

Historians and the Cold War

by Geoffrey Roberts (History Review Article December 2000)

The term 'cold war' first came into currency in 1947. It was used to denote a sharp and unexpected deterioration in postwar relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. In 1945 the USA and the USSR – the two main victors of the Second World War – had proclaimed their commitment to postwar unity and co-operation. But by the end of 1947 this public harmony had been replaced by mutual recrimination about who was to blame for the postwar break-up of the allied coalition that had defeated Hitler. Each side blamed the other for generating the political, ideological, and military rivalry that divided Europe into competing blocs and spawned a dangerous global power struggle between communism and liberal democratic capitalism.

From the very beginning of the cold war there was a dispute about its origins – about when, why and how the conflict started and who was responsible. Among historians the cold war origins debate went through several main phases.

From the 1940s to the 1970s it centred on the contribution of American foreign policy. Some historians (often labelled 'traditionalists' by their opponents) endorsed the official US government view that the cold war started because America resisted a series of aggressive and expansionary moves by the Soviet Union. Other historians (called 'revisionists' because they sought to revise the semi-official views of the traditionalists) were much more critical of American policy, arguing that the US had acted in an aggressive and unreasonable manner after the war, provoking a Soviet counter-response.

By the end of the 1970s the debate between traditionalist and revisionists had exhausted itself. Most historians were prepared to settle for a 'post-revisionist' or 'post-traditionalist' compromise view – essentially the idea that neither the Americans nor the Russians were to blame and that both sides had pursued what they considered legitimate security and foreign policy interests. The historical consensus was that the cold war was the result of mutual misunderstandings and of unavoidable clashes between Soviet and American foreign interests.

By the 1980s, however, the historical debate had entered a new phase with the publication of a number of studies on the origins of the cold war which emphasised the role of the lesser players, in particular Britain, France and West Germany. The themes of this literature were the European origins of the cold war, the independent role of the West European states, and the influence of politicians such as Churchill, Bevin, Bidault and Adenauer on US foreign policy.

Since the 1990s historical work on the cold war has been dominated by research on Soviet foreign policy. Following the fall of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, there was a significant opening up of Soviet bloc archives. Furthermore, the end of the cold war and the break-up of the Soviet Union facilitated more detached reflection on the roles and responsibilities of the different players. Broadly speaking, the post-revisionist consensus that nobody really wanted or was solely responsible for the cold war still holds. But it is a view that can now be validated from a multi-archival perspective.

The Grand Alliance

When exactly did the cold war begin? The two main responses to this question in the historical literature are: (i) 1917 and (ii) 1947. The first school of thought sees the cold war as a phase in a long history of antagonistic relations between the Soviet Union and the west. This history, it is argued, started when the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917 and began the socialist experiment in Russia, thereby provoking the ideological animosity of western liberal capitalism.

The alternative viewpoint focuses on the post-Second World War period and on the intense character of the Soviet-Western clash from

1947 onwards: not only ideological rivalry and hostility, but the emergence of polarised military-political power blocs kept on a permanent war footing and engaged in nuclear competition with each other.

Historians who characterise Soviet-western relations in the interwar period as an 'early cold war' make an important point. The post-1945 suspicion and mistrust among the great powers did not come out of thin air. Yet they tend to skip over possibly the most important phase in Soviet-Western relations before the cold war – the Grand Alliance period of 1941-1947, a phase of co-operation not confrontation.

The 'Grand Alliance', a grandiose concept popularised by Winston Churchill in the 1950s, is the most common name for the wartime coalition of Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. It was forced into being by Nazi Germany, which attacked Russia in June 1941 and declared war on the United States in December 1941. During the early period of its existence (1941-43) the alliance was primarily a war coalition, one dominated by military issues and priorities. However, with victory assured, decision-makers in London, Washington and Moscow began to turn their attention to the forthcoming peace settlement. From 1943 there were a series of tripartite negotiations and agreements concerning the postwar world. Of particular importance was a series of summits of the leaders of the Big Three at Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam. At these meetings Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt, Truman and Attlee agreed on the need for a peacetime grand alliance. The governing concept was that the postwar world should be shaped by the Big Three to assure peace, security and prosperity for all nations.

The story of the origins of the cold war is fundamentally one of how and why the grand alliance disintegrated. There were, it is true, a number of general conditions and contexts that pointed in the direction of such a break-up. Ideological differences and a history of difficulties in Soviet-Western relations have already been mentioned. During the war a large measure of agreement on postwar issues had been achieved but important unresolved disputes remained. At the end of the war there emerged numerous practical problems of working together in liberated Europe, above all in Germany. The fact that the Americans had the atomic bomb and the Russians did not was also problematical, as was the extent of the Soviet need for human and material resources to rebuild their war-devastated economy. Some historians argue that these factors made some kind of cold war inevitable. At the time, however, none of these problems was seen as insurmountable, given mutual respect and good will.

When the war ended there was good will aplenty – at least on most people's part. But not for long. It soon became evident that there were fundamental differences of policy and perspective between the Soviet Union and its grand alliance partners. The three most important areas of dispute concerned Eastern Europe, Germany and the political and economic reconstruction of Europe.

Eastern Europe

The dispute over Eastern Europe arose from the Soviet Union's determination to establish its domination of the region. Moscow saw control of the East European states – many of which had fought on the side of Germany during the war – as essential to Soviet security. Hence it wanted a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. This required the establishment of pro-Soviet governments and, so Stalin believed, the exclusion of western influence from the region. Since the Red Army had conquered most of Eastern Europe on its victorious march to Berlin the Soviets were in a strong position to get what they wanted. An additional factor in their favour was support from the East European communist parties, which wielded considerable political influence after the war. As a consequence Moscow pursued political as well as security goals in Eastern Europe – the strengthening of their communist allies and the sponsorship of radical, left-wing regimes

The British and Americans opposed Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. They accepted that the Russians had legitimate security interests in the region but emphasised the commitment made in the Declaration on Liberated Europe, agreed at the Yalta conference in February 1945, that the peoples of Eastern Europe would be free to choose their own governments. London and Washington were also concerned about the exclusion of American and British influence from the region. Anglo-American sympathies lay with anti-Soviet and

anti-communist politicians in Eastern Europe. Britain and the US argued that the Soviets and their communist allies were interfering with the democratic process in Eastern Europe, in particular by rigging ballots to ensure the election of pro-Moscow governments.

The main forum for the dispute over Eastern Europe was the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM). Established by the Potsdam conference in August 1945, the CFM was an organisation of the foreign ministers of Britain, China, France, the Soviet Union and the United States charged with the negotiation of the postwar peace settlement. It held its first meeting in London in September 1945 – a meeting which broke up in disarray when the western states refused to recognise the legitimacy of pro-Soviet governments in Bulgaria and Rumania. In due course that particular deadlock was resolved (the two governments were recognised) and the CFM resumed its meetings. Indeed, in 1945-47 the CFM successfully completed its main initial task of drawing up peace treaties for Italy, Rumania, Bulgaria, Finland and Hungary. However, the experience of these negotiations, which were exhausting and acrimonious, was none too edifying. Compounding the difficulties in the negotiations was the fact that much of the debate took place in public, in the press and elsewhere. Such public diplomacy resulted in the adoption of inflexible policy positions and often degenerated into purely propagandistic polemics.

The main problem in the negotiations was that the Soviets were unwilling to make any concessions that could undermine their position in Eastern Europe. Moscow also insisted on the principle of tripartism and co-decision-making, i.e. that everything should be decided by the Soviet Union, Britain and the US (the French and Chinese were considered, at best, as junior partners) and that within that tripartite arrangement each of the partners had a policy veto. For their part, the British and Americans sought to hold on to the positions they held – for example their influence in Italy and Greece – and to broaden out the process of decision and consultation on the postwar settlement.

Beyond the confines of the CFM the most important development in the Soviet-Western dispute over Eastern Europe was Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech in Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946. Churchill, in Fulton to receive an honorary degree, used the occasion to attack Soviet policy in Eastern Europe:

'From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of central and eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in the Soviet sphere and all are subject ... not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and increasing measure of control from Moscow.'

Churchill was no longer Prime Minister and his speech was not an official statement of British government policy. On the other hand, US President Harry Truman (who had succeeded Roosevelt in 1945) shared the platform with Churchill and the former PM's views could be taken as indicative of an influential strand in western policy and thinking. This was certainly how the Soviets interpreted the speech. Stalin himself publicly denounced Churchill as an anti-bolshevik warmonger. Privately, Moscow was becoming more and more concerned about the growth of anti-Soviet and anti-communist forces in the western states, worry which received ample confirmation with Truman's speech to the US Congress in March 1947:

'The peoples of a number of countries ... have recently had totalitarian regimes forced upon them against their will. The Government of the United States has made frequent protests against coercion and intimidation ... in Poland, Rumania, and Bulgaria ... At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life ... One way of life is based on the will of the majority ... The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority ... I believe it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures ...'

Truman's statement calling upon the United States to act in defence of the 'free world' subsequently became known as the Truman Doctrine. It signalled American determination to resist further Soviet expansion and to do so by the deployment of countervailing power, by what was called the policy of containment.

Truman's speech was delivered just as the CFM was convening in Moscow to consider the question of a peace treaty for Germany. His

evident abandonment of diplomacy and adoption of a confrontational position did not auger well for its proceedings.

Germany

Germany's future was the second important area of dispute between the erstwhile wartime allies. During the war it had been agreed that Germany would be jointly occupied by the allies and then denazified, demilitarised and democratised. To this end Germany was divided into Soviet and western zones of military occupation. Berlin too was divided, despite the fact that it lay deep in the Soviet zone of occupation. During the war there had been much talk of dismembering Germany, but both the Soviets and their western allies had found it convenient to drop this idea. Instead, the political future of the German state would be subject to further allied negotiations.

On Soviet insistence detailed discussion of a peace settlement with Germany (and Austria) was deferred until the conclusion of the peace treaties with the minor axis states. However, by the time the CFM met to discuss Germany the supposedly temporary zones of occupation had begun to solidify into something much more permanent. The Anglo-Americans in their western zone (the British and American zones were merged economically at the end of 1946) and the Russians in their Eastern zone both pursued policies which indicated an East-West political and economic division of Germany.

At the Moscow conference of the CFM in March-April 1947 the Russians pressed strongly for a unified German administration to be established, but the British and Americans could not agree with Moscow the terms and conditions for the creation of a single German state. One particular sticking point was the issue of reparations. Moscow wanted economic reparations from Germany to pay for Soviet war damage. The British and Americans accepted that the Russians could extract such reparations from the Eastern zone but not from their western zone. The western priority was postwar German economic recovery, seen as essential to a wider European economic revival. It was feared that reparations would cripple such a recovery – as had happened after the First World War.

Yet more important than economics was politics. By 1947 the British and American political priority was to retain political control of western Germany, a policy which was increasingly linked to a wider project of building a West European security bloc. The Soviets attempted to disrupt western political plans for Germany by insisting on the implementation of decisions taken at Yalta and Potsdam regarding the establishment of a central German administration. At the same time Moscow pursued a unilateral policy of consolidating the communist position in Eastern Germany. It was on this plane that Soviet policy converged with western. Insistence on continuing communist control of the Soviet zone could not but contribute to the eventual division of Germany.

Against this background, the CFM failed to reach any agreement on the future of Germany. Further attempts at negotiation proved equally forlorn. By the end of 1947 Soviet-Western negotiations on a German peace treaty had, to all intents and purposes, broken down.

European Reconstruction

The third important postwar dispute within the grand alliance concerned European reconstruction. By mid-1947 the western states had more or less given up on the grand alliance. The Soviets were moving in that direction too, though in fact Stalin still clung to the possibility of striking a deal over Germany and other issues still in dispute. In May 1947 he gave an interview to a visiting American senator in which he stressed the desirability of continuing peaceful coexistence and co-operation with the west. In summer 1947, however, there was a decisive change in his outlook. The precipitating event was the launch of the so-called 'Marshall Plan'.

In June 1947 US Secretary of State, George C. Marshall, spoke at Harvard University on the need for a large-scale programme of American financial support to aid European economic recovery. Behind Marshall's proposal lay American fears of a communist take-over in Western Europe, which remained war-torn and impoverished. The communist parties of France, Italy and other countries had established a strong position for themselves after the war. Until May 1947 the French and Italian communist parties were members of ruling coalitions, and communists participated in the government of other West European states as well. In sponsoring a European

economic recovery which would contribute to political stability, Marshall aimed to undermine support for the communist left and to strengthen the political position of anti-communist parties and movements.

Although the Americans were thinking mainly in terms of Western Europe, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were not excluded from the proposed aid programme. Indeed the British and French governments responded to Marshall's Harvard speech by inviting the Russians to a conference in Paris to discuss a European response to the plan. In Moscow, however, the Soviets were in two minds. On the one hand, they welcomed the possibility of American loans and grants, for themselves and for their East European allies. On the other, they feared that the Marshall Plan was an economic counterpart of the Truman Doctrine – a means of using American financial muscle to build an anti-Soviet alliance in Western Europe.

At the Paris conference in July 1947 Moscow's worst fears were realised. The British and French insisted (in accordance with Marshall's express wishes) that any American aid programme had to be co-ordinated and organised on a pan-European basis. This was seen by the Soviets as a western device for interference in the economic and political life of the East European countries. Such western involvement was completely unacceptable to Stalin. Consequently the USSR withdrew from all negotiations concerning the Marshall Plan and insisted its East European allies did not participate either.

The Soviet riposte to the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan was not long in coming. In September 1947 politburo member A.A. Zhdanov delivered what became known as the 'two camps' speech to the founding conference of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), the successor to the Communist International or Comintern. Zhdanov's speech set out a new, cold war perspective for the European communist parties:

'The more the war recedes into the past, the more distinct become two major trends in post-war international policy, corresponding to the division of the political forces operating on international arena into two major camps: the imperialist and anti-democratic camp ... and the anti-imperialist and democratic camp ... The principal driving force of the imperialist camp is the USA ... The cardinal purpose of the imperialist camp is to strengthen imperialism, to hatch a new imperialist war, to combat socialism and democracy, and to support reactionary and anti-democratic pro-fascist regimes and movements everywhere ... The anti-fascist forces comprise the second camp. This camp is based on the USSR and the new democracies [of Eastern Europe] ... The purpose of this camp is to resist the threat of new wars and imperialist expansion, to strengthen democracy and to extirpate the vestiges of fascism.'

While Truman had called for a defence of the free world against communist subversion and coercion, Zhdanov demanded action to defend postwar left-wing gains from imperialist threat and encroachment.

Conclusion: the Cold War Begins

1947 was the year of the cold war. By the end of that year the break up of the grand alliance – signalled by the Truman Doctrine, Zhdanov's two-camps speech and the breakdown of Soviet-Western negotiations over Germany and the Marshall Plan – was complete. In Eastern Europe Moscow's communist allies proceeded to impose full-scale Soviet-style authoritarian regimes. Germany remained divided; indeed, by 1949 two separate German states had been established: the Federal Republic of Germany in the west and the German Democratic Republic in the east. 1948 witnessed the first of the great cold war crises when the Russians cut off land access to West Berlin and forced the western powers to mount a massive airlift to supply their sectors of the city. The military-political division of Europe further deepened with the setting up of NATO in April 1949. With the Soviet A-bomb test of August 1949 and the communist invasion of South Korea in June 1950 the cold war confrontation entered a new and even more dangerous phase.

Timeline

- 1945
 - February The Yalta Conference

- **May 7th** Unconditional surrender of Germany
- **August** Postdam Conference
- **August 14th** Unconditional surrender of Japan
- **September 1st** First meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers
- **1946**
 - **March 5th** Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech
- **1947**
 - **March** The 'Truman Doctrine' announced
 - **June** Marshall's speech on aid at Harvard
 - **July** Paris Conference on aid; USSR withdrew
 - **September** Zhdanov's 'two camps' speech
- **1948**
 - **June** Soviets blockaded Berlin
- **1949**
 - **April** North Atlantic Treaty Organisation set up
 - **August** Soviets tested atomic bomb

Further Reading

- Caroline Lewis Gaddis *We No Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (1997)
- Martin McCauley *The Origins of the Cold War* (1990)
- David S. Painter *The Cold War: An International History* (1999)
- Geoffrey Roberts *The Soviet Union in World Politics: Coexistence, Revolution and the Cold War, 1945-1991* (1999)
- Marc Trachtenberg *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement 1945-1963* (1999)

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Geoffrey Roberts is Statutory Lecturer in History at University College Cork. Among his books are *The Unholy Alliance: Stalin's Pact with Hitler* (1989), *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War* (1995) and *The Soviet Union and the Grand Alliance* (forthcoming).