

## Book review

**Geraint Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War: The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964-1970* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009), ISBN: 9780861932986, xviii + 202pp., price £50 (hardback).**

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Harold Wilson came to office on a wave of optimism that few other premiers could only ever have dreamt of. In the event, and if we were to take David Marquand's argument, the Prime Minister disappointed more than most.<sup>1</sup> Yet this very point has become the perennial obsession of most historians when discussing the Labour administrations of 1964-1970. Only recently have scholars moved beyond this more mundane question to focus on the specificities of policy formulation and the more general geopolitical constraints acting upon Wilson's worldview, aided greatly by the release of archival material for the full period of his premiership.

Geraint Hughes' largely well written – if a little structurally disjointed – monograph is more than an apt addition to this burgeoning material which focuses on British diplomacy from the 1960s. Studying the first two terms of Wilson's period in office, Hughes examines the effect of the Cold War – specifically the impact of the USSR and by implication the development of the Communist world including Sino-Soviet relations, the polycentrism of Eastern Europe and *détente* – on Britain's foreign and defence policies. Hughes makes a potentially huge study more manageable by delineating three central features of British external policy of particular interest: diplomatic relations with communist powers; the need to accommodate the era of *détente* with continuing defence needs; and the East as an outlet for British trade. No such work would be complete without an appreciation of superpower politics, which is a recurrent issue, together with the use of secondary literature on Britain's relations to the EEC and the withdrawal 'East of Suez'.

Chapter 1 serves as a background chapter. Hughes makes the point that *détente* until 1964 was 'conspicuous by its absence' (p. 31) and that this, compounded by Wilson's conceited views of his diplomatic skills and continuing views of a British 'world role', weighed heavily on the course of Anglo-Soviet relations post-1964. This analysis is carried over into Chapter 2, which examines the development of Wilson's Cold War policy between 1964-5. Hughes suggests Wilson 'entered office with his own views on Anglo-Soviet relations' (p. 35), in essence one which saw Wilson keen to take a lead in driving *détente*. Yet myriad factors including Labour Party uncertainty, American MLF plans and eventually the onset of the Vietnam War constrained his position. Chapter 3 takes up this latter issue, a period which saw Wilson offer the United States support through words rather than

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<sup>1</sup> Marquand, D., *The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Blair* (London: William Heinemann, 1999), p. 155.

arms. Policy was once again driven by a belief in Britain as a superpower ‘go-between’ (p. 81), a product of Wilson’s self-delusion over the perceived quality of his negotiating skills and supposed good relationship with Soviet leaders. This culminated in the (ultimately unsuccessful) Sunflower initiative, but also had an impact on defence policy studied in Chapter 4. Hughes concludes that withdrawal East of Suez was brought about by ‘interaction of economic problems, conflicting alliance commitments, Cold War rivalries and calculations of national interests’ (p. 88). An insightful emphasis is placed on the role Healey played, in addition to Wilson, in the retrenchment decision. The link between East of Suez and Wilson’s push for Europe is also featured, though the most thorough work on the topic is not mentioned either here or anywhere else.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 5 discusses trade and *détente* against a background of espionage during the latter 1960s. Wilson promoted trade links – as had his predecessors – which combined economic rational and attempts to achieve *détente* with a simultaneous attempt to support the NATO alliance. This largely failed, in part exacerbated by espionage and paranoia on both sides, yet when compared to American, West German and French policy this failure was not unique. (p. 137). Lack of unity came to haunt the British position towards the Prague Spring episode examined in the penultimate chapter. Wilson was critical of the Soviet invasion, albeit more muted than other Western leaders at the risk of inflaming tensions. Despite this, Hughes states this had little long-term impact on East-West relations (p. 161).

All this indicates just how many issues Hughes has covered, and anyone with an interest in postwar British foreign policy is undoubtedly going to learn something from this adventurous undertaking. Yet from a personal point of view two concerns exist. The first revolves around the almost exclusive concentration on elite decision-making, something Hughes by his own omission notes is the case (p. 8). At times the word count is given over to role of the Labour party but as a determinant in Wilson’s own views rather than membership-level perceptions of the USSR. Given the level of analysis and extra research necessary for both elite and rank-and-file this is perhaps understandable; however there is clearly much more to be said on the party-wide responses to East-West relations. This reflects a second omission. Although Hughes has made use of some Labour archives held at the LSE Library, use of the fuller collection in Manchester is conspicuous by its absence. The same point can equally be applied to the lack of consultation with Soviet or Eastern European archives. These two concerns perhaps speak to the difficulty facing scholars when conducting comparative or multi-archival research than to any particular failing on Hughes’ part. However, the relations between all levels of the Labour party and the Russian (or Sino) communists could have really set this study apart.

Notwithstanding this, Hughes demonstrates that East-West relations are instrumental to our understanding of Britain’s postwar foreign policy. This, as Hughes aptly alludes to, had ramifications for several other aspects of external policy – most interestingly the course of British policy on the

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<sup>2</sup> See Parr, H., *Britain’s Policy towards the European Community: Harold Wilson and Britain’s world role, 1964-1967* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

wider issue European integration – and these all had a bearing on the course of Wilson's Cold War. It is in this theme that the real value of Hughes' book lies.

Matthew Broad  
University of Reading  
[m.broad@reading.ac.uk](mailto:m.broad@reading.ac.uk)