

Sergey Radchenko's 'To Run the World' Shortlisted for Pushkin House Book Prize 2025

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Courtesy photo

“Am I a trembling creature, or do I have the right?” are the oft-quoted words of Rodion Raskolnikov, the protagonist in Dostoevsky’s “Crime and Punishment.” In the novel, Raskolnikov murders an old pawnbroker and her sister to test whether he is one of those rare, exceptional individuals who can transcend conventional morality — those who *have the right* to break the rules in pursuit of a higher destiny.

As he discovers — he doesn’t.

But the line serves as a refrain that encapsulates the psychological and moral tension at the heart of Sergey Radchenko’s new book “To Run the World: The Kremlin’s Cold War Bid for Global Power,” shortlisted for the Pushkin House Book Prize 2025.

Radchenko, a distinguished Professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, argues that Marxism-Leninism only gets us so far in understanding Soviet behaviour. Instead, by drawing on a host of newly declassified Russian and Chinese Cold War documents, he reframes Soviet foreign policy as a recurring drama of “ontological insecurity”: Soviet leaders were haunted by the fear of being “trembling creatures” in the eyes of the world, seen as illegitimate, derivative, or weak. Their response, like Raskolnikov’s, was to reach for acts that would assert their historical significance — be it Stalin’s iron grip over Eastern Europe or Khrushchev’s nuclear brinkmanship. These were not just geopolitical manoeuvres, Radchenko suggests, but performances of greatness — desperate bids for recognition from rivals and allies alike.

Radchenko’s 700-page marathon is neatly carved into four parts, each dedicated to a Soviet ruler. The first part focuses on Joseph Stalin, who, in the aftermath of World War II, initially sought great-power cooperation and was willing to forgo some opportunities to expand Soviet influence in exchange for a stable international order. For Stalin, power without legitimacy — especially recognition from the United States — was insecure. But this hope soon gave way to a “zero-sum game” where any concession signalled weakness. Paranoid and deeply insecure, Stalin came to prefer control without legitimacy over legitimacy without control.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev assumed leadership of the Soviet Union, bringing with him a volatile mix of insecurity and revolutionary ambition — the subject of Part II. A “revolutionary romantic,” as Radchenko describes him, Khrushchev shared Raskolnikov’s tormented desire to prove himself — both to the world and to himself. This obsession drove him to push the Cold War to the brink, most notably over Berlin, where his sense of inferiority toward the West translated into a foreign policy oscillating between resentment and desperate pleading. Nuclear weapons, in his view, offered a shortcut to global greatness — a way for the Soviet Union to assert superpower status despite its economic backwardness. Though this, of course, pushed the world close to destruction in 1962 during the Cuba Missile Crisis.

In the Brezhnev era, the Soviet Union continued to seek recognition as an equal to the United States even as it worked to undermine American influence, especially through its engagements in the Third World. Nowhere was this more evident than in Vietnam. As Radchenko shows, Moscow’s support for North Vietnam was meant to bolster its revolutionary credibility and affirm its status as a global superpower. But what looked like a geopolitical win turned out to be a costly burden. The long-term expense of subsidizing Vietnam strained the Soviet economy and added to the systemic pressures that would intensify in the 1980s. In its bid for recognition, the USSR often confused symbolic gestures of influence with real, sustainable power.

Most fascinating in Radchenko’s account is his study of Mikhail Gorbachev, the subject of Part IV. Like his predecessors, Gorbachev sought international recognition — but, Radchenko argues, he redefined greatness in moral rather than military terms. True leadership, he believed, came from setting a positive example through disarmament, peaceful coexistence, and bold, often unilateral concessions. His most radical move was abandoning Eastern Europe, rejecting the Soviet need for a buffer zone. For Radchenko, this was the U.S.S.R.’s brief moment as a “city on the hill,” offering a new model of international order rooted in

cooperation and restraint rather than dominance.

Resentment at not being treated as an equal remains central to Russian foreign policy long after the Soviet collapse. Radchenko concludes that Putin is less a break from the past than a continuation — replacing communism with toxic nationalism, but preserving the craving for recognition as a great power or adversary. Putin's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 echo Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, driven by the same imperial impulses. It is, Radchenko writes, "as if Raskolnikov murdered the old pawnbroker lady in plain sight, and then walked down the street, brandishing the bloodied axe: see, I did it because I could!"

From "Conclusion"

[President] Clinton turned up in Moscow for the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet Victory Day, a controversial move, given Russia's ongoing war in Chechnya and Washington's complaints about Russia's sale of nuclear technologies to Iran. He decided to go, to advertise his support for Yeltsin and to help reenergize the Russian–American relationship, which was beginning to show signs of strain. He came to the parade as well, a relatively low-key affair, which on that occasion still featured some 6,000 Soviet veterans of the Second World War. They marched across the Red Square against the backdrop of a large banner showing a Soviet soldier and an American soldier in a friendly embrace. "I just can't get over the faces," Clinton later said. "The faces are incredible." Who knows what he read in those faces? But one of the marching veterans, retired colonel Viktor Gaevsky, probably spoke for many, when he told a reporter: "Yes, we are hurt and humiliated. But let the whole world see for themselves that the veterans have not been broken, and they are ready to stand for themselves, and for their impoverished, insulted nation."

Gaevsky, then a still a teenager, dug antitank trenches on the outskirts of Moscow in 1941, and fought in Karelia and in Eastern Europe. He was wounded in hand-to-hand combat, was nearly burned alive in one hostile engagement, but survived and greeted the end of war in Czechoslovakia. He was of that generation for whom the war was a formative experience, the point of greatest horror but also of greatest pride at having overcome, at having proven to the world that they could. The war was a legitimating experience, and the victory in that war, at however atrocious a cost, served to confirm the legitimacy of the Soviet project and the Soviet Union's exalted place in the global order. That idea — that the Soviet Union acquired true greatness by waging and winning a war against a mighty enemy — proved so resilient that it outlived the Soviet collapse and the death of Marxism–Leninism. The peculiar Soviet ideology was only a means to greatness but greatness itself — that was for the ages.

But — and this is where the Soviet Cold War experience became so interesting — greatness could not be simply proclaimed. It had to be recognized. Germany's unconditional surrender in the Second World War was a form of recognition — recognition through submission, as Hegel would have had it. But it was not enough. The recognition that Moscow craved had to come from the United States. The underlying premise of the Yalta discussions was that the United States would recognize certain Soviet gains in Europe and Asia, and by recognizing legitimize them. It was strange that Stalin, cynical operator that he was, put so much stock on the legitimacy of Soviet gains. But he did, and, as we have seen, he was even willing to surrender illegitimate gains in exchange for those legitimated by Yalta (this was clear in his

approach to China in particular).

But it quickly transpired that what Stalin deemed “legitimate” – that is, roughly corresponding to Moscow’s new postwar self-perception of greatness – was deemed quite illegitimate by the Americans. Early disagreements over Poland, the US initial failure to recognize the Bulgarian and Romanian governments, and Washington’s unwillingness to permit Stalin a colony in North invalidated Stalin’s claims to great-power equality. Therefore, while the Soviets secretly and urgently pursued their own A-bomb, Stalin played it tough in diplomatic encounters with the Americans, fearing that any, even minor, concessions, would be interpreted by the US leadership as a sign of weakness, as a sign that he had “blinked” in the face of American power and so lead to even more pressure. And yet Stalin blinked again and again: in Iran, where he retreated, betraying a separatist movement that he had brought to power; in Turkey, where he made threats and territorial demands but did little to follow through; in Berlin, when he tried to elbow the Allies out but refused to open fire on the American planes that resupplied the city. He was very cautious in China, leading Mao to suspect, rightly, that Stalin did not believe in the Chinese revolution. What Stalin was worried about above all was inadvertently triggering US intervention in the Chinese civil war, which could upend the regional balance of power and result in the loss of his gains, won after so much toil at Yalta.

Historians have long debated whether the communization of Eastern Europe in the late 1940s was inevitable, and this book sides with those who argue that it was not. Kennan was right to say that Stalin worked by no fixed plans; that, in effect, he was an opportunist. Moreover, he expected Communist parties to do better in elections. Only after it transpired that the Communists could not gain power peacefully did Stalin really give up on the idea of separate roads to socialism. The Marshall Plan contributed to this rethinking, increasing Stalin’s paranoia about the American penetration of Europe, though it was only one factor among several. The more important factor was the Communists’ declining electoral chances. The way to fix this problem was to falsify elections and to intimidate the opposition – but this option was only available to Stalin in countries under his direct control.

There is still the unresolved question of whether the Soviet Union at the outset of the Cold War was a status quo or a revolutionary power. If it was a status quo power, it was basically satisfied with its place in the global order and would not seek to disrupt it. Stalin’s entire approach at Yalta seems to be pointing in this direction. But here is the problem. If it was true that Stalin had a long-term vision for worldwide triumph of Communism, then he would never be content with a particular perch, even an exalted one. There would be tempting opportunities to go from gain to gain if he could reasonably get away with it. We could observe this with the Soviet behavior in Greece, the only country that was clearly assigned to the British “sphere” in the percentages agreement and where Stalin first refused to support a Communist insurgency but later came around to cautiously supporting it, until he changed his mind once again. He tested the boundaries of the possible in Iran and in Japan, retreating only when faced with US threats. This does not point in the direction of a stable equilibrium.

Thus, a failure to push back against Stalin’s demands could well have resulted in him making ever greater demands. On the other hand, pushing back hard against demands that Stalin deemed legitimate clearly contributed to the erosion of trust and the escalation of tensions, feeding the spiral of conflict. Henry Kissinger was right to argue in his 1957 book that “the

powers which represent legitimacy and the status quo cannot 'know' that their antagonist is not amenable to 'reason' until he has demonstrated it. And he will not have demonstrated it until the international system is already overturned." In Stalin's case, we never reached that point, because Truman pushed back. If he had not, would he have discovered that Stalin was, in fact, a reasonable old chap who merely wanted America to be equally reasonable? Maybe. But the price of getting it wrong would have been Soviet conquest. The price of pushing back was "just" the Cold War.

"To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power" by Sergey Radchenko is published by Cambridge University Press. Copyright © Sergey Radchenko 2024. All rights reserved. Footnotes have been removed to ease reading. For more information about the author and this book, see the publisher's site [here](#).

"To Run the World" has been shortlisted for this year's [Pushkin House Book Prize](#), which will be awarded on June 19 in London. Tickets for the ceremony are available [here](#).

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