

THE REAL 'EMPIRE OF EVIL'

The Cold War revisited

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TOP SECRET

Introduction

'(...) to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.'

With these words, uttered at a 1983 speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, President Ronald Reagan essentially summarized the prevailing western view on the Cold War. In this traditional view, upheld by both mainstream academia and the general public from the beginning of the Cold war until now, the aggression and expansionism of the Soviet Bloc is presented as the cause for the 'Cold War'. The United States and its allies were merely reacting to this cultural, political, economic and military threat of 'communism'. The nuclear arms build-up, the formation of NATO, the establishment of hundreds of US military bases around the world as well as the numerous overt and covert worldwide US military actions throughout the Cold War are held to be defensive actions against Soviet aggression. In political and academic discourse this is phrased as 'containment' of 'Soviet expansionism' by the United States.¹ This framework has been the basic premise of scholarship on the Cold War.

However, declassified documents of both American and Russian archives, which were released over the past twenty-five years, paint a different picture. These documents challenge the commonly held assumptions on the balance of aggression, expansionism and Soviet military capability in the Cold War. It seems that the Soviet Union never posed a military or economic threat to the US and, more importantly, both US and Soviet policy-makers were aware of this from the early dawn of the Cold War. Three main questions arise from this. Did the Soviet Union ever adopt an aggressive economic, political, military and cultural foreign policy, during the Cold War? Did internal deliberations of the US during the Cold War match publicly expressed views about the Soviet Union's supposed threat? Put in Reagan's terminology, who were the real 'Empire of Evil'?

In order to answer these questions I will analyze two themes related to the Cold

¹ See for instance: Samuel P. Huntington, 'After Containment: The Functions of the Military Establishment', in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 406 (1973) pp. 1-16; Linda B. Miller, 'American Foreign Policy: Beyond Containment?', in *International Affairs* Vol. 66, No. 2 (1990) pp. 313-324; Chalmers M. Roberts, W. Averell Harriman, Arthur Krock and Dean Acheson, 'How Containment Worked', in *Foreign Policy*, No. 7 (1972), pp. 41-53.

War. First there is the military and economic gap between the United States and the Soviet Union right at the end of the Second World War, and more importantly the awareness of policy-makers of this imbalance. Secondly, I will describe factual foreign policy of both powers during the Cold war in terms of expansionism and aggression.

AN UNBRIDGEABLE HEAD-START

After the Second World War, the United States was in a position of 'absolute dominance' making her the 'undisputed hegemon' of the world.² The military and economic arrears of the Soviet Union to the US were at an unsurpassable degree, giving Washington a virtually unbridgeable head-start over Moscow; in 1945, the United States controlled more than half of the world's GDP, nearly all of the world's financial reserves, 70 % of the world's merchant marine fleet, 75% of the world's transport and commercial aircraft and it had stockpiled 80% of the world's gold.³ Soviet economic strength stood at a fourth of the US's level. By 1950 the Soviet economic inferiority was so grand that 'it did not even begin to compare with that of the United States'.⁴ Militarily, the situation was no different. By 1949 the United States had already created a worldwide network of military bases. The Soviet Union had soon after the Second World War demobilized a large part of their army in order to supply the labor-shortage stricken civilian economy. The Soviet Navy was in poor condition; their army had no long-range capability and no nuclear weapons until 1949. The development of the Soviet nuclear bomb, in contrast to the financial-industrially superior US's, had progressed in a very problematic manner and at a very high cost. For instance, among the many documents that point this out is a letter to head of secret police Lavrenti Beria, whom Stalin had given principal responsibility for the atomic effort. In this letter, the scientific director of the Soviet nuclear project Igor Kurchatov describes the many production issues and states that '(...) despite major improvement in work on uranium in 1943-44, the situation remains completely unsatisfactory'.⁵

In view of this unbridgeable head-start in favor of the United States in the balance of power with the Soviet Union, the question arises why US policy-makers did act as if there was a serious Soviet challenge while in fact there was none? There are several discourses on this question. One explanation is that the Cold War was a result of mutual misperception. Despite the fact that both superpowers did not threaten each other, mutual suspicion and fear caused a severely confrontational attitude. This

² Michael Cox, 'From the Truman Doctrine to the Second Superpower Detente: The Rise and Fall of the Cold War', in, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, 1(1990) 25.

³ Donald W. White, 'The Nature of World Power in American History: An Evaluation at the End of World War II', in *Diplomatic History*, vol. 11 No. 3 (1987) pp. 181-202.

⁴ Cox, 'From the Truman Doctrine to the Second Superpower Detente', 26.

⁵ I.N. Golovin, "Kurchatov - uchenyi, gosudarstvennyi deiatel', chelovek" ["Kurchatov--Scholar, Government official, Man"], in *Materialy iubeleinoi sessii uchenogo soveta tsentra 12 ianvaria 1993 g.* [Materials of the Jubilee Session of the Academic Council of the Center, 12 January 1993] (Moscow: Russian Scientific Center "Kurchatov Institute," 1993), pp. 24-25. Translation: http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034F7FA-96B6-175C-93C4282B32860169&sort=Collection&item=Cold%20War%20Origins (04-28-2008).

'internalist' view on the Cold War argues that the United States culturally and historically could not coexist with an undemocratic and radical country. In other words, the widespread ideological detest of communism within the US prevented any rapprochement with the Soviet Union.

The 'revisionist' view on the Cold War advances the thought that the U.S. refused to accept the fact that the Soviet Union would not be part of her 'free-market' economic order. For reasons of an imperialistically motivated foreign policy, the US deliberately portrayed the Soviet Union as the aggressor. The high amount of military spending was thus justified. Furthermore, domestic criticism of 'defensive' US actions overseas against communism was minimized. Following on this, there is a 'post-revisionist' interpretation of the Cold War. Geir Lundestad for example argues, just as the revisionist school, that the US followed a much more aggressive and expansionist foreign policy than the Soviet Union.⁶ However, in contrast to the revisionist view, Lundestad argues that the US were 'invited' to do so by both the governments and the populations of the so-called 'satellite-countries'. Moreover, the post-revisionists insist that the expansionist urges of the United States were not any different from those of any other great power in history, regardless of their political or economic system.

⁶ Geir Lundestad, 'Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952', in *Journal of Peace Research*, 23, (1986) 263-277.

THE MYTH OF THE 'GAP'

Particularly important in the politics of the Cold War was the nuclear rivalry between the two powers. After the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and especially after the US lost her nuclear monopoly in 1949, fears of an annihilating nuclear war, or as some denoted it 'nuclear Holocaust' seized hold of the populations of the world. Hiroshima had 'shaken the whole world', as Stalin put it.⁷ Especially in western countries, government programs of information, subsidy and education conditioned people to be 'prepared' for a nuclear attack at any time. In the United States, the building of nuclear bomb shelters in private homes, drills in schools and informational TV programs shaped the public memory during the fifties and sixties.

During the nineteen fifties, the United States intelligence communities' officially disseminated estimates and publications, as well as commentaries by government officials such as Henry Kissinger, who served as a consultant to the National Security Council's Operations Coordinating Board and director in nuclear weapons and foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, advanced the idea of the 'missile gap'. On 12 November 1957, the official National Intelligence Estimate claimed that the Soviet Union would have 500 operational Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) by the end of 1961. Some analysts even estimated the Soviet Union's ICBM stock at 1,000. The United States was scheduled to have only sixty-five Atlas-type ICBM's by 1961.⁸ In short, it was accepted that the Soviet Union did have the same technological capabilities. The issue of 'debate' was production, not technological knowledge.⁹

The reality was, however, that there was no hard evidence for the 'missile gap'. The sources for this claim were entirely based on speculation, like observations of May Day air show rehearsals and estimates by attaches who attended the Soviet Union's arms parade at Aviation Day.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the missile gap, that is, the idea that the Soviet Union had surpassed the US nuclear armament capabilities and amount of nuclear missiles was uncontroversial and broadly accepted in the fifties and early sixties. We know now that the provided figures were exaggerated. As former president Gerald Ford explained in 1993: '(...) Allen Dulles and others from the CIA would come in and

⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *We now know. Rethinking Cold War history*, (New York 1997) 96.

⁸ Fred Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, (New York 1983) 155.

⁹ Roy E. Licklider, 'The Missile gap Controversy', in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (1970) 605.

¹⁰ Fred Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 156-157.

paint the most scary picture possible about what the Soviet Union would do to us. We were going to be second rate; the Soviets were going to be Number One.¹¹

The idea of the missile gap had several consequences for the shaping of the Cold War. President Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's plea for 'massive retaliation' in the event of a Soviet attack summarized sentiments in the US that caused an increase in both conventional and nuclear military spending.¹² Simultaneously, the perceived risk of 'mutual annihilation' or mutual assured destruction was the main motivation behind Henry Kissinger's thesis that the US needed to improve its capability to fight limited wars and, furthermore, that the US should not hesitate to engage in such wars in order to 'maintain credibility'.

¹¹ John L. Helgerson, *CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates*, (CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, Washington D.C. 1996) online edition:

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB116/cia/Chapter%203%20--%20Into%20Politics%20With%20Kennedy%20and%20Johnson.htm> (05-01-2008).

¹² Fred Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 174-176.

THE ORIGINS OF DETENTE

After more than two decades of increasing tension, the Cold War turned into a phase of 'detention' in the seventies. At the end of the nineteen sixties, the idea that the Soviet Union posed a direct threat to the US slowly but surely had decreased in popularity. The Sino-Soviet split and the visible economic problems of the Soviet Union, combined with the broken foreign policy consensus within the US in the wake of the Vietnam War and increased economic stress due to that conflict, caused a change in policy. The main goal of Richard Nixon and Kissinger's concept of détente was to tame the Soviet Union in order to maintain global order. If the Soviet Union accepted the status quo in exchange for expanded economic relations with the West and guarantees of no US interventions in the Soviet Union's 'backyard', it was thought that the Soviets would fall under economic dependency in the long term.¹³ Kissinger thus devised a new equilibrium in which, albeit retaining polarity, it would be in the Soviet Union's interest to let the US maintain global order.

The idea of détente, however, failed to succeed. First, it was based on a false assumption that it would be easy to increase economic relations with the Soviet Union. In reality, there was little demand for the inferior Soviet manufactured goods due to its non-competitive origin. Moreover, the real structural problem of détente was that it posed a threat to the 'system of Cold War' that had come to characterize the two countries. For both powers, relaxing attitudes to each other meant they could hold less sway over their 'satellite' countries due to the lack of a threatening enemy. Fighting either 'US imperialism' or 'Communist aggression' provided for a geopolitical objective and comprehensive strategy. Therefore, détente was too problematic to materialize.

In the eighties, the Reagan administration adopted a policy that can be described as the opposite of détente, to such an extent that even containment was considered to be too defensive. Adopting an aggressive and pro-active stance towards the Soviet Union, it was thought, was both feasible and necessary. Due to her poor economic condition since the late seventies, the Soviet Union was susceptible to pressure, which then would lead to a stance of withdrawal in her international politics and force economic reform.¹⁴ In a concrete sense, the Reagan doctrine meant an assertive policy of overt and covert military action throughout the world. In the forms of CIA-supported coups like the overthrow of the democratically elected Sandinista government in Nicaragua, direct military interventions such as in Grenada and aid to anti-communist yet dictatorial forces like the fundamentalist 'Mujahedin' in Afghanistan, the Reagan

¹³ Cox, 'From the Truman Doctrine to the Second Superpower Detente', 32-33.

¹⁴ Richard Pipes, *Survival is not enough*, (New York 1984) 280.

administration took the initiative and solidly took her place as the only 'credible' superpower.

'EVIL' POLICIES

Besides a short interlude during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet Union had no military bases or intervention forces beyond its own borders, like in Eastern Europe and Afghanistan. According to the *Defense Monitor* of January, 1980, by 1979 'the Soviets were influencing only 6 percent of the world's population and 5 percent of the world's G.D.P, exclusive of the Soviet Union'. The United States, on the other hand, intervened militarily in virtually every corner of the world. The Korean War, for example, was in fact one stage in the US's long aggression from the late forties on towards Korea's nationalist movements. Before North Korea attacked the south in 1950, already about 100.000 Koreans had been killed by American forces, 'without any trial whatsoever' according to Gregory Henderson who served as a US diplomat in the Korea of the forties and fifties.¹⁵ When American forces entered Korea at the end of World War II a functioning government was already set up by the anti-Japanese former resistance group, which was, moreover, very popular among the Korean population.¹⁶ Upon their arrival, the American forces dismantled these local administrations and Peoples' Councils in the south, incidentally with the help of recruited Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese and even a briefly resurrected Japanese police.¹⁷ After several years of conflict resulting from that, the North attacked the South in what was essentially an intervention against the suppression of the administration of the popular anti-Japanese resistance movement.

Other examples of military aggression by the United States throughout the Cold War are the Vietnam War, the invasion of Grenada and Panama and the aforementioned heavy support for the 'Contra' death squads against Nicaragua's Sandinista governments. The US's aggressive foreign policy in the Cold war is further demonstrated by her support for the deposing of democratically elected leaders like Salvador Allende in Chile, Patrice Lumumba in Congo and Mohammed Mosaddeq in Iran.

Apart from the regions around her border, the Soviet Union was very reluctant to engage in concrete support for leftist or communist movements beyond declarations of solidarity. The Cuban missile crisis was the notable exception, and even in this case the initiative was not the Soviet Union's but an invitation by Fidel Castro. Furthermore, the Cuban Missile Crisis is a demonstration of the imbalance in military power between the US and the Soviet Union. As mentioned, and to the contrary of the 'missile gap' framework of the time, the United States was far ahead of the Soviet Union in terms of

¹⁵ Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex*, (Cambridge 1968) 167.

¹⁶ Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War*, (New York 1988) 16.

¹⁷ Idem, 19-20.

military and nuclear capability. Up until the Cuban Crisis, the Soviets had no missiles or military bases in the vicinity of the United States. The US on the other hand had missiles and bases positioned on the immediate borders of the Soviet Union in Europe and Turkey. In a clever, mutually beneficial, but essentially a reciprocal move by Castro and Khrushchev the Soviet Union for the first time threatened, albeit incomparable to the reverse threat by the US, the American mainland despite her inferior nuclear arsenal. After the agreement with President Kennedy at the end of the crisis, the ballistic Jupiter missiles pointed at the Soviet Union were removed from Izmir, Turkey. Also, a secret diplomatic agreement was reached in which the United States guaranteed never to invade Cuba.¹⁸ Despite this small victory for the Soviet Bloc, a great disparity remained as regards to military vicinity to the adversary.

In view of the fact that the US was never really threatened by the Soviet Union, and was very aware of it, the question arises what the real motivations were behind their aggressive foreign policy in the Cold War. The major Cold War document N.S.C. 68 essentially states that without military spending there would be an economic decline in the United States and thus proposes a build-up of 'economic and military strength' through rearmament.¹⁹ John Lewis Gaddis argues that U.S. strategies of containment were shaped by 'the primacy of economic considerations (...). He subsequently states: 'To a remarkable degree, containment has been the product, not so much of what the Russians have done, or of what has happened elsewhere in the world, but of internal forces operating within the United States'.²⁰

¹⁸ For details on the course and outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis, see the declassified interchange of letters between Castro and Khrushchev and transcripts of U.S. government deliberations: http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/docs.htm (04-28-2008).

¹⁹ http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/korea/large/week2/nsc68_3.htm (04-13-2008).

²⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, (New York 1982) 356-357.

CONCLUSION

The Cold War was a complex and influential episode of modern history, for a long time clouded by the primacy of rhetoric, mnemonic conditioning and a lack of access to internal documents. Nevertheless, when the essentializing question of which side was really the most aggressive and expansionist need to be answered, besides an appraisal of the actual policies enacted by both sides, internal deliberations that showcase real motives behind the public rhetoric must be taken into account.

In terms of military aggression and expansionism during the Cold War, the conclusion that the United States was the more assertive side could be reached even without access to declassified documents. A look at the level of international military activity of both powers clearly manifests a great 'gap' in the favor of the United States. In contrast to the military aspect of the Cold War, where the Soviet Union managed to follow in the footsteps of her adversary by producing, albeit in lesser numbers and inferior capabilities, a nuclear arsenal, economically there was never a question of any form of rivalry. From the very beginning of the Cold War, the United States had an unbridgeable economic head-start over the Soviet Union. Furthermore, U.S. policy-makers were aware of their position as unrivaled military and economic power in the world. Nevertheless, the perceived threat of the Soviet Union was disseminated through education and public propaganda in order to facilitate the build-up and financing of the military-industrial apparatus, which was considered to be vital for the US's economic and political interests.

In conclusion, the United States was the real 'Empire of Evil' in terms of economic, military and even cultural aggression. The Soviet Union, incidentally, never set up a radio station in order to penetrate the NATO countries with communist propaganda, while conversely the United States did so from 1950 on with their 'Radio Free Europe'.

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http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034F7FA-96B6-175C-93C4282B32860169&sort=Collection&item=Cold%20War%20Origins (04-28-2008).