

History 12

Lecture Notes: The Origins of the Cold War

The Soviet Union and the western allies were never entirely comfortable with each other, though each knew that the other was essential for victory to be achieved. As the war drew to a close, it soon became apparent that mutual distrust was leading to a break-up in the alliance, though it is probable that neither intended to have their relationship to become as antagonistic as it ultimately became.

Cold War Historiography:

Soviet and Western historians, naturally, differ in their interpretation of what went wrong after the war. Though Soviet historians have had to reflect the conventional view of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, that the nasty and conspiratorial western capitalists sought to take advantage of their greatly strengthened position after the war to deprive the Soviet Union of the fruits of victory in preparation for an eventual attack on the national bastion of Communism. Historians like Ponomarev claim that American liberal capitalist imperialism was trying to impose itself on the world. The Soviet response was purely to preserve the Soviet Union and the Eastern European social democracies. Western historians, operating within a much freer environment, have shown a more interesting range of views.

In the West there are essentially three positions, conservative, liberal and "progressive":

Conservative:

Here there are essentially two positions, that of the more radical right - the "cold warriors" - and the more traditional conservatives, who generally refer to themselves as "realists."

1. The first type stresses the evil of communism and its atheistic ideology. Some important proponents of this view have been John Foster Dulles (former Secretary of State), J. Edgar Hoover (former CIA Director), Henry Luce (publisher of *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune*, and *Sports Illustrated*), and Ronald Reagan (U.S. President). Generally this group's work is highly propagandistic, but the work of John Lukacs does provide a more sophisticated version of this viewpoint.
2. The "Realist" school stresses balance of power politics. Like the other conservative group, it tends to be critical of the Soviet Union, regarding it as threatening the world balance of power. They take note of traditional Russian expansionist tendencies and Russian nationalism, wishing to see it contained. They see the cold war as a natural struggle for power. They tend to avoid comment on morality

instead dealing with the tendency of stronger nations to seek to fill in any power vacuums that are present. Stalin is seen as a traditional Russian nationalist who sought to restore Russia's traditional sphere of influence - increasing it if convenient - and gaining warm water ports. Some Prominent "realists" were and are: Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan (both former high officials in the American government), the Historians John Wheeler-Bennet and Louis Halle, and former Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Liberal:

Liberal historians see ideological factors as primary:

- Western European and American liberalism and democracy are ranged against Soviet totalitarianism. The roots of this view lie in **Wilsonian** notions.
- Liberals were sympathetic to Roosevelt, seeing him as seeking a Wilsonian peace, based on the U.N. and renewed collective security, as well as self-determination for a liberated Europe.
- They regard free trade as the key to a peaceful world.
- They see the Soviets as ruining the UN through their irrational use of the veto.
- Some liberals see the Soviet ideology as perverse and warping reality. Stalin is seen as operating on an irrational basis.

Famous examples of this particular viewpoint are historians Thomas Bailey and Arthur Schlesinger, as well as American government official Walt Rostow and former Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson.

Progressives:

They are sometimes referred to as leftist "revisionists", or as the "New Left". Some are outright Marxists. They stress economic influences in the development of the cold war.

- Generally they see American business as seeking to expand its power and influence after guaranteed war-time markets were lost with the end of World War **II**.
- They also see the U.S. government as actively fostering this activity, using the American monopoly over the atomic bomb in the immediate post-war years to ensure foreign acquiescence.
- American liberal internationalism, to these commentators, is largely a rationalization of capitalist goals.
- They see America's denial of post-war credits to the Soviet Union as an attempt to weaken that nation, while the loans to Western Europe were to stimulate American industry and ensure capitalist encirclement of the USSR.
- To the "progressives" **containment** is synonymous with counter-revolution. Some argue that President Truman was a "bad guy."

Important progressive writers were or are historians William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko and Gar Alperovitz. A moderate revisionist, who is well worth reading, is Walter LaFeber (America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1975).

When World War II came to an end, relations between the two opposing camps became exceedingly difficult, though the hostile armed forces did not come to blows. Thus the phrase **cold war** came to be adopted, describing a war of propaganda and economic conflict, rather than one in which the antagonists fire at one another. Both major powers sought to gather allies about themselves. Both sides regarded the situation as a **zero sum game** in which one side's gain was the other's loss. As a result, whatever the opposition did was regarded as threatening. Though the cold war thawed somewhat on many occasions, the basic antagonism of East and West has remained a constant of international relations since the end of the last world war.

Causes of the Cold War:

Stalin's foreign policy:

The official American viewpoint contends that Stalin sought to take advantage of the military situation at the end of the war to strengthen Russian influence in Europe - grabbing and refusing to let go of as much of Europe as they could possibly get away with.

- Some see Stalin's expansionist as being in the tradition of the Russian Czars. Others see it as an attempt to spread communism globally, now that "socialism in one country" had been securely established.
- The Soviets, and some western "progressives," see Stalin's motives as being wholly motivated by a need to gain secure western frontiers. Clearly the Soviets had reason to suspect the West - particularly given American and British intervention at the time of the Russian Civil War. The American monopoly on the bomb left a high level of conventional armament as Stalin's only counter in the early cold war years; later, American technological superiority continued this requirement.

Others see Western actions as leading to the conflict:

- The major Western political leaders after the death of Roosevelt were invariably hostile to the Soviet Union. Churchill had been one of the chief proponents of intervention in the Russian Civil War. Truman, right from the start, made his suspicions of the Soviets quite clear.

Chronology:

1. Yalta (February, 1945)

Most people date the start of the cold war to the Yalta con-

ference. All parties came away with different notions about what they had agreed to. Roosevelt counted on post-war cooperation in the United Nations. Stalin counted on establishing a protective buffer of friendly eastern European states. Churchill counted on American support in the post war world. Territorial concessions were made to the Soviets, but much else was left unclear.

2. Potsdam (July, 1945)

Stalin, Truman and Churchill (later replaced by Atlee) met in a much changed political atmosphere. Russian help was no longer essential to the Allied war effort in the Far East. The Western Allies were unhappy with Stalin's actions in the Eastern European nations, with Truman seeing Soviet actions as a betrayal of the American liberal plans for the future - which they felt that the Soviets had also committed themselves to when they agreed to the **Atlantic Charter** (the British also had a rather different notion about what it meant than did the Americans). Though the Russians kept their promise and joined the war against Japan, they were denied any real role in the occupation of that defeated nation.

3. Churchill's "Iron Curtain Speech" (March, 1946)

In a visit to the U.S., at Fulton, Missouri, Churchill said: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the continent." Churchill claimed that the Soviets were bent on "indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines" and he further called for a western alliance to resist this threat. Stalin responded by labelling Churchill a warmonger. Many British Labour politicians criticized the leader of the opposition for making such inflammatory statements. Most Americans echoed the ex-Prime Minister's sentiments.

4. Strengthening of the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe (1945-1948)

With troops on the spot and the Soviet Secret Police active in the occupied areas, it was not difficult for Stalin to ensure that "friendly governments" were installed in all nations bordering on the Soviet Union. In most cases this meant communist regimes, but not in all instances (eg. Finland). Security seemed to be the chief concern of the Soviet leader, but his means of achieving it tended to be particularly brutal. Elections were rigged throughout the region.

- In Bulgaria, Nikolai Petkov, leader of the Agrarian Party, was arrested by the Communists and eventually hanged.
- In Poland, the coalition government of London and Lublin Poles soon broke down. Stanislaw Mikolajczyk fled to London.
- The Soviet zone in Germany was stripped of anything of value by the Soviets, who shipped their plunder eastward.
- Only Finland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia had regimes independent of Stalin. Finland was firmly committed to benevolent neutrality. Czechoslovakia had a coalition government headed by a communist Prime Minister. Yugoslavia had a com-

unist leader who had liberated his own country and was therefore beyond the reach of the Red Army and the NKVD. Stalin argued that he was only doing what Churchill had agreed to in their war-time percentages agreement. His acquiescence in the British suppression of Greek communists indicates that Stalin was indeed prepared to write off his own allies outside his appointed sphere.

5. The Truman Doctrine (March, 1947)

The continuing communist insurrection in Greece proved to be a severe drain on British resources. So much so that the British Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, called upon the United States for help. President Truman replied, saying that America would "support free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." Greece received massive supplies of arms and other material, which helped to eliminate the internal threat to the Monarchy by 1949. Further funds were also sent to Turkey under the Truman Doctrine. America was now committing itself actively to a policy of **containment**, of stopping any expansion of communist influence - anywhere in the world.

6. The Marshall Plan (announced in June, 1947)

George Marshall, the American Secretary of State, launched a programme of massive economic assistance as an adjunct to the Truman Doctrine. His ERP (European Recovery Programme) was intended to restore European economic prosperity. Clearly a prosperous Europe would be one best able to resist communist influence, from without and from within. (One should note that significant support existed for communist parties within both Italy and France - in the latter the communists were not tainted by any hint of collaboration with the Nazis in the last war, unlike many conservatives). It should also be noted that such economic recovery would also provide a market for American goods and, if accepted by Eastern European countries, might achieve a "roll-back" of Soviet influence as those countries were tied into the western economic system.

- By September, 16 nations had applied for such aid (Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland, Portugal, Austria, Switzerland, Greece, Turkey, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the 3 western zones in Germany). \$13,000 million of U.S. aid entered western Europe in the next 4 years.
- The Soviets refused to allow their satellites to take advantage of the American offer, with Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov labelling it as "dollar imperialism." Even Czechoslovakia, which had expressed interest in the plan, chose not to antagonize Stalin by taking part.

7. Cominform (September, 1947)

Feeling the need to respond to the Marshall Plan in some way, rather than lose the propaganda war hands down, the Soviets

decided upon forming an organization of European communist parties. Stalin was determined to solidify his hold on client parties. Eastern Europe was to be moulded according to the Soviet model.

- Most eastern European parties fell into line.
- Yugoslavia refused to submit to Stalin's leadership and was expelled from the Cominform in 1948.

In 1949, the **Molotov Plan** was announced - a sort of Soviet Marshall Plan. **Comecon** (the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance) was set up to coordinate economic policies. Unlike the Marshall Plan, which allowed for a great deal of flexibility, the Soviet Plan seems to have been aimed solely at integrating the Eastern European economies with that of Stalin's USSR.

8. The Communist Coup in Czechoslovakia (February, 1948)

Most Westerners had never really regarded Czechoslovakia as an eastern nation. Certainly its cultural traditions were closer to those of Austria and Germany than Russia. The communist coup in 1948 therefore came as a rude shock.

- The government prior to the coup had been a democratic coalition, in which the communists held 1/3 of the cabinet posts, including the Prime Ministership of Klement Gottwald. President Benes, who had served in the same post before the war, and the Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, both represented bourgeois political viewpoints.
- The rejection of Marshall Plan aid just prior to elections seemed to point toward a massive communist defeat at the polls.
- It appears that the communists chose to act while they still held key positions. Using their control of the unions and police, they seized power in Prague. Benes and Masaryk did not resign along with the other non-communist ministers, but a few days after the coup, Masaryk "fell" or "jumped" out of his office window. Though the communist position was that this was a suicide, the opening of the Czech archives in 1968 by Alexander Dubcek's reformist government clearly points out that it was murder. Benes too resigned and Gottwald assumed the Presidency. The movement of Red Army troops to the Czech frontier corresponded so conveniently with the coup that one can hardly believe that the Soviets were not intimately involved with the coup plans.

9. The Berlin Blockade and Airlift (June, 1948 to May, 1949)

The first real crisis that might have broken out into a shooting war erupted over the occupied areas of Germany. At the end of the war, the occupying powers divided both the country and the capital of Germany among themselves. The Western zones in Berlin existed as "islands", entirely surrounded by the Soviet occupation zone of Germany.

- In early 1948, the Western Allies brought in a new currency and put an end to rationing and price controls. Prosperity returned to the western, but not the eastern zones. This proved acutely embarrassing to the Soviets, particularly in Berlin, where the contrast between the zones was so great.
- In a move intended to bring about a Western withdrawal from Berlin, all land and canal links between the western zones in Berlin and the western zones in Germany were closed. Without supplies, it appeared that the West would have to capitulate or condemn Berliners to starvation.
- Rather than back down, the Western Allies decided to stand firm, no matter what the cost. With only air lanes open, they flew in absolutely all of the supplies needed within their zones in the city. 2 million tons of supplies were flown in during the 10 months of the crisis. Everything from food to coal entered via the two (later three) air-ports.
- Eventually Stalin tired of the effort, ending the blockade in May, 1949.

The result of the blockade was a further hardening of hostile attitudes in the East and West. Ultimately the Western and Soviet occupation zones were made into countries, with the Federal Republic of Germany (West) and the Democratic Republic of Germany (East), becoming states in 1949 (West in August, East in October).

10. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (April, 1949)

In March a defense pact was set up in Western Europe - the Brussels Treaty Organization - including Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, and Luxembourg. Through the joint efforts of Britain and the U.S.A., this was enlarged in April, with the addition of America, Canada, Portugal, Denmark, Ireland, Italy and Norway in the larger NATO. Greece, Turkey and West Germany would join later.

The Soviets responded by expanding the role of the Cominform, but this was not considered enough by the mid 1950's and a Soviet alliance, the **Warsaw Pact** was eventually formed in 1955. Both alliances still are central in the European balance of power.