



# Foreign Policy Research Institute

# FOOTNOTES

Vol. 5, No. 6

*The Newsletter of the Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education*

September 1998

## THE COLD WAR REVISITED: A CONFERENCE REPORT

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*Proceedings of a History Institute for Secondary School Educators and Junior College Faculty. Organized by the History Academy of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 2-3, 1998*

The Cold War has always been the subject of intense debate - was it necessary, was it just, why did it happen, and how did it end -- and has been a challenging topic for teachers. Over 40 teachers from 17 states and two foreign countries met at this History Institute to hear five experts present the best and latest thinking about the Cold War and its lessons. Now is a particularly exciting time to be taking stock of this major issue of American and world history. New evidence both from the former Soviet Union and the West is overturning received opinions. We now know more than we did ten years ago, but less than we will know in the future.

So said the weekend's keynote speaker, Professor John Lewis Gaddis of Yale University. He made four points. First, that the end of the Cold War raised the question of legitimacy of political systems and of differences among them. Standard international relations theory had assumed that all states were equally legitimate. The end of the Cold War showed that the Soviet system lost legitimacy because it was cruel, brutal, and inefficient. Second, it showed that ideology, which the standard model said was unimportant, was instead very important. For example, Josef Stalin really believed that the two "imperialist" powers, the United States and Britain, would come to blows after 1945. He also believed that communist-ruled East Germany would be a magnet for the West Germans and that a united communist Germany was a serious prospect. Ideology also drove the Chinese communists to imitate the Soviets: to the Soviet collectivization of the early 1930s, which cost many millions of lives, corresponded the Maoist Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s, which was the greatest man-made disaster in history and cost more than 30 million lives. Finally, new evidence indicates that the Chinese communists deferred to the Soviets much longer than the standard theory assumed.

Third, even though the new evidence shows that the gulf separating democratic and communist states was even greater than people had thought, there was one area where leaders on both sides shared a common rationality, and that

was in regard to nuclear weapons. Fourth, given what we now know, why did the Cold War last so long? The premise of the detente era -- 1965-80 -- was that the West, not the Soviet Union, was in decline. Instead, we now see that Soviet power concealed decline, whereas the apparently declining West was much more vigorous than pessimists thought. The decisive push to end the Cold War came from Ronald Reagan, who unabashedly claimed legitimacy and the moral high ground for the West, and who in his prophetic speech to the British parliament in 1982 relegated communism to the

ash-heap of history. (For more of Gaddis's lecture, see his essay "The New Cold War History," Footnotes, June 1998.)

To begin the weekend, Professor Walter A. McDougall reviewed the historical debate over the origins of the Cold War with dialectical precision. He divided the historiography into three generations that explained the Cold War, respectively, as a product of Soviet aggression, American imperialism, or the deep-seated differences between the two superpowers. What is more, each generation promoted interpretations based on all three "images" of foreign policymaking, with first-image analysis stressing the personalities of the leaders themselves, second-image stressing the domestic pressures on foreign policy (economic interests, politics, bureaucratic rivalries, and public opinion), and third image stressing the threats and opportunities emanating from abroad.

Thus, "consensus" historians of the 1950s blamed Stalin himself, or the needs of the Soviet system, or the Russian/Communist bid for Eurasian hegemony for the Cold War, and believed that Truman's containment strategy was (in the words of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.) "the brave and essential response of free men to Communist aggression." The "revisionist" historians of the 1960s, riding the protests against nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War, however, turned these theories on their heads. They either explained the Cold War in terms of Truman's, not Stalin's belligerence, or in terms of an expansionist American capitalism practicing "Open Door" imperialism, or as the consequence of a U.S. bid for global hegemony based on its atomic monopoly. In their views, Soviet actions were understandable acts of self-defense. A synthesis of sorts emerged in the era of

detente in the 1970s when a third generation of scholars took a longer, more objective view. Rather than the Cold War being a great aberration in need of much explanation, it appeared as a wholly natural conflict between two new superpowers whose strategic, ideological, and economic conceptions of world order could not have differed more. Both the U.S. and USSR were, in Vojtech Mastny's phrase, "both victims and accomplices" in the Cold War. To be sure, a fourth phase is now upon us--a post-Cold War rethinking of the late 1940s based on the opening of the Soviet archives and declassification of American documents. But McDougall left it to Professors Trachtenberg and Gaddis to address the latest interpretations, for they are very much at the center of this rethinking. In retrospect, the debates over the origins of the Cold War might well be viewed, as Charles Maier of Harvard once said, as an extension of the Cold War itself. Such is history often driven by politics.

Another Penn historian, Marc Trachtenberg, followed Dr. McDougall with an exercise in self-criticism as the highest duty of the historian. The most important thing in research is to discover when you are wrong, because then you have learned something new. Many Cold War historians, according to Professor Trachtenberg, believed that the U.S. never accepted Soviet control of Eastern Europe. But was the U.S. really opposed to this Soviet power? In 1945, Truman predicted, in a document that Trachtenberg had found only recently, that "we'll have a Slav Europe for a long time, and it's not so bad." The basic configuration of Cold War Europe was determined and accepted by the Americans, especially by Truman's secretary of state, James Byrnes, when he accepted the division of Germany into spheres of influence based on where reparations were to be sent. American leaders long felt that they shared a great deal with their Soviet counterparts, and rarely showed any inclination to contest the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. In 1961, for example, John Kennedy proposed to Nikita Khrushchev that the two should agree to stabilize the geopolitical status quo. Such examples, which the new sources amply confirm, raise the question: If the two sides agreed on so much, why did the Cold War begin and last so long?

The basic reason, Dr. Trachtenberg said, was Germany. The Soviets never accepted the idea that the Western powers would have a totally free hand in Western Germany and were furious when the Germans in the late 1950s seemed about to obtain their own nuclear weapons. Eisenhower wanted a Europe able to defend itself; he wanted America to pull out of Europe in the not-too-distant future. And that concept implied that the Europeans, including the Germans, would have to have a nuclear capability under their own control. The conflict came to a head in late 1962, but by 1963 a stable system had more or less taken shape.

Professor Mark Kramer of Harvard is one of the scholars who has spent the most time studying the many kinds of new evidence available from behind the former Iron Curtain. One striking discovery is how much the communist leaders put down on paper. Stalin's order to kill the 13,000 or so Polish officers interned in 1939, long suspected but hitherto never proved, has, for example, actually turned up. In Dr. Kramer's view, the Soviets had three main international objectives. The first was to make the Soviet homeland secure from attack, both internally, via the secret police, and

externally, via a strong army and intercontinental missiles. The second was to establish and preserve the socialist bloc of states. But the Soviet commitment to defend the bloc was not completely consistent, and this has surprised many. In 1962, Khrushchev was not prepared to use nuclear weapons to defend Castro in Cuba, though most historians have assumed until now that he was. In 1981, the Polish leader Jaruzelski asked the Soviets to guarantee military support if his own state of emergency, imposed to suppress the democratic trade union movement Solidarity, should fail; the Soviets refused to issue such a guarantee. The Soviets' third objective, finally, was to expand Soviet power whenever they safely could. Again, this was not done as consistently as some have supposed. Until the 1970s, the Soviets had limited power projection capabilities. Another point that emerges from the new sources is how ideology remained crucial, more so than many had assumed.

On Sunday morning, Dr. Harvey Sicherman, a former aide to three U.S. secretaries of state and now president of FPRI, provided an analysis of the Cold War's end from the perspective of a policymaker. He focused on German unification and on the years 1989-91 and confirmed that the Cold War was a Russian story from beginning to end and that Germany was the vital bone of contention. The unfolding events of 1989-91 yield three lessons. One, no one foresaw the end. Two, the end was in fact quite dangerous; at the end of 1989 there was a real danger of war in Central Europe. Three, the Bush administration displayed good tactics in managing the transition to a united Germany but expected the superpower rivalry to remain the same and therefore had no vision for the next stage.

The Bush administration, unlike that of Reagan, believed in caution and reassurance rather than in rhetoric and grand gestures. To Bush and his staff, the main threat in 1989 was "Gorbymania," Gorbachev's amazing popularity in the West which was not, in their view, matched by deeds: Soviet actions continued to be aggressive and hostile. The danger of Gorbymania was that many Western leaders, such as the West German foreign minister, Genscher, believed that Gorbachev was for real. Gorbachev spoke of a common European home; such a slogan appealed to neutralists in western Europe because it meant a Europe including the Soviets but without the Americans. To counter this slogan, the Bush administration spoke of "Europe whole and free" while reassuring the Soviets that the U.S. was not interested in destabilizing the USSR.

Gorbachev wanted little Gorbachevs in the republics and satellite states of the USSR, but found himself dealing with little Stalins instead. In October 1989, he stated that the Soviet Army would not protect the East German Honecker regime. The regime's successor opened the Berlin Wall, by accident, in November 1989. Very soon, East Germany was losing essential personnel, and the West German chancellor, Kohl, had proposed a ten-point plan for German reunification. The British and French governments were negotiating with Gorbachev on how to stop this. Here, the Bush administration reached its finest hour when it proposed the "two plus four" solution. The two Germanies would meet with the four World War II powers (the U.S., the USSR, Britain, and France) to negotiate German unification. Thus, invoking the Four Powers would not threaten German

sovereignty, for they were now being invoked for the sole purpose of completing that sovereignty.

Following the panel, Professor Richard Immerman joined Drs. Kramer, McDougall, and David Gress for a look at how the Cold War illustrated the problems of harmonizing foreign policy and ethics. Then the weekend concluded with a workshop on applying the concepts and ideas from the

conference lectures to the classroom situation. Paul Dickler of Neshaminy High School and James Sanzare of FPRI's Wachman Fund (formerly a department head at Simon Gratz High School in Philadelphia) provided ready-made materials for teachers to use in the classroom. These included timelines, essays, lesson plans, fact sheets, student worksheets, and a wide range of video resources.

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