



Conclusion:

*The United States and the
Origins of the Cold War*

American leaders did not want a Cold War, but they wanted insecurity even less. By early 1946, President Truman and his advisers had reluctantly concluded that recent actions of the Soviet Union endangered the security of the United States. This decision grew out of a complex of internal and external pressures, all filtered through the perceptions and preconceptions of the men who made American foreign policy. In order to understand how they came to this conclusion, it is necessary to view the situation as they saw it, not as it appears today in the cold, but not always clear, light of historical hindsight.¹

World War II had produced a revolution in United States foreign policy. Prior to that conflict, most Americans believed that their country could best protect itself by minimizing political entanglements overseas. Events of 1939–40 persuaded leaders of the Roosevelt Administration that they had been wrong; Pearl Harbor convinced remaining skeptics. From then on, American policy-makers would seek security through involvement, not isolation: to prevent new wars, they believed, the whole

¹ On this point, see Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis*, pp. 32–45.

system of relations between nations would have to be reformed. Assuming that only their country had the power and influence to carry out this task, United States officials set to work, even before formal entry into the war, to plan a peace settlement which would accomplish such a reformation.

Lessons of the past greatly influenced Washington's vision of the future. Determined to avoid mistakes which, in their view, had caused World War II, American planners sought to disarm defeated enemies, give peoples of the world the right to shape their own future, revive world trade, and replace the League of Nations with a new and more effective collective security organization. But without victory over the Axis, the United States would never have the opportunity to implement its plan for peace. Given the realities of the military situation, victory depended upon cooperation with the Soviet Union, an ally whose commitment to American postwar ideals was, at best, questionable.

Kremlin leaders, too, looked to the past in planning for the future, but their very different experiences led them to conclusions not always congruent with those of their American allies. For Stalin, the key to peace was simple: keep Russia strong and Germany weak. The Soviet dictator enthusiastically applauded American insistence on unconditional surrender, questioning only the wisdom of making this policy public. He showed little interest in Washington's plans for collective security, the reduction of tariff barriers, and reform of the world monetary system. Self-determination in Eastern Europe, however, he would not allow: the region was vital to Soviet security, but the people who lived there were bitterly anti-Russian. Nor could Stalin view with equanimity Allied efforts, also growing out of lessons of the past, to limit reparations removals from Germany. These two conflicts—Eastern Europe and Germany—became major areas of contention in the emerging Cold War.

Moscow's position would not have seemed so alarming to American officials, however, had it not been for the Soviet Union's continued commitment to an ideology dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism throughout the world. Hopes that the United States might cooperate successfully with the USSR after the war had been based on the belief, encouraged by Stalin himself, that the Kremlin had given up its former goal of exporting communism. Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe in 1944 and 1945, together with the apparent abandonment of popular

front tactics by the world communist movement, caused Western observers to fear that they had been misled. Just at the moment of victory over the Axis, the old specter of world revolution reappeared.

It seems likely that Washington policy-makers mistook Stalin's determination to ensure Russian security through spheres of influence for a renewed effort to spread communism outside the borders of the Soviet Union. The Russians did not immediately impose communist regimes on all the countries they occupied after the war, and Stalin showed notoriously little interest in promoting the fortunes of communist parties in areas beyond his control.² But the Soviet leader failed to make the limited nature of his objectives clear. Having just defeated one dictator thought to have had unlimited ambitions, Americans could not regard the emergence of another without the strongest feelings of apprehension and anger.

Nor did they see any reason to acquiesce timidly in what Stalin seemed to be doing. The United States had come out of the war with a monopoly over the world's most powerful weapon, the atomic bomb, and a near-monopoly over the productive facilities which could make possible quick rehabilitation of war-shattered economies. Convinced that technology had given them the means to shape the postwar order to their liking,³ Washington officials assumed that these instruments would leave the Russians no choice but to comply with American peace plans. Attempts to extract concessions from Moscow in return for a loan failed, however, when the Soviet Union turned to German reparations to meet its reconstruction needs. The Russians also refused to be impressed by

² Historians, revisionist and nonrevisionist, now generally agree on the limited nature of Stalin's objectives. See, for example, Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*, pp. 403–4, 420–23; McNeill, *America, Britain, and Russia*, pp. 316, 406, 408, 476; Fleming, *The Cold War and Its Origins*, I, 252–62; Kolko, *Politics of War*, pp. 618–23; LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945–1967*, pp. 17, 23; Louis J. Halle, *The Cold War as History*, pp. 11, 17, 46; Deutscher, *Ironies of History*, pp. 151–56; Schlesinger, "Origins of the Cold War," p. 36; and Starobin, "Origins of the Cold War: The Communist Dimension," pp. 686–88. But in 1947 the distinguished historian William L. Langer was writing: "We can see clearly now that it was a mistake to believe that the Bolsheviks had given up the idea of world revolution. . . . Europe and the world have been freed of the Nazi menace only to be confronted with the specter of Communist control." ("Political Problems of a Coalition," *Foreign Affairs*, XXVI [October, 1947], 88.)

³ On this point, see Sir Denis Brogan, "The Illusion of American Omnipotence," *Harper's*, CCV (December, 1952), 21–28.

the atomic bomb, leaving the Truman Administration with the choice of actually using it, or returning to *quid pro quo* bargaining. American omnipotence turned out to be an illusion because Washington policy-makers failed to devise strategies for applying their newly gained power effectively in practical diplomacy.

Frustrated in their efforts to work out an acceptable settlement with the USSR, under severe pressure from Congress and the public to make no further compromises, American leaders embarked on a new Russian policy during the first months of 1946. Henceforth, expansionist moves by the Kremlin would be resisted, even at the risk of war. Negotiations would continue, but future concessions would have to come from Moscow. Meanwhile, the United States would begin rebuilding its military forces, now badly depleted by demobilization, and would launch an ambitious program of economic assistance to nations threatened by communism. Administration officials found it necessary to exaggerate the Soviet ideological challenge in order to win support for these projects from parsimonious legislators, but there can be no doubt that the President and his advisers regarded the danger as a serious one. Nor can there be any question that the general principle of "getting tough with Russia" evoked overwhelming public approval: a generation seared by the memory of Munich would not tolerate appeasement, however unpleasant the alternatives might be.

It is easy for historians, writing a quarter of a century later, to suggest ways in which the United States might have avoided, or at least lessened, the dangers of a postwar confrontation with the Soviet Union. President Roosevelt could have eased Russia's military burden by launching a second front in Europe in 1942 or 1943. He could have explicitly exempted Eastern Europe from provisions of the Atlantic Charter, thereby recognizing the Soviet sphere of influence in that part of the world. American officials could have aided in the massive task of repairing Russian war damage by granting a generous reconstruction loan, and by allowing extensive reparations removals from Germany. Finally, the United States could have attempted to allay Soviet distrust by voluntarily relinquishing its monopoly over the atomic bomb.

But these were not viable alternatives at the time. A premature second front would have greatly increased American casualties and might have weakened support for the war effort. Recognition of the Soviet po-

sition in Eastern Europe would have aroused opposition in the Senate to American membership in the United Nations, and might have endangered Roosevelt's reelection prospects. Economic concessions to the Russians, in the form of either a reconstruction loan or a more flexible attitude on reparations, would have evoked a storm of protest from a Congress still largely isolationist in its approach to foreign aid. A decision to give up the atomic bomb would have so alienated the American people and their representatives on Capitol Hill as to impair the very functioning of the government. Policy-makers operate within a certain range of acceptable options, but they, not historians, define degrees of acceptability. It is surely uncharitable, if not unjust, to condemn officials for rejecting courses of action which, to them, seemed intolerable.

A fairer approach is to ask why policy-makers defined their alternatives so narrowly. Important recent work by revisionist historians suggests that requirements of the economic system may have limited the options open to American officials in seeking an accommodation with Russia. Leaders of the United States had become convinced, revisionists assert, that survival of the capitalist system at home required the unlimited expansion of American economic influence overseas. For this reason, the United States could not recognize legitimate Soviet interests in Eastern Europe, Germany, or elsewhere. By calling for an international "open door" policy, Washington had projected its interests on a worldwide scale. The real or imagined threat of communism anywhere endangered these interests, and had to be contained.⁴

Revisionists are correct in emphasizing the importance of internal constraints, but they have defined them too narrowly: by focusing so heavily on economics, they neglect the profound impact of the domestic political system on the conduct of American foreign policy. The Constitution did, after all, give the public and their representatives on Capitol

⁴ This interpretation was originally put forward by William A. Williams in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. Important extensions and elaborations of Williams' thesis include Gardner, *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy* and *Architects of Illusion*; Kolko, *Politics of War*; LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, especially chapters 1 and 2; Gar Alperovitz, *Cold War Essays*, especially pp. 75-121; David Horowitz, *Free World Colossus*; and the essays on foreign policy in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration*. Revisionists are by no means in agreement on all aspects of the debate surrounding the origins of the Cold War, but they do all accept the basic elements of the Williams thesis.

Hill at least a negative influence in this field, and while these influences may not have determined the specific direction of diplomatic initiatives, they did impose definite limitations on how far policy-makers could go. The delay in opening the second front, nonrecognition of Moscow's sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, the denial of economic aid to Russia, and the decision to retain control of the atomic bomb can all be explained far more plausibly by citing the Administration's need to maintain popular support for its policies rather than by dwelling upon requirements of the economic order.

One might, of course, argue that the political system reflected the economic substructure, and that American officials were merely unwitting tools of capitalism, but it is difficult to justify this assumption without resorting to the highly questionable techniques of economic determinism.⁵ At times, it seems as if revisionists do employ this approach—they frequently take literally only statements of economic interest, disregarding as irrelevant whatever other explanations policy-makers gave for their actions. But the revisionists are not consistent in their economic determinism. Carried to its logical conclusion, that view of history would seem to indicate that the Cold War was an irrepressible conflict between two diametrically opposed ideologies; a clash for which individuals, presumably puppets of these systems, could bear no responsibility. Revisionists do not see the Cold War that way. They assert that the United States, because of its military and economic superiority over the Soviet Union, could have accepted Moscow's postwar demands without endangering American security. Because it did not, they hold leaders of the United States responsible for the way in which the Cold War developed, if not for the Cold War itself.⁶ This places revisionists in the odd posi-

⁵ For three recent critiques of economic determinism, see Berkhofer, *Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis*, pp. 56–57; David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, pp. 74–78; and Richard Hofstadter's essay on Charles Beard in *The Progressive Historians*, especially pp. 244–45.

⁶ Gardner, *Architects of Illusion*, pp. x–xi; Horowitz, *Free World Colossus*, pp. 19–20. See also Gardner's comment in Lloyd C. Gardner, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Hans J. Morgenthau, *Origins of the Cold War*, p. 109. The most thorough critique of Cold War revisionism is Charles S. Maier, "Revisionism and the Interpretation of Cold War Origins," *Perspectives in American History*, IV (1970), 313–47; but see also Paul Seabury, "Cold War Origins," *Journal of Contemporary History*, III (January, 1968), 169–82; Daniel M. Smith, "The New Left and the Cold War," *University of Denver Quarterly*, Winter, 1970, pp. 78–88; Christopher Lasch, "The Cold War, Revisited and Re-Visioned," *New York Times Magazine*, January 14, 1968, es-

tion of employing a single-cause explanation of human behavior, yet criticizing the subjects they deal with for not liberating themselves from the mechanistic framework which they, as historians, have imposed.

But even if, as the revisionists suggest, American officials had enjoyed a completely free hand in seeking a settlement with the Soviet Union, it seems unlikely that they would have succeeded. Accomplishment of this task required not only conciliatory actions by Washington but a receptive attitude on the part of Moscow. The latter simply did not exist. Traditional distrust of foreigners, combined with ideological differences, would have militated against a relationship of mutual trust with the United States regardless of who ruled Russia. Stalin's paranoia, together with the bureaucracy of institutionalized suspicion with which he surrounded himself, made the situation much worse. Information on the internal workings of the Soviet government during this period is still sparse, but sufficient evidence exists to confirm the accuracy of Kennan's 1946 conclusion that Russian hostility sprang chiefly from internal sources not susceptible to gestures of conciliation from the West.⁷

Historians have debated at length the question of who caused the Cold War,⁸ but without shedding much light on the subject. Too often they view that event exclusively as a series of actions by one side and re-

pecially p. 59; and Henry Pachter, "Revisionist Historians and the Cold War," in Irving Howe, ed., *Beyond the New Left*, pp. 166–91. My own reservations about Cold War revisionism were more fully expressed in "Domestic Influences on American Policy Toward the Soviet Union, 1941–1947," a paper delivered at the 1970 annual convention of the American Historical Association.

⁷ Kennan to Byrnes, March 20, 1946, *FR: 1946*, V, 723. See also Schlesinger, "Origins of the Cold War," pp. 46–50; and Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*, p. 399. Recently published memoirs by Soviet diplomatic and military officials depict vividly the almost pathological suspicion with which Stalin treated his own associates. A valuable compilation of translated excerpts is Seweryn Bialer, compiler, *Stalin and His Generals: Soviet Military Memoirs of World War II*. See also Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Twenty Letters to a Friend*; Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*; Harrison E. Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad*; and, if we may assume its authenticity, Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*. But no one has more effectively portrayed Stalin's personality and the effect it had on the Soviet bureaucracy than Alexander I. Solzhenitsyn in his novel *The First Circle*.

⁸ Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *The Origins of the Cold War*, provides the most useful introduction to this debate, but see also Norman A. Graebner, "Cold War Origins and the Continuing Debate: A Review of Recent Literature," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, XIII (March, 1969), 123–32; and Robert W. Sellen, "Origins of the Cold War: An Historiographical Survey," *West Georgia College Studies in the Social Sciences*, IX (June, 1970), 57–98.

actions by the other. In fact, policy-makers in both the United States and the Soviet Union were constantly weighing each other's intentions, as they perceived them, and modifying their own courses of action accordingly. In addition, officials in Washington and Moscow brought to the task of policy formulation a variety of preconceptions, shaped by personality, ideology, political pressures, even ignorance and irrationality, all of which influenced their behavior. Once this complex interaction of stimulus and response is taken into account, it becomes clear that neither side can bear sole responsibility for the onset of the Cold War.

But neither should the conflict be seen as irrepressible, if for no other reason than the methodological impossibility of "proving" inevitability in history.⁹ The power vacuum in central Europe caused by Germany's collapse made a Russian-American confrontation likely; it did not make it inevitable. Men as well as circumstances make foreign policy, and through such drastic expedients as war, appeasement, or resignation, policy-makers can always alter difficult situations in which they find themselves. One may legitimately ask why they do not choose to go this far, but to view their actions as predetermined by blind, impersonal "forces" is to deny the complexity and particularity of human behavior, not to mention the ever-present possibility of accident. The Cold War is too complicated an event to be discussed in terms of either national guilt or the determinism of inevitability.

If one must assign responsibility for the Cold War, the most meaningful way to proceed is to ask which side had the greater opportunity to accommodate itself, at least in part, to the other's position, given the range of alternatives as they appeared at the time. Revisionists have argued that American policy-makers possessed greater freedom of action, but their view ignores the constraints imposed by domestic politics. Little is known even today about how Stalin defined his options, but it does seem safe to say that the very nature of the Soviet system afforded him a larger selection of alternatives than were open to leaders of the United States. The Russian dictator was immune from pressures of Congress, public opinion, or the press. Even ideology did not restrict him: Stalin was the master of communist doctrine, not a prisoner of it, and could modify or suspend Marxism-Leninism whenever it suited him to do so.¹⁰

⁹ Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, pp. 12–13.

¹⁰ Schlesinger, "Origins of the Cold War," p. 48; Starobin, "Origins of the Cold War," p. 683.

This is not to say that Stalin wanted a Cold War—he had every reason to avoid one. But his absolute powers did give him more chances to surmount the internal restraints on his policy than were available to his democratic counterparts in the West.

The Cold War grew out of a complicated interaction of external and internal developments inside both the United States and the Soviet Union. The external situation—circumstances beyond the control of either power—left Americans and Russians facing one another across prostrated Europe at the end of World War II. Internal influences in the Soviet Union—the search for security, the role of ideology, massive postwar reconstruction needs, the personality of Stalin—together with those in the United States—the ideal of self-determination, fear of communism, the illusion of omnipotence fostered by American economic strength and the atomic bomb—made the resulting confrontation a hostile one. Leaders of both superpowers sought peace, but in doing so yielded to considerations which, while they did not precipitate war, made a resolution of differences impossible.

