Friot, Stephen P. (2023). *Containing History: How Cold War History Explains US-Russia Relations*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Friot offers a wide-ranging analysis of the Cold War's origins, its enduring relevance, and its impact on Russia's geopolitical behavior today. It effectively ties historical events to current developments, particularly in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As a senior federal judge out of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma, Friot might seem at first blush to be an unconventional authority on Cold War history. But he has served as a judicial delegate to numerous legal exchanges in Russia and has traveled extensively throughout the Russian Federation lecturing and conducting research. He has developed a deep expertise about Russian culture and history. Moreover, Friot has capitalized on newfound ability to access information unclassified since the initial set of foreign policy scholars wrote their longstanding classic, "definitive" treatments of the Cold War. These more recent developments inform his uniquely compelling vision of the profound cultural and historical experiences that continue to shape Russian society and politics.

The author rightly emphasizes that Russia's identity and geopolitical actions are deeply influenced by a long historical trajectory. Successive territorial invasions of Russia going back centuries include armed incursions by Polish, Swedish, French, Japanese, British, and German forces. Even American troops participated in the 1918-1920 Allied intervention. Friot observes, "The Allied intervention does not get more than a footnote—if that—in history books in the United States. The Russians remember it better than we do" (p. 10).

In a gripping style, Friot connects historical memory and current attitudes toward the West. The book acknowledges that Russia's experiences, particularly its sense of victimhood and historical grievances, are often misunderstood in the West. *Containing*

History contrasts competing Russian and Western perspectives over time. Likewise, it creates several analytical conversations among various aspects of international and domestic politics. As Friot notes, "The fact that the Cold War ended with the disintegration of the Soviet empire (which lasted some seventy years), is not nearly as historically significant as the fact that the Cold War ended with the disintegration of the *Russian* empire, which lasted for more than three hundred years" (p. 326).

The focus on the role of Russian ethnicity and cultural distinctiveness as drivers of political and social behavior is insightful. The observation that post-Soviet Russian generations feel a stronger sense of national identity than their predecessors is key to understanding the resurgence of Russian nationalism under Putin. The book dives into the geopolitical legacies of the Cold War, highlighting their continued influence on U.S.-Russia relations today. At its core, the book seeks to explain why Russia and Americans view each other so differently and how the Cold War shaped both nations' domestic and international politics. Friot places these divergent perspectives in the broader context of Russia's historical experiences, such as its imperial past Soviet legacy, and its struggle with Western encroachment.

The claim that the Cold War is still relevant, particularly in how it informs Russia's foreign policy and attitudes toward the West, is well argued. It is true that the distrust between Russia and the West, established firmly during the Cold War, persists and affects modern conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine. This historical perspective helps explain why Putin's actions may seem both strategic and reactive, rooted in a longstanding fear of encirclement and Western hostility. Friot emphasizes that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not signal an "end of history," as Francis Fukuyama famously suggested, but rather set the stage for renewed tensions as Russia seeks to reassert itself on the global stage. These pressure points have been exacerbated by Western misinterpretations of Russian nationalism and the internal

pressures facing Russia, especially under Vladimir Putin.

Russia's national identity is multifaceted. While historical antecedents rooted in the Cold War are certainly important, they do not fully account for the complexity of contemporary Russian society. For instance, the resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church, the role of economic interests, and the impact of globalization on younger Russians could all be explored more deeply to provide a more comprehensive view. Friot tends to focus on historical memory and external relations (especially regarding the West), but Russia's internal political dynamics, particularly the role of authoritarianism under Putin, are underplayed. The resurgence of Russian nationalism and militarism is not purely a product of historical memory—it is also a deliberate tool used by Putin to consolidate power domestically. The role of state propaganda, economic stagnation, and the suppression of dissent in shaping public opinion could be examined more thoroughly.

Friot explains how Russian history differs from that of the United States and Western Europe. The implication that Western societies lack comparable traumas oversimplifies the picture. Western nations, especially in Europe, have also experienced cataclysmic wars and political upheaval, including the two World Wars and the Cold War itself. A more nuanced discussion of how these historical experiences differ in their long-term effects on national identities could strengthen the argument.

The author broadly claims that the Cold War is still relevant. However, the rules of engagement are less clear today, especially in cyberspace. While the Cold War provides useful context, the contemporary global order is marked by multi-polarity (e.g. the rise of China), global economic interdependence, and emergence of non-state actors—all of which differ from the more binary structure of the Cold War. This book could benefit from more fully acknowledging these differences and exploring how new technologies, economic globalization, and different power

dynamics have altered the nature of conflict.

The author states that Putin's ethnonationalism is not an ideology "in anything like the same sense that communism was." This point is under-explored. While communism provided a cohesive, global ideological framework, Putin's blend of nationalism, imperial nostalgia, and anti-Western rhetoric serves a more pragmatic, situational purpose. It lacks the global ambition of Soviet communism but is still powerful in shaping domestic and foreign policy. A deeper exploration of how Putin uses ideology to legitimize his rule and justify his policies could enhance the analysis.

The book hints at some important historical episodes, like the Soviet-German nonaggression pact and the Cold War arms control negotiations. But it doesn't delve deeply into how these events directly shape modern Russian attitudes toward international law, diplomacy, and trust in global institutions. Exploring how historical treaties, betrayals, and alliances shaped Russian strategy could provide a richer understanding of Russia's behavior today.

The book is particularly informative when discussing the contributions of American policy leaders at various points in time during the Cold War. Friot is obviously impressed with many of the U.S. presidents, cabinet leaders, diplomats, and geopolitical strategists that guided American foreign policy during these perilous years. A key theme of the book is how the caliber of these Cold War era policymakers is far superior to contemporary leaders. Friot comments, "It is hard to look at this array of leaders without wondering what accounts for the palpable differences between them and many, if not most, of their twenty-first century counterparts (p. 111). He does express some admiration for Joe Biden's leadership in international affairs which he traces back to Biden's foreign policy experiences in the U.S. Senate. As President, Biden has leveraged Putin's assault on Ukraine to not only completely repair the damage done by President Trump, but

to expand NATO membership with the recent additions of Finland and Sweden.

The author effectively ties together the past and present. He makes some surprising predictions and policy recommendations. First, he recommends that American foreign policy should start preparing *now* for a post-Putin Russia. In the meantime, the West should blunt Putin's existing ambitions with explicit willingness to deploy superior military power.

Second, he says that "it is not likely that Crimea will ever be returned to Ukraine" (p. 328). He supports this prediction with discussion about the long history of Crimea being under Russian control since it was initially annexed in 1783 during the First Turkish War. Friot notes that Russians have longstanding cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious ties to Crimea. Furthermore, "Crimea has been redeemed more than once with Russian blood" (p. 329). The interplay of historical factors, geographical considerations, a sense of Western encirclement, the Russian diaspora, and Russia's enduring goal of maintaining access to a warm-water port—particularly Sevastopol, a city of both emotional and strategic importance—makes it clear that Russia is highly unlikely to willingly surrender Crimea (p. 329). In the strictest spirit of *realpolitik*, Friot says that the United States and its allies should feel little imperative in the near term to excuse or recognize Russia's control of Crimea. On the other hand, Friot encourages some toleration for a Russian equivalent to the Monroe Doctrine.

Third, the author declares that further "expansion of NATO to include Ukraine would be counterproductive, unnecessary, and conducive to open conflict" (p. 332). Friot sees a fundamental distinction between NATO's incorporation of Finland and Sweden into its membership and the possibility of such future membership for Ukraine. He asserts that, "rightly or wrongly, Russia would consider accession of Ukraine to be an existential threat" (p. 334). At the same time, Friot sees few drawbacks to welcoming Ukraine

into the European Union. These considerations could play out as major touch-points in any peace negotiations to end the Russia-Ukraine war.

Finally, Friot predicts that over the long term, the U.S. is more likely to ally with Russia than China. He points to the highly educated citizenry in Russia who possess strong affinity toward Western culture. Unlike China, Russian citizens jealously guard their access to the web—admittedly through the use of virtual private networks. The author sees great risk for Russian authorities to start placing limits on internet access. He cautions though that "meaningful democratic reform in Russia, when it comes, will be democratic reform, Russian style" (p. 350). The United States and its Western allies should refrain from arrogantly force-feeding democratic reforms should such an opportunity arise.

In sum, *Containing History* provides a strong historical framework—especially in the context of the Cold War—for understanding Russia's actions and its ongoing conflict with the West. The book is such a wonderful and timely overview to assist contemporary readers to appreciate the complexity of international affairs as currently playing out on the world stage. This book would be a welcome addition to any classroom covering contemporary international affairs.

REFERENCES

Fukuyama, Francis. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press.

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