INTRODUCTION

"In Stalingrad I witnessed an eerie sight," Nikita recalled. "Our people were collecting German corpses across the city … If the corpses lay around and began decomposing, we could have an epidemic." The Battle of Stalingrad (1942–43) had raged for months. Hardly a building was left standing in some of the most ferocious urban warfare the world had ever seen. Each side's casualties numbered in the hundreds of thousands, but it was the Soviets who ultimately prevailed. The tide had turned on the Third Reich. "We tried to remove the corpses as quickly as possible and burn them … There were many corpses, thousands of them. The corpses were piled in layers: a layer of corpses and two layers of railway sleepers, and these were set on fire. Huge piles were on fire … They made a very grim impression … Napoleon or someone else said that the enemy's corpse has a sweet smell. I don't know about the others but I did not find the smell sweet at all. Nor was it pleasant to behold the sight."[1]

Recollections of horror only deepened the sense of personal grief: in March 1943 Nikita lost his son whose plane was shot down by the Germans in an air duel. His remains were never found.

Several months later, in the autumn of 1943, Lyonya very nearly lost his life. He had been involved in a landing operation, aimed at capturing Novorossiisk, a Russian Black Sea port. The 30-something-year-old Lyonya was not himself doing much fighting – a party official, he spent the early months of war working out the logistics for the retreating Soviet forces – but this time he was close to the action – too close, it turned out. During one of the trips to the bridgehead, his boat hit a mine. He suffered a head injury and was fished out of the sea unconscious. The injury made itself felt years later, when Lyonya's speech began to slur.[2] Few knew about it and, unknowingly, endlessly mocked him for mispronouncing words. He would often recall a conversation with his father, Ilya, who had asked him about the height of the Eiffel tower. Upon learning that it stood 300 meters high, Lyonya's father said that he wanted to build a tower just like the Eiffel tower on top of Mount Everest, hang Hitler and his associates from that

tower, "and then give telescopes to people so everyone could see their fate." "Then," he added, "there would be no wars."[3]

Misha was just a 10-year-old boy when the war began. His father was drafted in August 1941, and miraculously survived through the end, finishing the war on a hospital bed in southern Poland. Misha himself nearly succumbed to famine in 1944, when many in his village starved. He remembered one particularly shocking scene. Once in the spring of 1943, after the snows had melted, he and his fellow boys came across dead Soviet soldiers. "You can hardly describe this," he recalled years later. "Decomposed, gnawed skulls in rusty steel helmets, bleached hand bones protruding from rotten uniforms, grasping rifles … They were lying there, unburied, in the dirty sludge of trenches and craters, beholding us with black, gaping eye sockets." Who could forget a sight like this? Not Misha, who had this to say of it all: "When the war ended, I was 14. Our generation is the generation of war children. It burned us, leaving an impression on our characters, on our entire worldview."[4]

When the Second World War ended, much of Soviet Europe was ashes and rubble. Some 1,710 cities and over 70,000 villages were completely or partially destroyed. Twenty-five million people were left homeless. Nearly 32,000 industrial enterprises lay demolished, accounting for 60 percent of prewar steel and coal production. Adding to the toll were some 40,000 levelled hospitals, 43,000 libraries, and 84,000 educational institutions. The uncannily exact price tag of the losses stood at 679 billion rubles, which was roughly equivalent to *four times* the entire expenditure of the last prewar national budget. These were just material losses; as horrible as they were, they were dwarfed by the human tragedy. An estimated 25.5 million Soviet citizens perished in the war, and this number does not include another 13.9 million of the dead children (up to and including 4 years old), and the unborn (due to a precipitous decline in birth rates during the war). There was not a family left untouched by the conflict.[5]

When Nikita, Lyonya, and Misha recalled the horrors of war, they were adding their voices to the collective story of suffering to which millions of their countrymen could easily relate. Nikita Khrushchev, Lyonya (Leonid) Brezhnev, and Misha (Mikhail) Gorbachev were deeply traumatized by the Second World War years before they took the reins of power in the Soviet Union. That trauma – their personal trauma, and the collective trauma, and the bitterness, and the humiliation, and the pride at having prevailed despite it all – added to the determination to shape the future in a way that would assure for the Soviet Union its security, and its place of honor among the great and the mighty of this world. The rest, they thought, would take care of itself.

This book retells the story of the making and the breaking of Soviet superpower. The story it tells begins at the end of the Second World War and ends with the Soviet collapse in 1991, overlapping with that bitter, protracted conflict we call the Cold War.

So much has been written about the Cold War that it well near beggars belief that anyone would still attempt to retell the story, traveling down all those roads well traveled by many a brave and brilliant historian. There must be a very good reason to reopen the old debates.

Here is that reason. The book offers a radical new interpretation of the underlying motivations of Soviet foreign policy, focusing on Moscow's narratives of legitimacy, and on how these narratives were negotiated through constant interaction between Soviet ambitions and those who recognized and so legitimized them, or those who refused to recognize them and, through their refusal, also (unexpectedly) legitimized them. While the way Soviet ambitions interacted with external audiences is something that yields itself to reasonable analysis, the sources of these ambitions must, of necessity, remain metaphysical. Why do some people aspire to greatness while others are content with their lives? Why do some states aspire to a special role in history while others pass history in relative obscurity? There is no easy explanation, but if one observation can be made, it is that the sources of Soviet ambitions are not specifically Soviet but both precede and postdate the Soviet Union, overlapping with the Cold War.

And, obviously, the Soviets were not unique in their ambitions. Throughout history, some countries aspired to greatness, while others did not; kingdoms were made and lost; empires rose and fell.

Ambition seems to be as universal a trait as any. The relationship between ambition and recognition has been probed by other scholars, not least Francis Fukuyama in the much-maligned *End of History*. What makes the end of history possible, argues Fukuyama, is that liberal democracy permits the kind of recognition of individual worth as to render further historical development unnecessary. We would all feel legitimated and empowered through a form of mutual recognition. Indeed, the subject of "recognition" is front and center in most of Fukuyama's work. He traces it to Plato's discussion (in his *Republic*) of the "third part of the human soul" (which craves recognition) and spends much time perusing Hegel's commentary on the question, in the part where Hegel (as interpreted by the Russian-French philosopher Alexander Kojeve) talks about the master's desire for recognition as the master.

All of this is very good, the reader will say – only it is not clear what any of this has to do with the Soviet Union's Cold War. Let me explain.

There are different ways of thinking about Moscow's foreign policy. One approach is to emphasize ideology – a slippery concept, used unsparingly by historians to describe a variety of phenomena, a catch-all phrase, an intellectual shortcut that often obscures more than it explains. Since ideology plays an important role in this book, too, let me offer the following definition. Ideology is a way of thinking about the world and one's place in it, and a set of prescriptions for either changing them (the world, and the place), or keeping them unchanged. The desire to change the world, and one's place in it, evidently has to do with the degree of satisfaction with the existing order of things, and this is as true for individuals, as it is for states. Satisfaction requires rationalization in status quo terms; the lack of satisfaction – in revolutionary terms. But since satisfaction is a fleeting sentiment that can and does change, ideology, too, changes accordingly. Much Cold War historiography regards the Soviet ideology as something fixed (as, for instance, described in the Marxist-Leninist canon). In reality, Soviet ideology (i.e. the Kremlin's view of the world, and the Soviet place in it, and the associated prescriptions) changed continuously even if the Marxist-Leninist canon remained largely the same.

In other words, Marxism-Leninism itself does not get us very far in understanding Soviet behavior. It was an ill-fitting cloth that never adequately draped the incongruent outlines of Moscow's ambition.

Another important source of Soviet conduct was the quest for security (in the benign version) or outright imperialism (more commonly accepted). Security and ideology are in fact interrelated concepts. One might even describe one as a subset of the other. For example, one's dissatisfaction with one's place in the world may be a result of thinking underpinned by security considerations (threats to one's physical survival), or, relatedly, dissatisfaction with the world itself (if that world is deemed implacably hostile). The resultant prescription may be, for instance, to build up the army to increase one's own security, or to promote subversive revolutionary activities as a way of changing the world into something more palatable. It thus becomes evident that analytically distinguishing security and ideology is an unrewarding and a self-contradictory undertaking. Most historians of the Cold War will be wise to steer well clear of such philosophical observations since probing our very discourse on ideology and security will yield such mind-boggling uncertainties as to frustrate even the most patient reader.

Assuming, for the sake of the argument, that ideology and security are something altogether distinct, it is still possible to fuse them in the way that, for example, historians Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov did when they described the Kremlin's policy making in terms

of "the revolutionary-imperial paradigm." In that reading, imperialism, like Communist ideology, could be the prime mover or it could simply rationalize actions taken for other reasons. For example, one could conceive that Moscow wanted an overseas empire for the sake of the empire, or for the sake of Communism. Disentangling these kinds of motivations is often impossible (and most of the time the actors directly involved could not themselves distinguish between them). This is the reason why historians seek refuge in multicausality.

But where does this argument overlap with ambition, which, we know from philosophers, is a key driver of human behavior?

To answer this question, we must try to understand what the Cold War represented. Was it not just another stage in the long story of the rise and fall of great powers, a story that neither began with, nor ended with the Cold War? But surely there was something unique, too. Unlike previous conflicts between great powers, the Cold War was characterized by the struggle over the best method of ordering the human society, a struggle over the paths towards modernity, which historian Odd Arne Westad has so eloquently and convincingly written about. The whole world became involved in this struggle in one way or another. It was a truly global contest between the Soviet Union and the United States for Hegelian recognition as masters, not just in the immediate physical sense (i.e. through a hub-and-spoke system of allied relations) but also in the philosophical sense: as masters of History. Melvyn Leffler has called it a struggle "for the soul of mankind." Mankind was called upon to accept Moscow's and Washington's global ambition; that is to say, to legitimate this ambition through their recognition.

Legitimacy is a famous can of worms, and since it is central to this book, it is a good idea to consider what it means. The usual definition encompasses notions like legality and justice (or morality).[6] Thus, the Soviet leaders were invariably concerned about legality and justice of their and their country's position in the global hierarchy (and they perceived the world as being hierarchically organized). The emphasis was more often on justice than on legality, the premise being that the Soviet Union for one reason or another *deserved* its high perch in the global order. Being *recognized* by others as legitimately occupying this perch was a central preoccupation of Soviet foreign policy from Stalin to Gorbachev. It was always a challenge, for, as Henry Kissinger had once put it, it entailed a process of reconciliation of a nation's vision of itself with its vision by other powers.[7]

Risking a dangerous analogy, one might say that the process was not unlike that experienced by individuals who perceive one another in time and

space. Each should have an understanding of the other that broadly aligns with that other's understanding of him or herself. As the Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing argued, "if there are discrepancies of a sufficiently radical kind remaining after attempts to align them have failed, there is no alternative but that one of [them] must be insane."[8] No one would of course accuse the Soviet leaders of being insane but it is nonetheless interesting that what the Soviets saw as their "legitimate" interests were often not seen as particularly "legitimate" by anybody else, leading to a kind of ontological insecurity on the Soviet part that was compensated for by hubris and aggression.

But was the Soviet ambition merely in changing Moscow's standing in the world, or changing the world itself? This does not have to be an either/or question, since by changing the world, the Soviets could *ipso facto* improve their standing in the world, for presumably the rearrangement would be to their benefit. By the same token, by changing their position in the world, they could change the world, since a world that allowed Moscow an ever higher perch would be a very different world from the one that did not. Both scenarios, however, could satisfy the Soviet craving for greatness, which is why this book is concerned above all with Soviet ambition and not Soviet ideology.

Legitimacy has internal, and not just external, sources. This is where the subject of the Soviet revolutionary ideology returns to reclaim the lost turf. For the Soviet leaders were apt at rationalizing their actions in Marxist-Leninist terms even when these actions were clearly driven by security concerns or the need for external recognition. That rationalization was in fact a form of legitimation. By draping their foreign policy moves in Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, the Soviets claimed that whatever place of honor they claimed for themselves in the global order, theirs was a legitimate claim. But such ideological self-legitimation could never replace external validation and recognition. Indeed, it became ever more difficult to legitimize the Soviet position in the world by appeals to Marxism-Leninism as the limitations and brutalities of the Soviet system became more and more manifest. The value of external recognition correspondingly increased.

There is, however, a certain complexity to the subject of recognition that goes beyond the simple assertion that the Soviets wanted their perch to be recognized as legally and justly theirs. What did Soviet Union strive to be recognized as? One obvious possibility is being recognized as a superpower on a par with the other superpower, the United States. Such recognition could only be bestowed by the United States, hence the Soviet obsession with equality or, rather, American recognition of this equality – and invariable resentment at having been denied such recognition. But this is not

the end of the story because in addition to being recognized as a superpower, the Soviets also sought recognition as the leader of the international Communist movement. Such recognition was bestowed by Soviet clients and allies, first and foremost China (until the two powers split up in the 1960s). But even after the Sino-Soviet split, the Soviets remained preoccupied with the Chinese challenge, and spared no effort to rebuff Chinese criticism that they had in fact betrayed the revolution.

These two identities – as a superpower and as the center of world revolution – often did not work well together. Certainly the Americans at times attempted to entice the Soviets to moderate their behavior through recognition of their global importance. This policy was called "linkage," and it never worked, simply because the Soviet leaders proved either unwilling or unable to reconcile their two identities. Perhaps they did not even see the need to reconcile them, because what made the Soviets true "equals" of America was that they represented an ideological pole as leaders of the "revolutionary" world, just as the Americans represented an ideological pole as the leaders of the "reactionary" world.

This led to a paradox that could never be adequately resolved: legitimation was attainable through recognition *either* as a partner *or* as an adversary. It makes sense: American recognition of the USSR as its major adversary supported the notion that the Soviet Union was the leader of the revolutionary forces, while a Soviet–American partnership exposed the Soviets to criticism from at least some of their clients (especially China) that they were not in fact as revolutionary as they claimed. The Soviet answer to the question of whether they were, in fact, America's partners or enemies, could thus be: Why could they not be both?

There was an interesting element in Moscow's striving for equality with the United States in that at some level the Soviets felt very insecure about whether or not they really *were* America's equals, hence, their pathological tendency to fall back on what has since become known as "whataboutism" (i.e. citing US transgressions and ambitions to justify their own). This, as we shall see, sometimes resulted in aggressive and reckless foreign adventures, which could have perhaps been avoided if the Soviets were a little bit more realistic about their own capabilities. The Soviet leaders pursued greatness in the sense Rodion Raskolnikov pursued greatness when he killed the pawnbroker lady and her sister in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. "Am I a trembling creature or do I have the right?" muttered the Soviet Raskolnikovs while aggressively planting their flags on remote shores, without, perhaps, recognizing that even by putting forward this question, they showed that they were out of their depth.

That desire for recognition – how did it tally against other desires, for example, the desire for security? This is not an idle question. Historians and policy makers have long linked Moscow's aggressiveness to its insecurity, not in the ontological sense, as in R.D. Laing, but in a very real physical sense. One need not invoke George F. Kennan's musings about Russia's historic fear of the "fierce nomadic people" and the "more competent, more powerful" West: Other countries have been invaded and overrun without developing bizarre fixations, and why should Russia be any different? But there is something to be said for security concerns – especially in the wake of the calamity of the Second World War, when the German invasion was beaten back, but only just barely, and at a monstrous price. This experience, as Stalin knew only too well, and that Nikita, Lyonya, and Misha of our narrative could relate to, created baseline perceptions in relation to national security that often underpinned policy decisions. However, these perceptions varied widely over time, partly in response to the changing security environment in Europe and Asia, and in part because of the nuclear revolution, which changed the meaning of what it meant to be secure.

Indeed, it may be argued that the nuclear revolution ended History in the way that Fukuyama never expected. The ability to destroy the world as we know it that the United States and the Soviet Union developed in the 1950s made it unlikely that either one or the other would ever again share Stalin's despair in the grim weeks after the German invasion, when he told his comrades dejectedly: "Lenin left us a great inheritance and we, his heirs, have fucked it all up." Great powers could and would lose wars on the periphery – from Vietnam to Afghanistan – but they could be reasonably secure of their continued existence. The logic of the Hegelian struggle between the self and the other, where the other submitted on pain of death and thus became slave to master, was hereby broken. Nuclear superpowers would continue to exist unless they decayed internally and fell apart (as, to be sure, the Soviet Union did in the end). But a direct conflict between the superpowers became downright unthinkable, leading logically to the possibility of an unending Cold War: a Cold War after a Cold War after a Cold War. In retrospect, it seems naive that we did not perceive this basic reality of the global order in 1989.

In evaluating how the desire for recognition holds up against basic security concerns, it is best to draw on yet another dangerous analogy – that of A.H. Maslow's hierarchy of needs.[9] In this reading, security needs (broadly understood as not just the need to protect oneself against a foreign invasion but also the need for internal security, i.e. regime stability), serve as a prerequisite for higher needs (i.e. the desire for esteem and

self-actualization). "Esteem" encompasses, per Maslow "the desire for reputation or prestige …, recognition, attention, importance or appreciation." We are thus back with Fukuyama and, more ambitiously, Hegel and Plato, except, of course, that for Maslow, basic security would precede these other needs. The hierarchy, however, is not rigidly fixed. As we shall see, the Soviet leaders were often willing to trade some basic needs for other basic needs, and would compromise security for the attainment of recognition and through recognition, legitimation.

One may object, correctly, here that states are not people, and people's hierarchy of needs and motivations cannot be compared to that of any state. That is true at one level, but it is also true that states are led by people, and foreign policy decisions are subject to fears, delusions, and, yes, needs of specific individuals. The Austro-British philosopher Karl Popper considered such reductionism preposterous and even dangerous, and unkindly called it "psychologism."[10] No good deed goes unpunished. So it is with this book, so deeply focused on individual psychological traits of Soviet leaders, at the expense of their social environment. In the end, it does not have to be one or the other. The Soviet leaders were able to shape their social environment, while being in their turn shaped by it. Theorizing how this process worked is beyond the abilities of any philosopher, let alone historian. In any case, the Soviet Union was not unique in this respect, though it does provide an excellent case study because of the remarkable concentration of foreign policy decision-making in the hands of just a handful of people. There is an old critique to the effect that a focus on "great men" detracts from the understanding of broader historical patterns, which can pass for a reasonable argument until one comes face-to-face with the painful proposition that fates of entire nations are directly tied to decisions made by specific individuals in their specific circumstances.

The notion that states pursue recognition (sometimes also described as "prestige" or "status") is familiar to theorists of International Relations and to political scientists; so much so that, as Jonathan Renshon argues, "this wide-ranging consensus crosses disciplinary and epistemological boundaries, and might truly be said to be one of the few facts on which world leaders and political scientists agree."[11] Books have even been written identifying Russia and China – the two main protagonists of this story – as particularly conscious of their international status.[12] The Cold War scholarship has not kept up, partly because historians are on the whole poor theorists. At best, they regard theory with suspicion because it ruthlessly simplifies the world, and at worst, they do not read theory at all, since it invariably induces deathly boredom. To disappoint some readers (but delight others), this

book is dangerously thin on theory, and in this regard it treads in the footsteps of other historians of the Cold War, only perhaps with a wistful glance in the direction of the theoretical canon rising to unassailable heights far in the murky distance.

Yet there is also something to be had from thinking about the Soviet Union's Cold War experience in broader theoretical terms, for then we begin to see that it was not *all that* unique, and that there were in fact continuities that predate and, most certainly, postdate the Cold War. The year 1989 becomes less of a watershed moment than we supposed it to be in our immediate post-Cold War euphoria. Some of the underlying motivations of Moscow's foreign policy in a sense remained unchanged. Many of the key Soviet-era institutions survived (including the military and the intelligence services). Toxic nationalism replaced Communism as an overarching narrative of self-legitimation but the need for external legitimation through recognition as a great power or a great adversary remained unchanged. Only, Moscow no longer had the same capabilities as it once did. Another power – China – came forth to play an ever greater role in the global order.

China joins the Soviet Union and United States in this book as one of the three main actors of the story. This, in a sense, is a challenge to the existing Cold War historiography. In recent years we have seen a shift away from the "center" towards the "periphery" of the Cold War, a trend most convincingly represented by the superb scholarship of Lorenz Lüthi.[13] I, too, have taken part in this de-centering of Cold War narratives by writing about the bit players like Mongolia and North Korea. It is a rewarding exercise, to be sure, but it is ultimately unsatisfying, because many of the key decisions that shaped the latter half of the twentieth century were made in Moscow and Washington. And, yes, these decisions affected millions in what we now call the Global South, and, yes, historian Paul Chamberlin is right to argue that it is the Global South that paid the highest prices for the Cold War.[14] Of course, these decisions were not taken in vacuum, and what policy makers in London, Paris, Beijing, New Delhi, Cairo, Havana, and Hanoi thought of Cold War narratives, how they saw themselves in the context of these Cold War narratives, matters a great deal to understanding how and why the Cold War unfolded. However, these regional and local contexts – important though they are – cannot be profitably disconnected from the overarching narrative that infused them with meanings they would not have otherwise. We should not commit the error of rejecting the rich, textured historiography that de-centers the Cold War but nor should we allow this historiography to distract from the broader picture. Enriched by the knowledge of individual trees, we should stand back and enjoy the view