



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Hopf, T. (2012) *Reconstructing the Cold War: the early years 1945-1958*

Bakalov, I.

Citation

Bakalov, I. (2015). Review of Hopf, T. (2012) *Reconstructing the Cold War: the early years 1945-1958*. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67(10), 1713-1714. doi:10.1080/09668136.2015.1102516

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3503707>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Book Review

Hopf, Ted, *Reconstructing the Cold War. The Early Years, 1945–1958*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014, ix + 305pp., £18.99/\$27.95 p/b.

Ted Hopf's book *Reconstructing the Cold War: The Early Years, 1945-1958* is as eclectic on the cover, where the epitomous socialist-realist sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* is vividly accentuated against a Russian avant-garde style background *à la* Kandinsky, as it is between the pages, where the author deftly attunes a rigid positivist methodological framework to a devout constructivist worldview. Ted Hopf, currently a Professor of Political Science at National University of Singapore, having previously held an equivalent position at Ohio State University, remains true to his commitment to strengthen the position of social constructivism within international relations (IR) scholarship. In this case he highlights the crucial role that domestic discourses and societal self-perceptions played in the formation of Soviet Union relationships to the rest of the world in the beginning of the Cold War.

The author's ambition to define a novel approach to understanding the logic of the Cold War is codified already in the book title, leaving no doubts as to which IR theory informs the scientific inquiry. To be precise, Hopf offers a custom version of constructivism, which he brands "societal constructivism", arguing that it differs from mainstream systemic constructivism, along the lines of Wendt, both in the scale of inquiry and in the sources of explanatory potential. The latter is a systemic theory focusing on intersubjective relations among international agents alone, whereas the former represents a mid-range theory tending to favour domestic discourses as the key constituents to a state's identity (though tentatively acknowledging the role of interstate relations as well). The main aim of the book is to explain the dynamics of Soviet relations, in the period immediately superseding the end of World War II until 1958, to a wide range of foreign countries by examining the interaction between different domestic societal discourses and their subsequent adoption by state officials. In two forthcoming volumes, Hopf will extend the scope of the investigation and cover the whole period of the Cold War.

The book has a clear and straightforward structure commencing with an outline of the theoretical foundations and methodology, further proceeding with a presentation of the discursively and domestically constructed Soviet state identities, each followed by in-depth

accounts of their transposition into Soviet behaviour in world politics, and finally concluding with a summary of the main findings. Overall, Hopf's work is equally engaging for historians, IR theoreticians and cultural anthropologists alike, but the conceptual density of the theoretical part might render it perplexing to a layperson. In it Hopf spells out his scientific manifesto, laying bare his axiomatic constructivist assumptions and presenting his methodological approach in strict accordance with the positivist canon. The narrative that follows is divided into two parts by the death of Stalin in 1953, which heralded the substitution of the discourse of danger with the discourse of difference. The main argument revolves around the opposition between the two and Hopf uses the U-turn in domestic discourse after Stalin's death to account for the concomitant changes in Soviet relationships with a wide range of countries. Naturally, the two discourses differed in many aspects, most importantly in the level of perceived (in)security from internal and external threats to the socialist project, yet they also shared certain features, notably the taken-for-granted position of the Soviet Union atop the hierarchy of socialist states.

The clarity of the book's general structure is a virtue in itself, albeit the sub-structure of some chapters can be unbalanced at times, leaving certain ideas more extensively elaborated than others. Nevertheless, it is truly remarkable that Hopf managed to condense such vast empirical material into so little space, while at the same time offering a narrative that genuinely engages the reader's interest. Though the book does indeed provide an extensive and helpful reference database, it is unfortunate that some passages of citation are not referenced. A definite merit of Ted Hopf's work is that he analyses not only political archives, but also the dynamics in the sphere of culture, thus presenting a rich picture of the social field. This said, it should also be pointed out that at times it remains unclear what the author means by 'Soviet society', often referring interchangeably both to a broad conception of Soviet society as a whole and to a more limited rendition restricted to the intelligentsia in Moscow and Leningrad.

While generally convincing, the theoretical explanation has its blind spots, which is also conceded by the author himself. Notably, one has to look to systemic theories of international relations to account for the nature of the Soviet Union's relations to the USA, as domestic discourses have little to say about the intersubjective dynamics between the two superpowers. But the crucial pitfall of Hopf's explanation is that it forgoes telling the reader why dominant domestic discourses change and why some discourses are adopted by state officials while others are not. Admittedly, it is not Hopf's purpose to answer the latter questions with this

book, yet by eschewing the discussion he leaves the rest of his argument vulnerable to charges in endogeneity bias, especially from realist grounds. If it actually turns out that the agents (political elites) are emancipated from the influence of discourses and independently determine which one dominates the public sphere, the explanatory value of Hopf's theoretical framework, which posits that discourses inform political elites and structure their perceptions towards foreign actors, would be severely undermined.

Overall, Hopf achieves his purpose of building a convincing argument suggesting that domestic discourses structured Soviet relations to a wide range of countries and offers a strong novel approach to conceptualising the development of the Cold War, which combines the ontological strength of a constructivist account with the epistemological rigour of positivism. However, if he is to truly seal the marriage of his interpretive intersubjective worldview to positivist methodology, Hopf must enter the holy ground of why-questions, thus venturing beyond the cautious inquiry into the 'hows'.

By Ivan Bakalov