

On the Spot: Vladislav Zubok

HT historytoday.com/archive/interview/spot-vladislav-zubok

VINTAGE

ALLIES AT WAR

FROM THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF APPEASING HITLER

'There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies and that is fighting *without* them'

WINSTON CHURCHILL

OUT
NOW



Interview

'What historical topic have I changed my mind on? The collapse of the Soviet Union. I used to think it was a relatively peaceful event.'

Vladislav Zubok | Published in History Today Volume 75 Issue 5 May 2025



A queue in front of the Lenin Mausoleum, by Hans Gerber, August 1965. ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive / Com_L15-0757-0600-0002 (BY-SA 4.0).

Why are you a historian of the Cold War?

When I chose to study the Cold War I believed it would continue forever. In the 2000s I shifted to other topics, but when the Cold War began to 'return' I stopped vacillating.

What's the most important lesson history has taught you?

Nothing is inevitable and everything is caused by humans.

Which history book has had the greatest influence on you?

The Imperialist Policy of the USA in the Countries of the Caribbean Basin, 1900-1939 by my grandfather Lev Zubok.

What book in your field should everyone read?

The Origins of the First World War by James Joll and Gordon Martel.

Which moment would you most like to go back to?

June 1914.

Which historian has had the greatest influence on you?

Most recently, Thomas Carlyle.

Which person in history would you most like to have met?

Thucydides, to ask him if he invented his famous 'dialogues' or if they resulted from his oral history interviews.

How many languages do you have?

Russian and English, passively French, German, and Italian.

What's the most exciting field in history today?

Studies of empires and nationalism.

What historical topic have you changed your mind on?

The collapse of the Soviet Union. I used to think it was a relatively peaceful event.

What is the most common misconception about your field?

That it is about 'one clerk writing to another clerk'.

Who is the most underrated person in history...

Raisa Gorbacheva. Every evening she took a walk with her husband. We do not know what they talked about, but we saw the results.

... and the most overrated?

Joseph Stalin.

Is there an important historical text you have not read?

I've started *Das Kapital* many times.

What's your favourite archive?

National Security Archive at the George Washington University.

What's the best museum?

The Pantheon in Rome (previously it was Hagia Sophia in Istanbul).

What technology has changed the world the most?

The printing press, of course.

Recommend us a historical novel...

Ali and Nino by Kurban Said.

... and a historical drama?

Medici.

You can solve one historical mystery. What is it?

Did Boris Godunov really order the death of Tsarevich Dmitry?

Vladislav Zubok is Professor of International History at LSE. His latest book is *The World of the Cold War: 1945-1991* (Pelican, 2025).

Cold War