

The Cold War: Grandiosity and Rhetoric as a Diplomatic Confrontation between Two Factions of the Ruling Class

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I.

The Cold War refers to an era of political and military tension between the periods of 1948 to the end of 1991. The war is described as “cold” since there was no actual or large-scale fighting against the opposing states except through proxy armies. The US lost tens of thousands of men in Korea and Vietnam, while the Soviets lost men in Afghanistan. Thus, “Cold” might not be the best description.

This paper will argue that the Cold War is best understood as a matter of two empires fighting over trade organization rather than ideology. Both empires sought dominance over the globe rather than just a limited area such as a state or region. Foreign policy and diplomacy were two extremely important ways this battle was carried out. In fact, diplomacy was dominant here largely because the US was heavily invested in the USSR, which is a fact curiously omitted from mainline histories of this era. Empires at war are not usually investing in the others economy. As argued in Paul Dukes' *The USA in the Making of the USSR*, there could be no “evil empire” without massive cooperation between the two powers.

The Cold War involved the entire globe. Almost all the world's peoples took part in the Cold War, either directly or in a supportive role. What makes this “war” unique is that, since the two empires did not directly fight one another, diplomacy rather than physical violence was the preferred mode of battle. The Third World, much of which became independent during this era, was forced to base itself around allegiance to one pole or the other, often playing them off against each other for the sake of greater concessions. For the first time, the people's in the third world were able to shift the focus of a conflict.

II.

After World War II, the world was divided into spheres of influence between two empires with different social systems, but systems that were more alike than distinct. Though Marxism as such was not the issue nor the cause of the Cold War, this huge state-led monolith of the Soviet Union was an alternative trading bloc to that which was (directly) controlled by the US.

The Soviet Union sought to maintain and expand the “socialist camp,” led by a single center based on the Soviet administrative-command system. In its sphere of influence, the Soviet Union sought the political domination of the Communist Party and, as a result, the introduction of state ownership of the basic means of production (which is the same as “private property”). Thus, the “ideological” component was over what entity would rule oligarchically over the empire: a political bureaucracy or an economic elite. Thus, “ideology” was not the cause of the war, and as it turns out, the US has mastered both.

The United States, a long time ally of the USSR since World War I, sought a global order based around private corporations efficiently competing for profit. There, the consumer could

“vote with his dollar” and support only those enterprises that served his interests. The USSR sought a state run economy as a temporary situation awaiting the demise of capitalism and the institution of economic equality. Despite this difference between the two systems, their systems had much in common. Both systems are based on the principles of industrial society, which required industrial growth, and hence the increase in the consumption of resources.

Both systems were materialist (metaphysically speaking) in that social progress is best defined in material terms such as GDP, technological innovation and scientific breakthroughs. Both sides accepted modern science implicitly and its practical application into technology. Both sides saw the Enlightenment as a positive thing and the middle ages as a time of “darkness.” Both saw social organization as essential to justice and both placed the state front and center in this organization. Both were highly bureaucratic and highly centralized. Both were obsessed with quantity: if it was not measurable in numbers, it probably did not exist. Both were involved in developing drugs for psychological problems and “medicalizing” dissent. Both fielded first class internal security systems and external espionage. Both systems were oligarchies and both systems claimed the formal existence of rights and democracy. Both sides claimed to have interpreted the trajectory of history and had a tendency to reduce everything to economics (Stern, 205-206).

The US and USSR were far closer than normally described. Ideology was never the issue, since many allies of the US had fully statist economies. Corporate capital can profit in the USSR as easily as in the US, as hundreds of corporations invested in the USSR – such as General Electric and Ford Motors – can prove. It did not matter which force held capital, but rather the scientific acumen of either side that was the determinant of victory and hence, justice. The third world especially developed a form of national socialism that stressed both the nation and state in economic development and the goal of material equality.

III.

The immediate start of the “Cold War” was due to conflicts in southern Europe and Asia. For some time, western populations were shown rosy views of Soviet industrial development. Since Hitler had been the main enemy, Russia was idealized, especially in its Soviet guise (Stern, 10-15). However, as soon as it became clear that Stalin was interested in far more than defeating Hitler, the US saw its potential global empire threatened. It was “Russian nationalism” rather than communism that was the threat (Sakwa, 164-168).

The front of the “Cold War” lay not between countries but within them. About a third of the population of France and Italy supported the Communist Party. This is easy to envisage since Stalin's crimes had been deliberately covered over for the sake of Allied Unity. That western companies were heavily invested in the USSR is also an overlooked reason that ideology was not an issue.

In 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall announced that the United States is willing to provide financial assistance to the countries of Europe for their post-war economic recovery. Initially, even the Soviet Union was involved in negotiations for the provision of assistance, but it soon became clear that American aid will not be given to countries that did not hand over their economic records so as to determine their objective needs. While aid continued to flow to Moscow throughout this “War,” Stalin refused to countenance the internal snooping of the Marshall Plan. It should be noted that Francisco Franco in Spain was not even considered for Marshall Plan aid due to the “non-democratic” nature of the state (Hogan, 189-200). Franco was forced to develop an autarkic economy, as was South Africa, while the USSR received billions in

both aid and investment, more proof that “communism” was never the issue (Payne, 248).

The United States demanded political concessions in hopes of compensating for Roosevelt's explicit sanction of Stalin's colonization of eastern Europe. Under pressure from the United States, some Communists were expelled from the governments of France and Italy, and in April 1948, 16 countries have signed the Marshall Plan to provide them with \$17 billion in assistance from 1948-1952. Eastern European countries did not participate in the plan (Hogan, 55).

As the intensification of the struggle for Europe's future grew, Moscow needed to clamp down on the contacts her satellite states had with the west. In 1949, most Eastern European countries came together in an economic union - the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. These events fixed the division of Europe so that in April 1949 the United States, Canada and most countries in Western Europe created NATO. Turkey was to join in 1952. The USSR and Eastern Europe only in 1955 responded by creating their own military alliance – the Warsaw Pact (Sakwa, 334).

IV.

In 1960, the Soviet Union was surrounded by American military bases (Zubok, 66). While vacationing in the Crimea, drew attention to the fact that even its beach was within direct reach of American missiles in Turkey. Khrushchev decided to put America in the same position. Using the fact that Castro had repeatedly asked the USSR to protect them from possible attacks by the United States, the Soviet leadership decided to install nuclear missiles in Cuba (Zubok, 143-149). Now every city in the USA could be wiped out in a matter of minutes. In October 1962, this led to the well as the Cuban missile crisis. As a result of the crisis, the world was brought very close to the edge of a nuclear catastrophe. The result was that a compromise was reached: the USSR removed missiles from Cuba and the United States guaranteed Cuban independence under Soviet protection, and, in addition, withdrew its missiles from Turkey (Zubok, 145-147).

During the period of detente (that is, the post Cuban world), important agreements developed on limiting the arms race, including agreements to limit missile defense (NMD) and Strategic Nuclear Arms (SALT-1 and SALT-2). However, the SALT agreements had a significant disadvantage. Limiting the total volume of nuclear weapons and missile technology, it hardly touched the deployment of nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, either side could concentrate a large number of nuclear missiles in the most dangerous places in the world, not thereby breaking the agreed-upon total volume of nuclear weapons (Zubok, 184).

In 1976, the Soviet Union began to modernize its medium-range missiles in Europe. Soviet missiles were able to quickly reach targets in Western Europe. As a result of this upgrade, the balance of nuclear forces in Europe was upset. It daunted the leaders of Western Europe, who feared that the United States will not be able to assist them against the growing nuclear might of the USSR. In December 1979, NATO decided to deploy the Tomahawk missile design in Western Europe. These missiles could destroy the major cities of the USSR, while the territory of the United States for a time would remain invulnerable (Bacon, 94-96).

As the security of the Soviet Union was threatened, Moscow launched a campaign against the deployment of new American missiles and was even willing to dismantle some of their nuclear weapons in Europe. Strangely, a set of “spontaneous rallies” against missile deployment erupted in Germany and elsewhere. The new president of the United States Ronald Reagan proposed in 1981 the so-called “Zero Option,” that is, the full withdrawal of all Soviet and

American nuclear medium-range missiles from Europe. The problem was that this did not affect British and French missiles aimed at the Soviet Union. Brezhnev refused the “Zero Option” (Bacon, 93-96).

As detente fell into memory, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 re-ignited the “Cold War.” In retaliation, the US planned economic sanctions on the USSR in 1980-1982. In 1983 President Reagan called the Soviet Union an “evil empire” due to its lack of democracy and the system of Gulag camps which had become part of the Soviet economic structure. New American missiles in Europe were the obvious response. Yuri Andropov, a hard-line reformer, stopped all negotiations with the United States (Zubok, 272).

Andropov can be a hard-liner and a reformer, since he was fully supportive of central planning but, by the mid-80s, the USSR entered a period of crisis. The purely bureaucratic economy could not meet the growing needs of the population as the wasteful use of resources led to a significant reduction in the Soviet standard of living, especially in contrast to the USA (Zubok, 272-276). Soon, Andropov and his successor Chernenko faced a population that began to agree with Reagan (Zubok, 275-277). The USSR found it increasingly difficult to bear the burden of the “Cold War,” while at the same time supporting allied regimes around the world, and waging war in Afghanistan. More prominent and dangerous was the glaring technological backwardness of the USSR versus the capitalist countries (Levine, 3-9).

In these circumstances, President Reagan decided to quicken the pace of the USSR's destruction. The current estimate of Soviet foreign exchange reserves were a paltry \$25-30 billion. The USSR had to get additional financial injections from Western European banks, which is a strange way to “weaken” the USSR or fight a “War” with them. In 1981, in response to the suppression of the workers' movement in Poland, Reagan announced a series of sanctions against Poland and its Soviet sponsor (Zubok, 265-275).

Events in Poland served as another pretext for aggression, because this time, unlike the situation in Afghanistan, international law had not been violated by the Soviet Union. The United States declared the termination of the supply of oil and gas equipment to the Warsaw Pact, which again, suggests that the Cold War was not really a war at all. To threaten that the US will no longer help buttress the Soviet economy seems a strange sort of threat. Such much of NATO wanted to cooperate with their “enemy” over natural gas deliveries to Western Europe, rejected Reagan's approach. Because of this, Soviet industry was able to independently produce the pipeline delivery system to furnish the west with gas (Rutland, 129-134). Reagan's crusade against the pipeline failed, as NATO decided that profiting the USSR was better than fighting it.

None of this really mattered when in 1983, President Reagan proposed the idea of a “Strategic Defense Initiative” (SDI), quickly parodied by the western media as “Star Wars.” This was a space-based system that could protect the United States against nuclear attack (Zubok, 292-293). The program was implemented in circumvention of the ABM Treaty, through Reagan realized that Treaties are signed due to national self-interest and were not exactly eternal law (Bacon, 125-127). The Soviet Union did not have the technical capacity to respond to such a system. Despite the fact that the United States had yet to perfect this ambitious project, the USSR was so sensitive to the west's scientific superiority that risking its imminent deployment was too much.

In March of 1985, a new General Secretary of the CPSU was elected (by the party): Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1986, he proclaimed a policy of broad reforms known as *perestroika*. In November of 1985, Gorbachev met with Reagan in Geneva and offered to significantly reduce

nuclear weapons in Europe in exchange for the abandonment of SDI. It is arguable that, the moment Reagan said “no,” the USSR was no more. Chernobyl, Afghanistan, American economic growth and the American dominance of the dawning computer age was too much. Gorbachev wanted more American investment in the USSR, which was the real background to Soviet “restructuring.”

In the summer, both sides began to probe the possibilities for a “second Geneva,” which famously took place in 1986 in Reykjavik, Iceland. Again Gorbachev offered large-scale reductions in nuclear weapons overall, but only in exchange for the abandonment of SDI. It became clear that the USSR was not negotiating from a position of strength. SDI became the issue, from which there could be no deviation as far as Moscow was concerned. To refer to a Soviet threat from this point on was just silly. Reagan gambled and won.

The US faced some domestic opposition to the “Cold War” posture in Africa and Central America, but the financial position of the Soviet Union began to deteriorate for reasons not directly related to it. The economy of the Soviet Union depended on oil prices, which began to fall in 1986, the same year that the Chernobyl disaster seriously weakened the financial balance of the USSR. This made it even more difficult to reform the country's planning system and spurred more grassroots initiatives among the subject people's of the Soviet Union. Both in Russia itself and powerful nations such as Ukraine and the Baltic states, opposition to Soviet policy erupted to the point where accepting them became a fait accompli.

V.

The destruction of the USSR from 1989 to 1991 is historically unprecedented. Even in times of desperate warfare, empires the size of the USSR do not decompose overnight. Moscow disintegrated in peacetime and in a very brief time window. It is unprecedented also in that it was not predicted by those who are paid to make such predictions. In fact, the CIA and MI6 were claiming a strong and robust Soviet economy in 1988.

Part of the problem was progress – the economy became too complex. The greater the requirement for specialization, the less power parties and dictators have. Managers did not respond to threats. Rather threats created scapegoating and dissimulation. This however, was reaching the point of diminishing returns outside of a market. From 1955 to 1977, Gosplan says that unfinished construction went from 73% to 92% of all investment projects.

This essay was a brief excursus of the Cold War world with the understanding that it was not really a war. It was a matter of economic turf and the desire to take the defeat of Hitler and remake the world into an ideological image: a statist USSR and a slightly less statist US. That such a distinction does not sound like a cause for war is correct. It was not. The foreign policy establishments in both states accepted the legitimacy of the other. This was not the case in the war against the Third Reich. There were mass protests against the deployment of nuclear missiles in Germany, none against the deliberate policy of terror bombing of civilian centers in Germany and Japan. Marxism was a cause celeb in the US, while national socialism never came close to a foothold in America. Mass executions (judicial and otherwise) was the norm after the defeat of Berlin, while communist butchers, far better in their craft than the Germans, continue to draw pensions. This needs to be explained, and can be in part through the fact that the US had anchored itself into the USSR early on.

SDI was different in that it was the very cutting edge of American technology that was not the subject of American investment in Russia. Because there was no exchange over that specific

information, the USSR was frightened by it and it began the process of collapse. The USSR showed severe signs of strain only when the US did, starting in the 1970s and into the 1980s, as the dollar continued to lose value once taken off the gold standard. Once Reagan made it clear that the USSR was an enemy rather than a business rival, the USSR was doomed.

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