by Brown University professor of history Abbott Gleason, the second by Richard Gid Powers of the City University of New York, shed light on the subject precisely because each of these talented historians is more interested in truth than in grinding a particular axe. These books are not in themselves comprehensive Cold War histories, but each is an exceptional addition to the story. Each helps our understanding by demonstrating that the Cold War was primarily an ideological struggle, fought with ideas; that these ideas mattered; and that the holders of the ultimately triumphant idea—that communism as a practiced political and economic doctrine is evil—often maintained this conviction in the face of scorn, disbelief, and ridicule.

In *Totalitarianism*, Abbott Gleason investigates the evolution and use of “the great mobilizing and unifying concept of the Cold War.” Simply put, the totalitarian idea is that the twentieth century has seen the development of a qualitatively new kind of state that attempts to transform human nature itself in accordance with its revolutionary, messianic ideology. There is more to totalitarianism than that, of course, but its central role in the history of the Cold War stems from Gleason’s core assertion that the two states that most closely followed the totalitarian model were Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the latter especially during Stalin’s lifetime. This alleged affinity was an immensely controversial idea during the Cold War—though it is such a commonplace today that even the

New York Times uses it. Prior to 1990 or 1991, however, if you told me what you thought of "totalitarianism," I could tell you where you stood on the USSR and American foreign policy. The Left, naturally, hated the idea, for it justified U.S. global leadership in defending against Soviet tyranny and expansionism.

Gleason traces the origins of the term from the Italian fascists of the early 1920s, through its acceptance by Nazi philosophers, to its use in polemical battles during the Cold War between proponents and opponents of Truman's policy of containment. Gleason demonstrates how the Korean War revived and expanded the concept of totalitarianism and how some Eastern European intellectuals (Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia, and Adam Michnik, Leszek Kolakowski, and Andrzej Walicki of Poland) discovered and embraced it in the 1960s and 1970s. He describes how anticommunists in the 1980s, most notably Jeane Kirkpatrick and Ronald Reagan, used the term as a powerful ideological weapon against the Soviet Union. Reagan's famous use of the phrase "evil empire"—which had a stunningly powerful effect on Soviet society—was intended as shorthand of sorts for all that is meant by totalitarian.

This is intellectual history at its finest, for the connection between ideas and their consequences is made clear. By 1990 Soviet scholars themselves were able to investigate "totalitarianism," compare it to the Soviet record, and honestly conclude that Reagan and other proponents of the totalitarian concept had been right. This realization, fittingly, helped bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Reagan is a major figure in Richard Gid Powers's comprehensive history of anticommunism in America, *Not Without Honor*. However, Reagan does not appear until halfway through the book, as an actor who first tussled with communists in Hollywood labor disputes in the late 1940s. This monumental, well documented work covers communism as a core issue in American politics from well before the Cold War—the Wilson administration—to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The strength of Powers's narrative lies in his description of the many personalities involved, including Sidney Hook, Eugene Lyons, William F. Buckley, and Richard Nixon. He is less persuasive with his conceptual framework, a rather Manichean division of anticommunists into "liberals" (who are wise and honest) and "countersubversives" (who are nutty at best and, at their worst, downright dangerous to civil liberties). Indeed, Powers is very quick to judge the extreme anticommunists as "loony" or "laughable," but there is no equal haste to call the far Left dangerous, malicious, or, heaven forbid, traitorous.

There are some other problems with this book. The pro-Soviet left is referred to, tendentiously, as the "progressive left." Anticommunism is at one point described as "a matter of doctrine" for Roman Catholics. Wernher von Braun is referred to as a "nuclear strategist." Powers calls J. Edgar Hoover's allegations that American communists were in the employ of the Kremlin a "false and dangerous stereo-type"—although that is precisely what many American communists were. Calling McCarthyism a "system of repression" is hyperbolic license

that mocks real victims of truly repressive systems.

But Powers is undoubtedly correct in his central thesis, that anticommunists' worst enemies were some of their own number, most notably Joe McCarthy. Because a few anticommunists were motivated by political ambitions, or were anti-Semitic, or believed in a fantastically omnipotent, secret communist network in America, anticommunism at large suffered—despite the fact that the USSR did make use of agents to penetrate U.S. institutions and conduct espionage. One of the more interesting passages describes how William F. Buckley cleansed the modern conservative movement, centered around his journal *National Review*, of anti-Semites, Ayn Rand atheists, and members of Robert Welch's John Birch Society (who maintained that Ike was a commie). Another fascinating story concerns communists in American labor unions; the Congress of Industrial Organizations had a "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the late 1930s. The account of the harm done to anti-communism by Roosevelt's pro-Soviet policies, combined with the Left's technique of "brown-smearing" conservatives by associating anticommunism with fascism and anti-Semitism, makes compelling reading, as does the later and truly mean "brown-smearing" of Barry Goldwater by Bill Moyers, Nelson Rockefeller, and Daniel Schorr. Finally, Powers contends that Jimmy Carter's warning about America's "inordinate fear of communism" was naive, and that Ronald Reagan's unapologetic anticommunism was realistic if not heroic. Powers concludes, in fact, by saying that anticommunism, despite its faults, represented "America at its best."

The major contribution of *Not Without Honor* is that it provides needed historical context to an issue that tended to divide Americans for seven decades. Both this work and Gleason's *Totalitarianism* should reside in the library of every serious student of the Cold War.

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Love, Robert W., Jr., ed. *Pearl Harbor Revisited*. New York: St. Martin's, 1995. 200pp. \$45

An eclectic collection of papers, sponsored by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute at Hofstra University upon the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor, this work encompasses eleven essays as topically diverse as J. Thomas Sanders's survey of Soviet historiography and attitudes toward Pearl Harbor, and Marlene Kassel's interesting, if specialized, article on "Japanese Wartime Rhetoric in the Traditional [Oriental] Philosophical Context." The range also encompasses John Major's discussion of the Panama Canal as the prewar psychological *sine qua non* of American popular and military sensitivity, and Jon Bridgeman's "Saturday, Dec. 6, 1941."

The conference call suggested that participants consider Pearl Harbor as a "unique international event" and approach it from "unconventional, oblique or eccentric angles." By and large they fulfilled that prescription.

Jon Bridgeman's essay suggests that fully tracing President Franklin D. Roosevelt's activities that day might prove, or disprove, the conspiracy thesis. While Bridgeman traces much of the day, gaps remain, and his references to