'The Soviet's Acted; the Americans Reacted' Complicating the Cold War 'Story'

How do you explain the beginning and end of the Cold War in Europe?

The Cold War is generally defined as starting in 1947 with the Truman Doctrine and ending with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, approaching the study of the Cold War presents a formidable challenge to historians, as even agreeing on relevant dates is difficult. For instance, as a war of ideas involving many different relationships, Odd Arne Westad makes a strong argument that the Cold War had 'not one but many endings.'[1] Questioning when the war started and ended is the first step in complicating the reductive, traditional Cold War metanarrative of America and Western Europe that 'the Soviets acted; the Americans reacted.'[2] Both the start and end of the Cold War can be studied in terms of the creation of contexts, the role of individuals and the particular moments that represented the 'sparks' initiating change. Although both individuals and moments were significant, within the Cold War, context was paramount. As Fred Greenstein articulates, 'A devastating forest fire may be the result of human action, but there is little likelihood of such a conflagration in a rainforest.'[3] Studying both long-term and short-term contexts, helps historians move away from a continuing moral dichotomy—the assigning of blame to one side or the other—and

[1] Odd Arne Westad, "Beginnings of the End: How the Cold War Crumbled," in *Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War: Issues, Interpretations, Periodizations*, ed. Silvio Pons and Federico Romero (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p.68.
[2] Thomas G. Paterson, "The Origins of the Cold War," *OAH Magazine of History* 2, no. 1 (1986): p.5.
[3] Fred I. Greenstein, "The Impact of Personality on the End of the Cold War: A Counterfactual Analysis." *Political Psychology* 19, no.1 (1998): p.2.

reveals that although other factors were significant, political ideology was the dominant force in both the beginning and end of the Cold War.

Popular knowledge of the Cold War generally places its start in a neat box upon the conclusion of the Second World War with the emergence of the US and USSR as competing superpowers. Yet the early roots of the Cold War can be traced to the Russian Revolution of 1917. Vladimir Batyuk argues that the overthrowing of Tsarist Russia meant 'the decay of the cosmopolitan aristocracy and of the ideological unity of Europe that it epitomised.'[4] Significantly Western Europe and America immediately perceived this loss of an ally to a 'foreign' ideology as threatening. The US, Britain and France in the midst of the First World War, sent soldiers to protect access to the trans-Siberian railway line, but remained in Siberia until mid-1920 attempting to help overthrow communist rule. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was declared in 1922, but the Western intervenors were hesitant to recognise its legitimacy, with America holding out until 1933.

It is easy to overlook the significance of the Russian Revolution, because Russia fought the Second World War on the side of the Allies. However, crucially, as Priscilla Roberts argues, this alliance was 'based decidedly on convenience, not mutual trust.'[5] She points to the polarising nature of the war, seen in Churchill's remark: 'If Hitler invaded Hell he would at least make a favourable reference to the Devil!'[6] Gabriel Gorodetsky discusses Stalin's 'intense suspicion that Germany and Britain might close ranks and mount a crusade against

[4] Vladimir Batyuk, "The End of the Cold War- A Russian View," *History Today* 49, no. 4 (1999): p.28.
[5] Priscilla Roberts, *The Cold War* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013), p.35.
[6] Roberts, *The Cold War*, p.35.

Russia.'[7] Stalin perceived an affinity between the two anti-communist nations, he wrote that Churchill bore a 'striking resemblance to Hitler and his friends.'[8] On the other hand, when Stalin signed the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression Pact in 1939, it was assumed by the West that this neutrality agreement would soon become a more active alliance.'[9] As such, both the Soviet Union and Britain were paranoid that a separate peace would be made.

This foundational mistrust only increased as the war progressed. John Lewis Gaddis discusses how the creation of a second front was delayed until Britain deemed it 'militarily feasible,' which 'angered the embattled Russians, who lacked the luxury of minimising casualties.'[10] Perhaps worse than this was the lack of Soviet involvement in strategic discussions. Sir Stafford Cripps warned England, 'It appears that we are treating the Soviet Government without trust and as inferiors rather than as trusted allies.'[11] Gorodetsky goes as far as arguing Churchill was intent on doing as little as possible beyond 'pacifying' the Russians. 'The inexplicable British silence during the siege of Moscow' certainly does compare harshly to Churchill's immediate departure to Washington, accompanied by his entire Chiefs of Staff, when Pearl Harbour was attacked.[12] However, it would be unfair to judge Churchill disproportionately for the discrepancy between his political discourse and practical actions. At the Yalta Conference towards the end of the war, Stalin agreed to free elections in Eastern

[7] Gabriel Gorodetsky, "The Origins of the Cold War: Stalin, Churchill and the Formation of the Grand Alliance," *The Russian Review* 47, no. 2 (1988): p.150.
[8] Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, "The Soviet Union," in *Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives* 2, ed. David Reynolds (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p.62.
[9] Gorodetsky, "The Origins of the Cold War," p.152.
[10] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), p.19.
[11] Gorodetsky, "The Origins of the Cold War," p.164.
[12] *Ibid*., p.164,167.

Europe, which he had no intention of carrying out.[13] Roosevelt proclaimed that Stalin "has broken every one of the promises he made at Yalta."[14]

What really assured a long bitter Cold War, was the establishment of an East-West dichotomy based on political ideology, which constructed a total 'other.' Winston Churchill's 1946 speech where he declared 'an iron curtain has descended across the Continent,' is the most famous example of this.[15] Churchill reflected the polarising view that communists globally 'work in complete unity and absolute obedience to the directions they receive from the Communist centre' which form a 'peril to Christian civilisation.'[16] The ultimate fear of the 'Red menace' can be seen in the internal politics of the post-war era in America in particular where, under McCarthyism, any kind of social subversion was treated as a potential weakness to communist infiltration. Roberts explains how this fear not only defined the enemy, but united Western Europe with the US who 'represented the only available potential counterbalance against a menacing Russian neighbour.'[17] The Soviet Union saw capitalism as a threat, in similar ways as the West feared communism. Thomas Paterson argues that 'the Soviets had profound security fears in the wake of a world war that cost them perhaps as many as 10 million dead.'[18] The introduction of nuclear weapons into the latest 'arms race,' raised the stakes of conflict exponentially. When America detonated a nuclear bomb in Hiroshima in 1945, without the official prior knowledge of the USSR, Stalin was quick to authorise a Soviet 'catch up': 'The

[13] Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p.21.
[14] *Ibid.,* p.22.
[15] "Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' Speech, 'Sinews of Peace,'" March 05, 1946, *Cold War International History Project*, in Wilson Centre Digital Archives, n.p.
[16] *Ibid*., n.p.
[17] Roberts, *The Cold War*, p.41.
[18] Paterson, "The Origins of the Cold War,"p.9.

balance has been destroyed… That cannot be.'[19] In 1946 Nikolai Novikov claimed that the 'imperialistic tendencies of American monopolistic capitalism are characterised by a striving for world supremacy.'[20] Gaddis explains how Marxist-Leninist ideology, which perceived that greedy 'capitalists would never be able to cooperate with one another for very long,' added to this view of inevitable conflict.[21]

Now that revisionist historians argue that the conditions for Cold War were created on both sides of the divide, does this lessen the role of Stalin's aggression—the main feature of the West's traditional Cold War metanarrative? Interestingly, Russian historians Zubok and Pleshakov strongly disagree; they argue that 'history is about people' and that there was 'no one more important in the origins of the Cold War' than Josef Stalin.[22] They point to Stalin's drive to restore the former glory of Russia's empire.[23] Yet it would be hypocritical of the West to blame the Cold War on Stalin's imperial ambitions. Although the end of the Second World War instigated a chain of mass decolonisation, at the beginning of the Cold War era the world was still largely characterised by colonial powers. Gorodetsky argues that one of the reasons Britain focused on the war in Africa, rather than assisting Russia, is that this 'offered an opportunity of re-establishing Britain's deteriorating international positon.'[24] After the war, America turned away from a foreign policy of isolationism to exert her power in the international realm and to pursue an active role in global intervention.[25] Gaddis argues that

[19] Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p.26.
[20] *Ibid*., p.30.
[21] *Ibid*., p.12.
[22] Zubok and Pleshakov, "The Soviet Union,"p.57.
[23] *Ibid*., p.58.
[24] Gorodetsky, "The Origins of the Cold War," p.153.
[25] Paterson, "The Origins of the Cold War,"p.6.

Stalin believed that as he paid the highest cost for the defeat of Germany, he should reap a proportionate share of the spoils.[26] Stalin feeling cheated by his small fraction of power, declared in 1946 that 'all of Germany must be ours.'[27] There is no doubt that Stalin was a brutal dictator who committed many atrocities, but in some ways it is understandable that he did not distinguish his imperial behaviours from that of his Western counterparts.

Significantly, several of the 'sparks' that cemented the Cold War, were actions undertaken by the West. Truman's Doctrine announced in March 1947, officially established a policy of 'containment' of Soviet power. This policy was largely based on the 'Long Telegram' of George Kennan, who later admitted that his 'image of a Stalinist Russia poised and yearning to attack the West, […] was largely a creation of the Western imagination.'[28] Paterson argues that Truman too, has some moral culpability for the Cold War as 'counter-evidence was often discounted to satisfy the President's preference for the simple answer or to match his preconceived notions of Soviet aggressiveness.'[29] The 1947 Marshall Plan exerted American influence within Europe, under the umbrella of financial aid, with the clear aim of aligning struggling nations with capitalism, rather than communism. Gaddis argues that Stalin responded 'just as Kennan had predicted he would: by tightening his grip wherever he could.'[30] The first indisputable act of the Cold War—the Soviet Union's 'Berlin Blockade' of 1948—was sparked by the British, French and American zones uniting into one country, which undoubtedly felt threatening for Stalin, in such an environment.

[26] Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p.11.
[27] *Ibid*., p.22.
[28] Paterson, "The Origins of the Cold War," p.7.
[29] *Ibid*., p.8.
[30] Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p. 32.

If the establishment of the Cold War was a drawn-out and complicated process, its end was even more so. Westad traces the long road to peace arguing that the Cold War 'did not so much as collapse, as become increasingly irrelevant.'[31] Certain events undermined the capitalist—communist binary long before the fall of the Soviet Union. In 1979, Enrico Berlinguer, of the Italian Communist Party, separated his party from their USSR counterpart by speaking out against the Soviet military presence in Africa.[32] In the 1980s, the political discourse within the Middle East, which provided the battleground for many of the Cold War's 'hot proxy wars,' began to be increasingly both anti-capitalist and anti-communist. Khomeni's declaration in Iran is particularly poignant: 'We have turned our backs on the East and the West, on the Soviet Union and America, in order to run our country ourselves.'[33] Moments such as these are signposts in the gradual movement towards the end of the Cold War. However, significantly, they occurred alongside acts of continuing aggression, such as the nine-year Soviet-Afghan War launched in 1979.

There are strong arguments to be made that the end of the Cold War was primarily about the more immediate context of economic and social issues within the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s. Batyuk argues that 'it became obvious that the Communist experiment had failed miserably' and that the Soviet people themselves became disillusioned with the 'economic hardships' and 'technological standstill.'[34] By the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was

[31] Westad, "Beginnings of the End: How the Cold War Crumbled," p.69.
[32] *Ibid*., p.72.
[33] *Ibid*., p.74.
[34] Batyuk, "The End of the Cold War," p.28.

spending 40 percent of its budget on the military alone, to the detriment of social spending.[35] Brooks and Wohlforth argue that through studying the notes made by government officials it becomes clear that 'the preoccupation with money for a collapsing Soviet government and polity was overwhelming.'[36] The Soviet Union's economic unfavourable situation increased the likelihood of peace, but it was not enough on its own. After all, the Soviet Union entered the Cold War straight from the Second World War, in which Russia suffered disproportionately in both blood and hunger.

The changing political and ideological discourse within the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s was remarkable. The new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* (political reformation) and *glasnost* (openness), signified a new era of hope in global politics. The Nineteenth Party Conference of 1988, the first held in Russia since 1941, called for checks on executive power, greater transparency and freedom of speech.[37] Batyuk argues that the West was 'no longer seen as an irreconcilable enemy.'[38] In examples such as the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in April 1989, in line with the Geneva accords, Batyuk points to the willingness of the Soviet Union to 'give up the anti-imperialist struggle in the Third World.'[39]

[35] Zubok and Pleshakov, "The Soviet Union," p. 129.
[36] Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Clarifying the End of Cold War Debate." *Cold War History* 7, no. 3 (2007): p.452.
[37] Mark L. Haas, "The United States and the End of the Cold War: Reactions to Shifts in Soviet Power, Policies, or Domestic Politics?" *International Organisation* 61, no.1 (2007): p.164.
[38] Batyuk, "The End of the Cold War," p.30.
[39] *Ibid*., p.30.

This dramatic change within the Soviet Union in the 1980s, leads to a historiographical debate about the role Gorbachev played in bringing about peace. Raymond Garthoff argues that Gorbachev took decisive action to secure peace, particularly in that he 'renounced the idea of inevitable world conflict' inherent in the Marxist-Leninist ideology previously dominant in the USSR.[40] At least one side needed to believe peace was possible, before any real progress could be made. Mark Haas discusses how Gorbachev's willingness to make disproportionate reductions in armaments and to withdraw his troops from many occupied territories was crucial in convincing the West that he was a 'trustworthy actor who was genuinely committed to ending the Cold War.'[41] Yet the significance of Gorbachev is not uncontested. Peter Shearman argues that Gorbachev did not plan for the peace process to play out as it did, but rather that he was a weak leader who has been 'given credit for something he did not set out to do.'[42] As noble as the idea of *Perestroika* was, it was a very vague concept which lacked any real plan. Valery Boldin, Gorbachev's Chief of Staff, pointed to Gorbachev's 'abysmal ignorance' and 'lack of systematic knowledge of political economy.'[43] Garthoff admits that Gorbachev 'seriously underestimated the task of changing the Soviet Union.'[44] It seems unlikely that Gorbachev had a full and comprehensive plan that played out as he wished, especially considering his reforms empowered nationalist groups, which led towards the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet Gorbachev should certainly still be credited for what was at the time, a unique willingness to compromise, which was vital for moving towards peace.

[40] Raymond L. Garthoff, "Why Did the Cold War Arise, and Why Did It End?" *Diplomatic History* 16, no.2, p.289.
[41] Haas, "The United States and the End of the Cold War," p.150.
[42] Peter Shearman, "Gorbachev and the End of the Cold War," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 26, no.1 (1997): p. 131.
[43] *Ibid.,* p.129.
[44] Garthoff, "Why Did the Cold War Arise, and Why Did It End?" p.290.

Gorbachev's attitudes seem even more significant in light of the behaviour of American politicians in the 1980s. When Ronald Reagan became President in 1981 he immediately increased military spending by ten percent.[45] Admittedly this was before Gorbachev's reforms. Yet even as late as 1987, the Reagan administration issued a policy paper, without any reference to Gorbachev's new policies, instead continuing the Cold War discourse that the Soviet Union sought a 'global hegemony' and that the 'unprecedented military build-up posed a continuing threat to America and its allies,'.[46] Reagan eventually accepted the changing nature of the Soviet Union. Haas argues that this was not primarily about foreign policy, but rather his gradual perception of 'domestic-ideological and institutional changes in the Soviet Union,' which implied that 'Gorbachev was dedicated to core tenets of liberal ideology.'[47]

The relationship between the West and the Soviet Union was now ready for just a few 'sparks' to cement peace. In December 1988, Gorbachev committed to withdrawing 500 000 men and 5 000 tanks from Eastern Europe and when revolutions spread in these areas in 1989, he did not intervene. Haas explains that this was significant for Cold War politics because it 'significantly reduced the Soviets' ability to wage an offensive war in Europe.'[48] The proliferation of arms control treaties in this same period was also significant for garnering trust.[49] On the 9th of November 1989, the Berlin Wall was pulled apart by tens of thousands of Germans brick by brick, in a symbolic rejection of division based on ideology.[50] Mass

[45] Greenstein, "The Impact of Personality on the End of the Cold War," p.5.
[46] Haas, "The United States and the End of the Cold War," p.158.
[47] *Ibid*., p.146.
[48] *Ibid*., p.171.
[49] Batyuk, "The End of the Cold War," p.29.
[50] *Ibid.,* p.31.

demonstrations led to the collapse of many communist parties within Europe. This weakness in communism, especially considering Gorbachev's semi-liberal reform, meant the key feature holding the diverse ethnic groups within Soviet Union together disintegrated. A former member of Soviet government put it as such: 'can you imagine a state that included [places similar to] both Denmark and Iran?'[51] In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and there was no longer any doubt that the Cold War was over.

There are many significant individuals and moments to consider in the study of the beginning and end of the Cold War. However the role of all of these was dependent upon contexts highly defined by ideological warfare. The communist—capitalist dichotomy between the East and the West created a deep-seated mistrust which bloomed into the Cold War. In order to move towards peace, the Soviet Union needed to represent signs of a Western model of social and economic liberalism. It is no coincidence that both the early origins and conclusive end of the Cold War coincided with the rise and fall of the USSR, but this does not mean it can automatically be seen as the aggressor. The holistic study of Cold War contexts, helps us move past the black and white assignment of blame to one side or the other, which is itself akin to the polarisation of the Cold War era, to see the complex picture of mutual culpability. The Cold War is long over, but trying to decipher its lessons is still highly relevant in the contemporary atmosphere of mistrust between Russia and the West, particularly as the UK decides this year about the renewal of its Trident nuclear deterrence program.

[51] Batyuk, "The End of the Cold War," p. 32.

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