

# WE NOW KNOW

Rethinking  
Cold War History

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# *The New Cold War History: First Impressions*

And despite the many failings of the United States, there was no doubt that the world, for all its misery, was a better place than it would have been without American resistance to Joseph Stalin's vision.

Warren I. Cohen<sup>1</sup>

Readers should not be misled by the confident tone of the literature (including my own observations) into confusing opinion with established truth.

Eric Hobsbawm<sup>2</sup>

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HISTORY does not end, but historians sooner or later must. The patience of readers, the constraints imposed by publishers, the limits of our own energy and insight—all of these require that we find convenient points at which to conclude our books. When writing about war, this is usually not difficult. Most wars begin and end at specific points; and although historians may debate their origins, conduct, and consequences, they rarely disagree about their dates. Nor is there apt to be much doubt about who won, although there may be about why. Such certainties are possible because historians generally wait until wars are over to begin writing about them. Beginnings, endings, and consequences tend to be, by then, self-evident.

Consider what the history of any great war might look like if accounts of it began to appear before the fighting had ceased. Historians would hardly be able to draw equally and dispassionately upon the archives of each belligerent, with a view to determining who started it. Available sources would be biased and incomplete. Winners and losers would remain unclear, as would the circumstances of victory or defeat. A history of World War I composed as late as the winter of 1918, or of World War II completed in 1942, would differ dramatically from those familiar to us; for these would be histories written from *within* a great event, not after it. It is precisely that quality of coming *after* that causes us—most of the time—to regard a narrative as “historical” in the first place.

World War I took four years to fight; World War II required six. The Cold

War, however, dragged on for four and a half decades: more than *ten times* the length of the 1914–18 war, *seven times* that of 1939–45. Historians chose, reasonably enough, not to await the Cold War's end before beginning to write about it. This meant, though, that until recently their real histories resembled our imaginary histories of the two world wars: they lacked equivalent access to archives on each side, and they were written without knowing how it would all come out.<sup>3</sup> Despite divergent and often discordant interpretations, all Cold War historians—whether of orthodox, revisionist, post-revisionist, corporatist, international, cultural, or post-modernist persuasions—fell into the unusual habit of working within their chosen period rather than after it.<sup>4</sup>

What seems most striking now about this “old” Cold War history are not the disagreements that took place among its practitioners but rather its common characteristics. It showed little of the detachment that comes from following, not reflecting, a historical epoch.<sup>5</sup> It gave one side disproportionate attention: whether critical or complementary, most of this scholarship focused on the United States, its allies, or its clients. It neglected the fact that *two* superpowers dominated the post-1945 world; that each often acted in response to what the other had done; and that third parties responded to—but sometimes manipulated—each of them. It emphasized *interests*, which it mostly defined in material terms—what people possessed, or wanted to possess. It tended to overlook *ideas*—what people believed, or wanted to believe.

There were various reasons for these deficiencies. The Cold War went on for so long that toward its end few experts on it had experienced any other international system: comparisons across time and space faded as a result. Marxist-Leninist states got slighted because they kept so much of their history so carefully hidden: until the late 1980s none had even begun to open the kind of archives routinely available in the west. “Realist” and “neorealist” theorists of international relations regarded what went on inside people’s heads as hard to measure, and therefore easy to dismiss.<sup>6</sup>

The “new” Cold War history is likely to depart from these patterns in several ways. It will treat its subject as a discrete episode with a known beginning and end, not as a continuing or even permanent condition. It will place the Cold War within the stream of time; it will not confuse the Cold War *with* the stream of time. It will acknowledge that there have been, and will assuredly be, other ways of organizing international relations than those practiced after World War II. It will therefore place its subject within a broader comparative framework than the “old” Cold War history managed to do.

The “new” Cold War history will be multi-archival, in that it will at least attempt to draw upon the records of *all* major participants in that conflict. It will abandon the asymmetry that provided clinical detail on the public *and* behind-the-scenes behavior of western leaders, but little beyond speculation when it came to backstage maneuvering within the Marxist-Leninist world. It will thus be a truly international history, affirmative action for the “second” as well as the “first” and “third” worlds.<sup>7</sup>

The “new” Cold War history will take ideas seriously: here the way that conflict ended is bound to reshape our view of how it began and evolved. For the events of 1989–91 make sense only in terms of ideas. There was no military defeat or economic crash; but there was a collapse of legitimacy. The people of one Cold War empire suddenly realized that its emperors had no clothes on. As in the classic tale, though, that insight resulted from a shift in how people thought, not from any change in what they saw.

All of these practices—knowing the outcome, having multiple sources, paying attention to ideas—are decidedly old-fashioned. They are the way history is written most of the time. They suggest not only that the “old” Cold War history is out of date; it was also *an abnormal way of writing history itself*. It was the product of an abnormal age, which was the Cold War itself. Like the post-Cold War world in which it exists, the “new” Cold War history is only getting us back to normal.

But what does it all amount to? How might this view of the Cold War from the outside—and from the “other side”—change our understanding of it? What follows are first impressions, gleaned from writing this book, stated as a series of hypotheses. They are, most emphatically, subject to refinement, revision, and even subsequent rejection in the light of additional evidence. They represent what I think we know *now* but did not know, at least not as clearly, while the Cold War was going on. We will surely know *more*, though, as time passes and the Cold War completes its lengthy progression from that most frightening of contemporary anxieties to just another distant, dusty, historical memory.

## I

The first of these hypotheses is that *the diversification of power did more to shape the course of the Cold War than did the balancing of power*.

A key assumption of the “old” Cold War history was that with the defeat of Germany and Japan, the international system shifted from a multipolar to a bipolar configuration.<sup>8</sup> The great powers of Europe appeared to have committed a kind of collective suicide, leaving the United States and the Soviet Union as even greater superpowers. Whereas earlier history had seen several large states competing within the global arena, the future now lay, or so it seemed, in the hands of only two. Alexis de Tocqueville had predicted in 1835 that Russians and Americans would one day dominate the destinies of half the earth, and in 1945 it certainly looked as though their time had come.

This switch from multipolarity to bipolarity also impressed theorists. “Realists” interpreted it to mean that only the balancing of power would ensure peace.<sup>9</sup> By the 1970s, “neo-realists” saw bipolarity as so deeply rooted that stability was sure to result from it. Their most influential spokesman, Kenneth Waltz, foresaw the possibility that the Cold War might someday end—but only because bipolarity would make that possible. The Soviet Union and the United

States would dominate the post-Cold War world, he predicted in 1979, for as far into the future as one could foresee.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously both the historians and the theorists got it wrong. The error arose, I think, from the way we calculated power during the Cold War years. We did so almost entirely in monodimensional terms, focusing particularly on military indices, when a multidimensional perspective might have told us more. The end of the Cold War made it blindingly clear that military strength does not always determine the course of great events: the Soviet Union collapsed, after all, with its arms and armed forces fully intact. Deficiencies in other kinds of power—economic, ideological, cultural, moral—caused the USSR to lose its superpower status, and we can now see that a slow but steady erosion in those non-military capabilities had been going on for some time.

To visualize what happened, imagine a troubled triceratops.<sup>11</sup> From the outside, as rivals contemplated its sheer size, tough skin, bristling armament, and aggressive posturing, the beast looked sufficiently formidable that none dared tangle with it. Appearances deceived, though, for within its digestive, circulatory, and respiratory systems were slowly clogging up, and then shutting down. There were few external signs of this until the day the creature was found with all four feet in the air, still awesome but now bloated, stiff, and quite dead. The moral of the fable is that armaments make impressive exoskeletons, but a shell alone ensures the survival of no animal and no state.

Had we understood better that power exists in multiple forms; had we perceived that some kinds of power can exist in a bipolar configuration while others are distributed more widely; had we allowed for the possibility that power, whether within a state or a system of states, can evolve either toward or away from diversity; had we grasped these subtleties, we might have seen sooner than we did that bipolarity was an artifact of the way World War II ended and therefore also of the improbable series of events that had caused World War II. It was *not* a fundamental change in the nature of the international system. That system remained *multidimensional* throughout the Cold War, and the Soviet Union's slow descent into monodimensionality is what eventually killed it. Multidimensionality may be multipolarity more accurately conceived.

## II

Another hypothesis that emerges from the “new” Cold War history is that *the United States and the Soviet Union built empires after World War II, although not of the same kind.*

Most “old” Cold War historians acknowledged that despite its anti-imperial traditions the United States constructed an empire after 1945: what they debated was whether this happened intentionally or by inadvertence. Was the American empire the result of a domestically rooted drive for markets and

investment opportunities abroad? Or was it an accidental by-product of having rushed to fill a power vacuum in Europe, a reflex that would cause Americans to meddle wherever else in the world they thought there *might* be a Soviet threat? Either way, credibility became the currency in which the United States, like most empires in the past, counted its assets.

Much the same was true, it now appears, of the Soviet Union. Partly driven by ideological and geostrategic ambitions, partly responding to the opportunities that lay before him, Stalin too built a postwar European empire. With Mao’s victory, he hoped—not quite trusting his own good fortune—to extend it to China; Khrushchev sought similar objectives in the “third world.” But as problems developed, whether in Korea or later in Cuba, fears of falling dominoes surfaced about as often in Moscow as in Washington: hence Stalin’s extraordinary pressure on the Chinese to save Kim Il-sung; hence Khrushchev’s remarkable risk-taking in defense of Fidel Castro.

From an imperial perspective there was little new here. All empires fear losing credibility; one might conclude, therefore, that the Soviet and American empires did not differ all that much from one another. But other findings from the “new” Cold War history suggest that such an “equivalency” argument, at least as far as Europe and Japan are concerned, would be quite wrong. To see why, consider another issue all empires have had to face: will their subjects collaborate or resist? The difficulty of managing any empire is bound to vary accordingly; but it is the *occupied*, not the occupiers, who make this choice. Even the apparently powerless have that much power.

More than a decade ago, the historian Geir Lundestad revealed distinctive patterns of collaboration and resistance when he pointed out that the West Europeans “invited” the United States to construct an empire and include them within it, in the hope of containing the empire the Russians were imposing on eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup> This argument still makes sense, but with certain refinements.

One is that Stalin appears also to have *hoped* for an “invitation,” especially in Germany, perhaps elsewhere in Eastern Europe, possibly even in Japan. The disarray now evident in his policies toward these regions may reflect the fact that it never came. If so, the Europeans and the Japanese become critical players, for while it was hardly within their power to prevent Soviet or American domination, they were free to welcome or fear that process. Their responses were not always overt, especially in countries the Red Army occupied. Resistance is no less significant, however, for taking sullen or subtle forms: officials in Moscow soon lost whatever illusions they might have had that they could count, in a crunch, upon their East European and German “allies.” The Americans, if anything, *underestimated* the loyalty of their NATO partners and the Japanese. In Europe and Northeast Asia, then, these were hardly equivalent empires.<sup>13</sup> The American presence had a strong base of popular support, confirmed repeatedly as free elections kept the governments in power that had invited it. The Soviet presence never won such acceptance: that, no doubt, is why free elections within Moscow’s sphere of influence ceased to be held.

Patterns blur, to be sure, when one looks elsewhere. It is clear now that the

Chinese—or at least their new communist leaders—initially extended an invitation to the *Russians* and resisted what they saw as threats from the Americans. In Southeast Asia as well as the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, invitations to both superpowers were periodically advanced and withdrawn. Whether the Russians or the Americans responded more brutally—or more humanely—is difficult to say: as always, the “third world” defies easy generalizations. Decisions to collaborate or resist depended upon time, place, and circumstances.

But the “third world” did not, in the end, determine the Cold War’s outcome. What took place in Europe and Japan largely did, and there the results were decisive: where possible, the inhabitants resisted the Soviet Union and collaborated with the United States; where impossible, most wished passionately that they could have done so. That raises the question of why Washington’s empire, in those pivotal regions, generated so much less friction than Moscow’s.

### III

One answer may be that *many people then saw the Cold War as a contest of good versus evil, even if historians since have rarely done so.*

Let me focus here on a single significant case: it has to do with what happened in Germany immediately after the war as its citizens confronted their respective occupiers. What Stalin sought there, it now seems clear, was a communist regime in the east that would attract Germans in the west without requiring the use of force, something the Russians could ill afford given their own exhaustion and the Americans’ monopoly over the atomic bomb.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, this is not what he got. Germans first voted with their feet—fleeing to the west in huge numbers to avoid the Red Army—and then at the ballot box in ways that frustrated all of Stalin’s hopes. But this outcome was not foreordained. There were large numbers of communist party members throughout Germany at the end of the war, and their prestige—because of their opposition to the Nazis—had never been higher. Why did the Germans so overwhelmingly welcome the Americans and their allies, and fear the Russians?

It has long been known that the Red Army behaved brutally toward German civilians in those parts of the country it occupied, and that this treatment contrasted strikingly with that accorded the Germans in the American, British, and French zones. What we had not known, until recently, is how pervasive the problem of rape was: Red Army soldiers may have assaulted as many as *two million* German women in 1945–6. There were few efforts for many months to stop this behavior, or to discipline those who indulged in it. To this day, some Soviet officers recall the experience much as Stalin saw it at the time: troops that had risked their lives and survived deserved a little fun.<sup>15</sup>

Now, obviously rape in particular, and brutality in general, is always a problem when armies occupy the territory of defeated adversaries. Certainly Russian

troops had good reason to hate the Germans, given what they had done inside the Soviet Union. But these semi-sanctioned mass rapes took place precisely as Stalin was trying to *win the support* of the German people, not just in the east but throughout the country. He even allowed elections to be held inside the Soviet zone in the fall of 1946, only to have the Germans—women in particular—vote overwhelmingly against the Soviet-supported candidates.<sup>16</sup>

The incidence of rape and other forms of brutality was so much greater on the Soviet than on the western side that it played a major role in determining which way Germans would tilt in the Cold War that was to come. It ensured a pro-western orientation from the very beginning of that conflict, which surely helps to account for why the West German regime was able to establish itself as a legitimate government while its East German counterpart never did.

What happened here was not a reflection of high policy; it was rather a matter of occupying armies, in the absence of clear orders, falling back upon their own domestic standards of acceptable behavior. The rules of civil society implicit in democratic politics made the humanitarian treatment of defeated enemies seem natural to the Western allies. Their troops did not have to be ordered to do this—they just did it, and it did not occur to them to do otherwise. Much the same thing happened, with equally important results, in occupied Japan. But thanks to Stalin and Hitler, Russian troops came out of a culture of brutality with few parallels in modern history. Having been brutalized themselves, it did not occur to many of them that there was anything wrong with brutalizing others. And it did not occur to their leaders to put a stop to this process until after it had lost them Germany.

In this instance, then, civility on one side and its absence on the other played an enormous role in shaping the course of events. The rapes dramatized differences between Soviet authoritarianism and American democracy in ways that could hardly have been more direct. Social history, even gender history, intersected with inhumanity to make diplomatic history. What this suggests, then, is that historians of the Cold War need to look quite carefully at what those who *saw* distinctions between good and evil *thought and did* about them. For when people vote with their feet, it generally means they have ideas in their minds. But to understand these, we have to take seriously what *they at the time believed*.

No historian looking at the religious practices of late antiquity, or at the medieval peasantry, or even at revolutions in America, France, or Russia, would doubt the importance of seeking out the voices and viewpoints of everyday life. And yet, when looking at the origins, the evolution, and the end of the Cold War—or for that matter at the gap between popular and academic perceptions of the past today—historians seem to want to tell the public what its memories ought to be.<sup>17</sup> A little self-scrutiny might be in order here, to see whether we are treating the distant past and the recent past in exactly the same way.

## IV

If the American empire generated less resistance than did its Soviet counterpart, another reason may be that *democracy proved superior to autocracy in maintaining coalitions*.

Democratic principles seemed ill-suited to foreign policy as the Cold War began. The founding fathers of "realism"—Morgenthau, Kennan, Lippmann, E. H. Carr—tended to blame Wilsonian "legalism-moralism" for having led to the League of Nations, the Washington Naval Treaties, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and all the other well-meaning gestures that had failed so conspicuously to prevent World War II.<sup>18</sup> None of these initiatives, they insisted, had taken into account the actual power relationships that determined the course of international relations. If the western democracies were to survive in the postwar world—which was likely to be as cold and cruel as the prewar world—they would have to abandon the illusion that they could conduct diplomacy as they ran their domestic affairs. It would be necessary to learn about balances of power, covert operations, and the permanent peacetime uses of military force—idealists, in short, would have to master the cynical art of *Realpolitik*.

As always with Kennan, there was a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, he stressed how little use he had for democratic procedures in the making of foreign policy: witness his memorable comparison of democracy to "one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin."<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, he expected containment to work by having the United States remain true to its principles, which presumably included those of democratic politics: "The greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem of Soviet communism, is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping."<sup>20</sup>

This danger, it is now clear, never materialized. Despite frequent departures from them, the United States on the whole retained its traditional values; it also allowed these, from time to time, to shape its Cold War policies. It did so, to be sure, less from intention than instinct: when otherwise unsure what to do, Americans tended to revert to their democratic habits and encourage others to adopt them as well.<sup>21</sup> Far from being the impractical idealism the "realists" feared, though, such behavior turned out to be eminently realistic. Consider three key episodes, all of which illustrate the extension of American domestic practices into the foreign policy realm: the democratizations (by way of military occupation) of Germany and Japan, the management of the NATO alliance, and the encouragement of European integration.

What each of these had in common was the stake in the success of the enterprise the Americans gave their allies by involving them in design, organization, and administration. German and Japanese occupations provided the fewest opportunities, yet even here it is striking to what extent Generals Clay and MacArthur adapted their reforms to local conditions while still, for the most part, making them stick. NATO was very much a joint venture: Europeans pro-

posed it, and the United States permitted them a surprising amount of influence over its structure and strategies. European integration for years has flourished independently of the Americans, but it could hardly have arisen had not Washington insisted upon European cooperation in return for economic and military assistance during the late 1940s. Only then did the process become self-organizing, with a character very much its own.

It is difficult to imagine the Soviet Union acting similarly. Its occupation policies in Germany backfired, failing to generate popular support. The Warsaw Pact never operated as NATO did: there was little sense of mutual interest, especially after the events of 1956. Once the Korean War was over, the Sino-Soviet alliance functioned no better. Nor was there spontaneous economic or political integration within the Soviet sphere: instead, everything had to be routed through and managed from Moscow, in the classic manner of old-fashioned empires.

The Americans constructed a new kind of empire—a democratic empire—for the simple reason that they were, by habit and history, democratic in their politics. They were used to the bargaining and deal-making, the coercion and conciliation, that routinely takes place within such a system. They did not automatically regard resistance as treason. Their example, as a consequence, spread easily; it also coexisted comfortably with other democracies where they were already in place.

The Russians, coming out of an authoritarian tradition, knew of no way to deal with independent thinking other than to smother it. The slightest signs of autonomy, for Stalin, were heresy, to be rooted out with all the thoroughness of the Spanish Inquisition. The result was surely subservience, but it was never self-organization. To the extent that it gave others a stake in the enterprise, that stake may have been as much in welcoming failure as success.

In this sense, then, preserving democratic ideals turned out to be a very realistic thing for the west to have done. The Kennan of the X article was a lot more prescient than the Kennan haunted by visions of democratic dinosaurs.

## V

A related hypothesis is that, in contrast to democratic realism, *Marxism-Leninism during the Cold War fostered authoritarian romanticism*.

In his recent book, *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger faults Hitler for having fallen prey to visions based more on emotion than on rational calculation. Stalin, he claims, was brutally realistic, prepared to take as long as necessary to achieve his goals, willing to adapt ideology as needed to justify them. For Hitler, Kissinger seems to be saying, ideology determined objectives, and practical difficulties were not allowed to stand in the way. For Stalin, it was the other way around: the objectives determined the ideology, which was adjusted as necessary to shifting circumstances.<sup>22</sup> That certainly has been the standard view of how

Marxist-Leninist states functioned, and as a consequence the "old" Cold War history failed to take ideology very seriously.

The new sources suggest the need to reconsider, for they seem to suggest that ideology often *determined* the behavior of Marxist-Leninist regimes: it was not simply a justification for actions already decided upon. In one sense, this should hardly surprise us. The Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and other such states based their very legitimacy upon an ideology which, with its premium on orthodoxy and its deep distrust of heresy, permeated all aspects of daily life. Why, except for ideology, would Kremlin leaders retain a system of collectivized agriculture that had repeatedly shown itself not to work? Why, for that matter, insist on a command economy in the first place, since the evidence of its failures was almost as compelling? Foreign policy too reflected ideology, in ways that resist alternative explanations.

Take, for example, what we now know to have been Stalin's persistent belief, after 1945, that the next war would take place within the *capitalist* world. It came, of course, from a literal reading of Lenin: capitalists were so greedy, the great man had insisted, so preoccupied with finding ways to cheat or exploit one another, that they would never be able to cooperate on anything for very long. But these Leninist expectations kept Stalin from seeing what was really happening during the early postwar years: Soviet behavior in Eastern Europe and Germany was causing the West Europeans and the Americans to combine in a coalition directed against *him*. Stalin imagined one Europe while ensuring, through his actions, that a totally different one would actually evolve.

Then there is Mao Zedong, who now appears to have been a much more committed Marxist-Leninist than previously suspected. Chinese and Soviet sources show him consistently subordinating national to ideological interests: this led him, quite short-sightedly, to suspect the Americans and trust the Russians. It is difficult otherwise to account for Mao's extraordinary deference to his "elder brother" in the Kremlin, his willingness to accept an "unequal treaty" with Moscow, and the massive sacrifices China made in the Korean War. Not until after Stalin's death did an independent Chinese foreign policy emerge; but even that had an ideological basis. It was just that Mao now considered himself to be chief ideologist.

Ideology also helps to explain Stalin's uncharacteristic aggressiveness in the months preceding the Korean War. He interpreted Mao's victory as evidence that the revolutionary tide, contained in Europe, had shifted to Asia. He fell, as a consequence, into a kind of geriatric romanticism, encouraging the Chinese to support insurgencies elsewhere and authorizing Kim Il-sung to attack South Korea. It was as if Stalin chose to celebrate his seventieth year by trying to recapture his revolutionary youth: his ideological vision made him a naive and sentimental as well as a brutal old man.

And lest that pattern seem unique, consider what we now know of Khrushchev, who responded to Castro's revolution in Cuba in much the same way. There could have been little strategic logic in *creating* a Caribbean outpost at least as indefensible as the one the Americans and their allies had *inherited* in

West Berlin. From an ideological perspective, though, Cuba was all-important: it might provide the spark that would set off Marxist uprisings throughout Latin America. There was little hard evidence of such a prospect, but even the possibility—however remote—had an intense *emotional* hold in Moscow. One has the image here, not so much of a Bismarck or even a Lenin, but of aging Ponce de Leons in search of an ideological Fountain of Youth.

The new materials suggest, then, that Kissinger was right about Hitler, and would have been right about Stalin and his successors as well as Mao had he applied to them a similar model of emotionally based ideological romanticism. For there seems to have been something about authoritarians that caused them to lose touch with reality. Being a communist provided no greater safeguard against tilting at windmills than being a fascist. The explanation is not difficult to discern: autocratic systems reinforce, while discouraging attempts to puncture, whatever quixotic illusions may exist at the top.

## VI

Why, though, if the Americans had multidimensionality, collaboration, morality, and realism all going for them, did the Cold War last as long as it did? Here the "new" history suggests yet another hypothesis, which is that *nuclear weapons exchanged destructiveness for duration*.

The proposition that nuclear weapons kept the Cold War from getting hot is an old and familiar one, although still not universally accepted.<sup>23</sup> The new technology of warfare is supposed to have created constraints against escalation not previously present, and as a result crises that in other periods would have caused great wars during the Cold War did not. There seems little doubt now that the nuclear revolution indeed had this restraining effect. But there was a price to be paid—even though it was surely worth paying.

If, as suggested above, retaining a diversified power base helped the west win the Cold War—if one triceratops remained healthy while the other slowly sickened—then it would be worth specifying *when* the Soviet Union completed the transition from multi- to monodimensionality. One might have expected this to happen shortly before the struggle ended. But the new evidence indicates—that on this point old evidence more carefully analyzed might also have suggested—that the process was virtually complete by the early 1960s. The Cold War went on for another three decades. How come?

This is where nuclear weapons come in, for they encouraged the monodimensional measurement of power. McNamara insisted that a 17–1 advantage for the United States in 1962 still translated into *effective* nuclear parity because the prospect of only a few nuclear explosions on American soil would deter Washington from doing anything that might provoke them. Unconvinced, Soviet leaders used the years that followed to seek actual parity with the United States, and by 1970 they had largely succeeded. But look what was happening

here: both sides had tacitly agreed to calculate their strengths in the particular category of power—if one agrees that the “third world” offered little, the *only* category—in which the Soviet Union could still match the United States. It was as if the ailing triceratops somehow convinced its adversary to focus only on its external appearance, disregarding its reflexes, blood pressure, X-rays, and stool samples.

There developed, as a result, a fixation on the nuclear arms race as the focus of Soviet-American relations. Future generations are sure to wonder at this. Why was so much time spent worrying about intricate numerical balances in categories of weapons no one could use? Or on the negotiation of arms control treaties that reduced no arms? How did the idea ever take hold that security could lie in the deliberate cultivation of mutual vulnerability? That defense was a bad thing?

Not until the Reagan administration would anyone seriously question these orthodoxies—whether it did so out of ignorance or craft is still not clear. What is apparent is that the United States began to challenge the Soviet Union during the first half of the 1980s in a manner unprecedented since the early Cold War. That state soon exhausted itself and expired—whether from unaccustomed over-exertion or Gorbachev’s heroic efforts at resuscitation is also still not completely clear.

Nuclear weapons preserved the image of a formidable Soviet Union long after it had entered into its terminal decline. We will never know whether the USSR could have been successfully—but also safely—confronted at an earlier date; for the Cuban missile crisis convinced western leaders, perhaps correctly, that their own nations’ survival depended upon that of their adversary. Efforts to shake the other side seemed far too dangerous to undertake. There was, therefore, a trade-off: we avoided *destruction*, but at the price of *duration*; the Cold War went on much longer than it might have had nuclear weapons never been invented. Given the fact that they did exist, the Cold War could have ended with a bang at just about any point. It took decades to arrange a whimper.

## VII

What is there new to say about the old question of responsibility for the Cold War? Who actually started it? Could it have been averted? Here I think the “new” history is bringing us back to an old answer: that *as long as Stalin was running the Soviet Union a cold war was unavoidable*.

History is always the product of determined *and* contingent events: it is up to historians to find the proper balance between them. The Cold War could hardly have happened if there had not been a United States and a Soviet Union, if both had not emerged victorious from World War II, if they had not had conflicting visions of how to organize the postwar world. But these long-term trends did not in themselves *ensure* such a contest, because there is always room for the

unexpected to undo what might appear to be inevitable. *Nothing* is ever completely predetermined, as real triceratops and other dinosaurs discovered 65 million years ago when the most recent large asteroid or comet or whatever it was hit the earth and wiped them out.

Individuals, not asteroids, more often personify contingency in history. Who can specify in advance—or unravel afterwards—the particular intersection of genetics, environment, and culture that makes each person unique? Who can foresee what weird conjunctions of design and circumstance may cause a very few individuals to rise so high as to shape great events, and so come to the attention of historians? Such people may set their sights on getting to the top, but an assassin, or a bacillus, or even a carelessly driven taxicab can always be lurking along the way. How entire countries fall into the hands of malevolent geniuses like Hitler and Stalin remains as unfathomable in the “new” Cold War history as in the “old.”

Once leaders like these do gain power, however, certain things become highly probable. It is only to be expected that in an authoritarian state the chief authoritarian’s personality will weigh much more heavily than those of democratic leaders, who have to share power. And whether because of social alienation, technological innovation, or economic desperation, the first half of the twentieth century was particularly susceptible to great authoritarians and all that resulted from their ascendancy. It is hardly possible to imagine Nazi Germany or the world war it caused without Hitler. I find it increasingly difficult, given what we know now, to imagine the Soviet Union or the Cold War without Stalin.

For the more we learn, the less sense it makes to distinguish Stalin’s foreign policies from his domestic practices or even his personal behavior. Scientists have shown the natural world to be filled with examples of what they call “self-similarity across scale”: patterns that persist whether one views them microscopically, macroscopically, or anywhere in between.<sup>24</sup> Stalin was like that: he functioned in much the same manner whether operating within the International system, within his alliances, within his country, within his party, within his personal entourage, or even within his family. The Soviet leader waged cold wars on all of these fronts. The Cold War we came to know was only one of many from *his* point of view.

Nor did Stalin’s influence diminish as quickly as that of most dictators after their deaths. He built a *system* sufficiently durable to survive not only his own demise but his successors’ fitful and half-hearted efforts at “de-Stalinization.” They were themselves its creatures, and they continued to work within it because they knew no other method of governing. Not until Gorbachev was a Soviet leader fully prepared to dismantle Stalin’s structural legacy. It tells us a lot that as it disappeared, so too did the Cold War and ultimately the Soviet Union itself.

This argument by no means absolves the United States and its allies of a considerable responsibility for how the Cold War was fought—hardly a surprising conclusion since they in fact won it. Nor is it to deny the feckless stupidity with

which the Americans fell into peripheral conflicts like Vietnam, or their exorbitant expenditures on unusable weaponry: these certainly caused the Cold War to cost much more in money and lives than it otherwise might have. Nor is it to claim moral superiority for western statesmen.<sup>25</sup> None was as bad as Stalin—or Mao—but the Cold War left no leader uncorrupted: the wielding of great power, even in the best of times, rarely does.

It is the case, though, that if one applies the always useful test of counterfactual history—drop a key variable and speculate as to what difference this might have made—Stalin's centrality to the origins of the Cold War becomes quite clear. For all of their importance, one could have removed Roosevelt, Churchill, Truman, Bevin, Marshall, or Acheson, and a cold war would still have probably followed the world war. If one could have eliminated Stalin, alternative paths become quite conceivable. For with the possible exception of Mao, no twentieth-century leader imprinted himself upon his country as thoroughly and with such lasting effect as Stalin did. And given his personal propensity for cold wars—a tendency firmly rooted long before he had even heard of Harry Truman—once Stalin wound up at the top in Moscow and once it was clear his state would survive the war, then it looks equally clear that there was going to be a Cold War whatever the west did. Who then was responsible? The answer, I think, is authoritarianism in general, and Stalin in particular.

## VIII

Finally, how will the Cold War look a hundred years hence? Not as it does today, it seems safe enough to say, just as the Cold War we now know looks different from the one we knew, or thought we knew, while it was going on. It ought to humble historians to recognize how much their views of the past—any past, no matter how distant—reflect the particular present in which they find themselves. We are all, in this sense, *temporal parochials*. There follows, then, one last hypothesis: “new” Cold War historians should retain the capacity to be surprised.

It would be foolish for this book or any other to claim definitive conclusions on the basis of the fresh but very incomplete evidence the Cold War’s end has placed at our disposal. Surprises are bound to lie ahead, whether from new documents or new perspectives or their interconnections. Revisionism is a healthy historiographical process, and no one, not even revisionists, should be exempt from it.

It would be equally short-sighted to dismiss new evidence solely because it fits—or does not fit—existing interpretations. The temptation, among established Cold War historians, is certainly there.<sup>26</sup> Surely we will produce better history, though, if we alter our perspectives to accommodate our sources than if we select from those sources only what sustains our preconceptions. Pre-Darwinian paleontologists insisted for years on the immutability of species despite the fossil evidence that lay before their eyes. Historians who fail to take

new sources seriously risk a similarly antiquated commitment to the immutability of theses.

“Triumphalism” too can mislead.<sup>27</sup> To the extent that it reviews what the west did right during the Cold War—as well as what it did wrong—it is a valid historical method, since otherwise one would be hard-pressed to explain why the Cold War ended as decisively as it did. But when “triumphalism” fosters complacency, it goes too far. It obscures the fact that victories, more often than not, carry within themselves the seeds of their own undoing. Enemies may disappear but historical processes rarely do: self-congratulation can get in the way of seeing what these are, where they are going, and what they may portend.

Just because market capitalism and democratic politics triumphed during the Cold War is no guarantee that they will continue to do so. Capitalism still distributes wealth and status unevenly, as Marx said it did. Democracy still gives voice to the alienation that results: people do not necessarily vote the way economists think. Where did communism and fascism come from in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—to say nothing of the great reform movements in the United States and Western Europe—if not from a clash of unregulated markets with an expanding political franchise? And yet the post-Cold War world has seen an unprecedented push for economic integration and political self-determination, with almost no thought given to how each might relate to the other.<sup>28</sup>

It is, therefore, too soon to write authoritarianism’s obituary. Despite the setbacks it suffered during the Cold War, that form of government has a much longer history than does democracy. It would be temporally parochial in the extreme to conclude that its day is done. If Marxism-Leninism generated so many internal contradictions that it ultimately collapsed, why should we regard democratic capitalism as exempt from similar tendencies? How do we know we are not living within a long historical cycle, one that may sweep us back to a world of authoritarians—although almost certainly not of the Marxist-Leninist variety—all over again?

And yet—surprises happen. There are instances in which historical ecology itself shifts, in which behavior that has flourished for as far back as we can detect suddenly ceases to do so. Bad habits, like ill-adapted life-forms, do sometimes become extinct. This happened to slavery and dueling during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it may be happening to great-power war as the twentieth century draws to a close.<sup>29</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, a post-Darwinian paleontologist who takes a very long view, likes to tell of a particular species of fish which flourished for millions upon millions of years, all of that time superbly in tune with its environment—until the pond dried up.<sup>30</sup>

It may be that the west prevailed during the Cold War not so much because of the success of its institutions or the wisdom of its leaders—although surely there was some of both—as because that conflict just happened to take place at the moment in history when the conditions that had for thousands of years favored authoritarianism suddenly ceased to do so. Perhaps (let us hope so) the pond simply dried up.

93. Khrushchev to Castro, 30 Oct. 1962, *ibid.* 486–7. See also *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, pp. 177, 182–3. For Castro's explanation of this message, which emphasizes translation difficulties, see Blight et al., *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 121–2, 478–80.
94. Khrushchev to Castro, 28 Oct. 1962, in *ibid.* 482.
95. *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, p. 183.
96. See Chapter VIII.
97. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, pp. 542–5. See also Reeves, *President Kennedy*, pp. 424–5.
98. John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States: An Interpretive History*, 2nd edn. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), p. 251. Khrushchev's admission is in *Khrushchev Remembers*, p. 553.
99. *Ibid.* 555.
100. *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, p. 180.
101. Khrushchev to Castro, 30 Oct. 1962, in Blight et al., *Cuba on the Brink*, p. 488.
102. Soviet transcript, Mikoyan–Castro conversation, 4 Nov. 1962, CWIHP *Bulletin* 5 (Spring 1995), p. 97.
103. Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, p. 268; Gribkov and Smith, *Operation ANADYR*, p. 73; Tompson, *Khrushchev*, pp. 272–3; Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, pp. 156–7; Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 132.
104. For a convenient graphical representation of the post-Khrushchev Soviet strategic military build-up, see the CIA National Intelligence Estimate 11-3/8-76, "Soviet Forces for Intercontinental Conflict Through the Mid-1980s," 21 Dec. 1976, in Donald P. Steury, comp., *Estimates on Soviet Military Power, 1954 to 1984: A Selection* (Washington: CIA, 1994), p. 253.
105. Hershberg, "Before 'The Missiles of October,'" makes the strongest case for this possibility.
106. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 127.
107. Blight et al., *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 236–9; Quirk, *Fidel Castro*, pp. 480–3; also Carlos Lechuga, *In the Eye of the Storm: Castro, Khrushchev, Kennedy and the Missile Crisis*, trans. Mary Todd (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1995), pp. 195–211.
108. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 215–45. The paragraph that follows draws on this essay.
109. A classic analysis of this system is Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

## CHAPTER X

1. Warren I. Cohen, *America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945–1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 261.
2. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), p. 614.
3. For an illustration of the errors that can arise from trying to guess the outcome of a historical event without knowing it, see John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 133–54.

4. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) provides a good introduction to these schools of interpretation; as does Anders Stephanson, "The United States," in David Reynolds, ed., *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 23-52.
5. Two important exceptions were William H. McNeill, *America, Britain and Russia: Their Cooperation and Conflict* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970; originally published in 1953); and Louis J. Halle, *The Cold War as History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
6. See Douglas J. Macdonald, "Communist Bloc Expansion in the Early Cold War: Challenging Realism, Refuting Revisionism," *International Security* 20 (Winter 1995/6), 152-88; and, for a more general set of complaints, John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *ibid.* 17 (Winter 1992/3), 5-58. For another critique of realism from a different perspective, see John Gerard Ruggie, "The False Premise of Realism," *ibid.* 20 (Summer 1995), 62-70.
7. John Lewis Gaddis, "The Tragedy of Cold War History," *Diplomatic History* 17 (Winter 1993), 7-9, expands on this point.
8. See e.g. Halle, *The Cold War as History*, pp. 1-11.
9. Here the influence of Hans J. Morgenthau predominated, especially his *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948), which went through five subsequent editions. Other prominent "realist" analyses included Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1939); Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943); and George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy: 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).
10. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 183, 204.
11. For a similar metaphor used somewhat differently, see Marshall D. Shulman, "The Superpowers: Dance of the Dinosaurs," *Foreign Affairs* 66 ("America and the World, 1987/8"), 494.
12. Geir Lundestad, "Empire By Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952," *Journal of Peace Research* 23 (Sept. 1986), 263-77.
13. For an expanded argument, see John Lewis Gaddis, "On Moral Equivalency and Cold War History," *Ethics and International Affairs* 10 (1996), 131-48.
14. This section draws on *ibid.* 142-5, which in turn relies heavily upon Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 69-140.
15. See the interviews with Red Army officers in pt. 1 of the British television series *Messengers From Moscow*; also Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, trans. Michael B. Petrovich (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 95.
16. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, pp. 120-1.
17. I have in mind, in particular, the treatment of Cold War history in the first draft of the National History Standards and the Smithsonian Institution's abortive effort to mount an exhibit on the dropping of the atomic bomb. Both are discussed more fully in my "Moral Equivalency" article, cited above. See also, for the argument that contemporary perceptions of good and evil are inappropriate in the writing of Cold War history, Michael J. Hogan, "State of the Art: An Introduction," in Hogan, ed., *America in the World: The Historiography of*

- American Foreign Relations since 1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 4-9.
18. See the works cited in n. 9 above.
  19. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, p. 66.
  20. Kennan "long telegram" of 22 Feb. 1946, *FRUS: 1946*, vi. 709.
  21. A point made by Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 156.
  22. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 332-3.
  23. See John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).
  24. James Gleick, *Chaos: The Making of a New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987) provides a useful explanation.
  25. See Melvyn P. Leffler, "New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Spring 1995), 187-8.
  26. See the commentaries by Michael Hogan, Bruce Cumings, and (particularly surprisingly) Michael Hunt in Hogan, ed., *America in the World*, pp. 3-19, 127-39, 148-55.
  27. A point made by Leffler with respect to my own work in "New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," p. 187; as well as in "Inside Enemy Archives: The Cold War Reopened," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (July/Aug., 1996), 121.
  28. For more on this, see John Lewis Gaddis, "Peace, Legitimacy, and the Post-Cold War World: Where Do We Go From Here?" in Geir Lundestad, ed., *The Fall of Great Powers: Peace, Stability, and Legitimacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 351-68.
  29. Or so Mueller argues in *Retreat from Doomsday*, esp. pp. 3-13.
  30. I heard Gould make this point in a presentation at Ohio University in May 1994.