14 The Cold War, I

Politics and ideology

Reader's guide: The legacy of World War II. The onset of the Cold War. The course of the conflict. Soviet and US performance. Soviet failures.

Introduction: from war to peace – the consequences of World War II

The Cold War has passed into history, but the nuclear bomb and the nuclear revolution are here to stay, prospectively for ever. Between them, the bomb and the political context of the Cold War nearly brought strategic history to an abrupt full stop. The human experience in its entirety might well have been concluded violently. How did this happen? And, more to the point, why? This chapter offers a fresh look at the Soviet–American Cold War of 1947–89, while the chapter that follows pays particular attention to its historically novel nuclear dimension.

The events and non-events, but possible events, of the Cold War years comprise a contested history among scholars today (Westad, 2000; Herrman and Lebow, 2004). Almost everything about the Cold War is uncertain; at least, it is uncertain if one focuses on issues of motivation and causation. There is no solid consensus on why the Cold War began, who was most responsible for it, or why it concluded with barely a whimper with the loss of the will to power of the Soviet ruling elite in the late 1980s. Fortunately, the historical record provides some compensation for the deeper uncertainties. Even if one cannot be sure exactly why particular decisions were taken, one can secure an adequate grasp of who did what and when. Furthermore, one can proceed to ask and answer the strategist's question: so what? Deeds and their consequences are less mysterious than are motives.

One of the themes of this text is the intimate connection between war and peace, and indeed between peace and war. Peace, at least some semblance thereof, follows war. Moreover, peace of a particular character is what a war is all about. It is easy to forget this fundamental fact amid the stress, excitement and difficulties of waging war. The Cold War was a consequence of the changes in context produced by World War II. It is vital to recognize the complex authority of context. It is not quite everything, because individuals matter. But the Stalins, Kennedys and Gorbachevs must exercise their judgement, their somewhat free will, in political, socio-cultural, economic, technological,

Map 14.1 Europe after 1945

military–strategic, geographical and historical contexts for which they are largely not responsible.

Nothing in history is strictly inevitable. However, history, for all its non-linearities, is by no means a random sequence of happenings. It is plausible to argue that the Soviet–American Cold War was an inevitable or, if preferred, a highly probable outcome of the war against Germany. The old European balance of power had just been destroyed utterly – not that it had been at all healthy in the 1930s, one might add. Only two states were still standing as truly great powers. Britain, France and China were treated as great powers, but that was more attributable to habit, courtesy, convenience and interests than to real strength. In the traditional logic of international politics, when two polities stand far above the rest, sooner or later they are bound to be rivals. Much of the history of the Cold War is debatable, but there are no convincing grounds for believing that the conflict was a mistake, an accident or an avoidable product of misunderstanding. This is not to argue that Moscow and Washington understood each other at all well; they did not. But in its essentials the conflict emerged, and was prosecuted, for sound enough reasons, given the ideologies and geopolitical interests of the two potential rivals. The Cold War may have been pursued overenthusiastically, even recklessly, at times by one or both parties, but each side quite accurately viewed the other as an enemy. In terms of capabilities broadly understood – which is to say grand-strategically, not narrowly militarily – the United States and the Soviet Union correctly regarded each other as their only serious enemy on the planet. Grand strategy refers to the purposeful employment of all of the assets of a state, not only to the use of the military instrument.

Why did the Cold War happen? The most convincing answer must eschew any monocausal determinant. Instead, three structural reasons can be identified and one of human agency. The structural reasons can be summarized thus: each superpower was, globally, the sole major threat to the other; they were deadly ideological rivals; and their political differences, especially with respect to East–Central Europe, which is where the Cold War began, were non-negotiable. As for human agency, the Soviet Union was led by the immensely paranoid Joseph Stalin. For a terse forensic summary of the Cold War, it would be difficult to improve on the judgement of former British senior intelligence official Gordon S. Barrass: 'It was a toxic mix of history, ideology, geography and strategy' (Barrass, 2009: 2). When one adds the personal human element to that deadly cocktail, one is in the realm of high plausibility.

The conflict did not burst into life at a certain date, but rather emerged slowly between 1944 and 1947–8. Its emergence happened, in tactical detail, as a result of the interaction of Soviet and American behaviour. Context is not everything in strategic history, but it certainly explains, or helps explain, most things, always provided one makes due allowance for human agency and the occasional surprise. It is important to recognize fully just how significant and pervasive were the consequences of World War II. The 'peace' that came to be dominated almost immediately by the Cold War was the result of the great conflict that ended in 1945. The Cold War was not by any means made wholly in, or by, World War II, but its occurrence and much of its detail assuredly were. So, to understand the Cold War, it is necessary to view it in good part, albeit not entirely (for example, not with respect to the rival ideologies), as a consequence of World War II.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the consequences of that war for all aspects of international life in the years that followed. It may be recalled that it is a premise of this

venture in strategic history that organized violence has been, and continues to be, the most potent influence upon the course of events. Rather than simply claim as a generality the consequential sovereignty of World War II, Box 14.1 provides an itemization of the war's major consequences. This list describes the world of the Cold War. Repeatedly, this book has emphasized the consequences of war for the peace that followed. This introduction concludes by specifying the principal consequences of the very great war, or wars, waged from 1939 to 1945. Most of the fuel for the Cold War was produced by the events of those years, and Box 14.1 offers a formidable accounting of the deeds and misdeeds of global warfare. It should be emphasized that the principal consequence of World War II was the creation of the political, economic, cultural and strategic contexts both for the Cold War that did follow and for a highly nuclear World War III which might have followed.

Box 14.1 **The consequences of World War II**

World War II:

1. Resolved the 'German problem', defined as the difficulty of balancing German power, but at the price of creating a 'Soviet problem'.
2. By concluding with the utter defeat of Germany and Japan, completely destroyed the balance of power in Europe and Asia.
3. Produced a physical and ideological confrontation between two very great powers with ideologies which claimed global authority.
4. Introduced truly global politics and war.
5. Shaped a new global geopolitics and geostrategy.
6. Concluded 500 years of European domination of world politics.
7. Promoted the United States to the rank of first-class superpower, a rank it alone has held until the present day.
8. Produced in its aftermath a context of such political, economic and strategic insecurity in Europe that the United States reversed its 200-year principle of avoiding entangling alliances, especially in peacetime.
9. Enmeshed the United States in European security affairs, a condition that still obtains, through NATO, in the twenty-first century.
10. Eventually produced a uniting Europe. The European Union is an offspring of the French, Belgian, Dutch and German experiences of the war years.
11. Ended militarism in most of Europe, with the noteworthy exception of the Balkans. Any residual attractions of war that remained after 1914–18 were definitively removed by the ghastly happenings of 1939–45.
12. Conclusively delegitimized fascist ideologies, though, alas, not all fascistic practices.
13. Led to the creation of the state of Israel.
14. Produced yet another attempt, the most ambitious yet, to create a multinational institution capable of policing international order with some justice – the United Nations (UN). This was the third great power club, following the

Congress (and Concert) System of the nineteenth century and the League of Nations of the interwar years.
15. Accelerated decolonization by further delegitimizing the overseas European empires.
16. Led to the innovation of international war crimes trials.
17. Promoted the institutionalization of management tools to discipline international financial affairs, promote freer trade and encourage economic development and recovery. The institutions created under US sponsorship were the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) (popularly known as the World Bank) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).
18. Accelerated progress in both theoretical and experimental nuclear physics, to the point of their weaponization in 1945.
19. In its atomic conclusion on 6 and 9 August 1945, cast doubt upon the strategic utility of all traditional means and methods of warfare.
20. In its nuclear legacy, changed significantly the conduct and goals of foreign policy, prospectively for ever.
21. Created the largest refugee flows in history, which had the unplanned consequence of completing most of what remained to be fulfilled of the Wilsonian principle of 1919: the national self-determination of peoples.
22. Promoted rapid progress in medicine, especially in antibiotics.
23. Accelerated cultural awareness of the importance of human rights, a development made manifest in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was incorporated into the Charter of the UN in 1948.
24. Accelerated social change everywhere, as great wars invariably do – the only exception being the cases where authoritarian governments were able to resist the pressure for changes that might threaten their authority.

From cold peace to Cold War

The Nuclear Age dawned explosively almost simultaneously with the first visible stirrings of what was to become the Cold War, but that was simply a coincidence of history. The nuclear revolution was neither a cause of the Cold War nor, as a general rule, provided significant fuel for its continuance. With a few noteworthy historical exceptions, it is plausible to argue that, on balance, the nuclear dimension to the interstate competition probably made a positive contribution to international order and the avoidance of war. Today, the products of the nuclear revolution are still with us, while the Cold War (and one of its principals) is no more. However, for a long period the competition in nuclear weaponry between the United States and the Soviet Union was the primary focus and instrument of their interaction. Certainly, it seemed as if the nuclear arms race had taken on a life, and had a strategic meaning, all its own. If that were so, it was a violation of the Clausewitzian dictum which mandates the dominance of the political over the military. But when and why did the Cold War erupt – or, more accurately, emerge – among the members of the Grand Alliance against Germany and, eventually, Japan?

It is reasonable to date the Cold War from 1945, but there is a persuasive case for maintaining that it emerged and took shape gradually from August 1944 to June 1950. The former date is more contentious than is the latter, but the Soviet refusal to assist the Polish uprising against the Germans in Warsaw in August 1944 was a political marker of importance in Soviet–American relations. In fact, Soviet misbehaviour of several kinds in Poland was the single most potent source of fuel for the growing Western suspicion that their current, soon to be erstwhile, ally was going to pose a major problem for stability and order in post-war Europe. After all, Poland had been not only a friendly state but the country that had provided the trigger for British and French belligerency in September 1939. Moreover, several hundred thousand Polish soldiers either fled across the Romanian border in 1939 or were released from Soviet captivity in 1941, in both cases often to rejoin the fight against Germany. The future of Germany was of far greater political and strategic importance than was the future of Poland, but at least the Western members of the Grand Alliance had a real vote there, a vote which rested on a physical presence as well as on prior agreements. With respect to Poland, Stalin did what he wanted, regardless of promises apparently made to Roosevelt and Churchill at the summit meeting in Yalta in February 1945.

June 1950 is the most suitable month to select for the full emergence of the Cold War, because the invasion of South Korea by the North on the 25th had a near-traumatic, and certainly a galvanizing, effect upon American and some other Western opinion, policy and defence spending. The Korean invasion promoted the militarization of the Cold War as nothing before that date had done. A communist power crossed a recognized border in a campaign of conquest. That was a new development and it caused the United States and the recently established NATO (4 April 1949) to redefine their understanding of the character of threat they faced. This, though, is not to deny that America's South Korean client, Syngman Rhee, was at least as willing to invade the North as his counterpart in Pyongyang was to move south.

It is not difficult to trace the political course of mounting suspicion and outright hostility between the Soviet Union and the United States which marked the years 1944 to 1950. One needs to recognize the relatively slow-moving, but inexorable, Soviet campaign to install 'friendly' governments in those countries liberated (or conquered – the differences between the two were not always obvious) by the Red Army. The final straw which broke the camel's back of Western optimism was the Soviet staging of a coup in Prague in February 1948. The coup was completed with the murder (or assisted suicide) of Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk by the curiously characteristic Czech method of defenestration. In June 1946, Stalin had rejected the Baruch Plan to place all developments in nuclear energy under the authority of the United Nations. A year later, he had been equally negative towards the Marshall Plan. The United States had hoped that the latter plan's financial infusions would jump-start the moribund economies of devastated Europe. Seeking to demonstrate to the people in the Western zones of Berlin that they could not be protected by the Americans, the British or the French, Stalin imposed a blockade on the city on 24 June 1948. It lasted until 12 May 1949. And so it went on. Year after year, from 1944 to 1950, there was fresh evidence of ill intent on the Soviet part, evidence to which the Western powers reacted. Of course, in some cases the Soviet moves were, in their turn, reactions to what Stalin perceived, generally correctly in his terms, to be unfriendly Western acts.

But the story just outlined (selectively and in only the barest detail) was not merely one of Western perception and recognition of Soviet perfidy and aggressive purpose. From the Soviet, which is to say Stalin's, perspective, the Western powers played their role, as Moscow had expected them to do, in promoting harm to Soviet interests. The Cold War emerged by a process of interaction; it was by no means entirely a product of Western reactions to Soviet initiatives. One must hasten to add that to recognize an interactive dynamic is not to assert a moral or political equivalency between East and West. The fact that both sides contributed to the escalation of political hostility should not be permitted to obscure the evidence which points overwhelmingly to Stalin's responsibility for the onset, emergence and maturing of the Cold War. The question of blame for the Cold War carries the misleading implication that had only the most guilty party behaved better, the conflict might have been avoided, or at least greatly mitigated. Such a view is easily justifiable. Indeed, a lack of appreciation of contemporary contextual realities is apt to lead the historian blessed with hindsight seriously astray. So, it is necessary to break with the common habit among Anglo-American historians of focusing unduly upon the world as it appeared to Western leaders in the mid- and late 1940s. How did the world appear to Joseph Stalin in the autumn of 1945?

His armies had done most of the fighting and most of the dying. But while the Soviet Union had suffered approximately 27 million fatalities, only 9.5 million of them had been military. Stalin and his countrymen believed they were owed revenge, recompense and guarantees of future security. As a result, the Soviet Union plundered, looted and generally added to the existing devastation in Central Europe, especially, though not exclusively, in Germany. Obviously, the Red Army's misbehaviour did nothing to commend it as a liberating force to those who might otherwise have been inclined to regard it favourably. It was now in place in Central Europe; indeed, it was as far west as the Elbe. As the armies of the United States and Britain melted away by demobilization – or, in the British case, were diverted to strenuous end-of-empire duties in South Asia and the Middle East – the Russians became militarily ever more dominant in Europe. The Red Army was there by right of conquest, and increasingly it was unchallenged and even unchallengeable. American forces in Europe were shrinking rapidly in the summer of 1945 because of demobilization and a wholesale switching of military focus to the Pacific, in preparation for the anticipated invasion of Japan.

The political context for Soviet power and influence in Europe looked distinctly promising. The communist parties in France and Italy, to give the prime examples, were close to achieving national power. Indeed, throughout Europe, and even to some useful degree in Britain and the United States, the Soviet Union was understandably popular as the principal conqueror of Nazi Germany. And one should not forget that the Western Allies had praised 'Uncle Joe' Stalin for four years, presenting him to their publics as a rather cuddly, if somewhat strict, warrior against Nazi evil. They had even described the Soviet Union as a democracy 'of a kind'. Readers have already been warned that whenever the basic idea of democracy is enriched by some qualifying word or phrase, it is usually a safe bet to assume that the authors of the qualification should not be trusted. More, invariably, is less when it comes to adjectival elaboration on democracy.

On the evidence of deeds, as well as from the archives that have been opened, it is reasonably clear that Stalin neither sought nor expected a Cold War with the West. Certainly, he did not anticipate an intense forty-five-year struggle focused upon military

high technology. However, he was committed to a policy of security consolidation in Europe for the Soviet Union, including the expansion of Soviet influence, where feasible. That commitment ran a high risk of triggering hostile Western responses, but Stalin was not a reckless gambler; in his style, he was far removed from his fellow dictator, Adolf Hitler. Stalin was not a gangster in a hurry but the guardian, and conveniently the sole authoritative interpreter, of a political doctrine which provided understanding, guidance and high expectations for the future. Few people in the West, in 1945 or since, seemed to appreciate that in Stalin's mind the Soviet Union was always at war with the capitalist powers. But that ideological fact did not preclude any necessary measures of expedient tactical flexibility – witness the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939. Furthermore, communist doctrine insisted that the leading capitalist states, though the deadly enemies of the Soviet Union, would fight among themselves for a dominant share of world markets. In the immediate post-war years, Stalin sincerely expected Anglo-American relations to deteriorate to the point of active hostilities for reason of economic rivalry. With a misplaced confidence borne of his ideological convictions, he believed that the Soviet Union would be the beneficiary of a series of inter-capitalist conflicts in the post-war world. He had harboured the same illusion in 1939, when he expected to be able to sit out a lengthy and exhausting struggle between Germany and the Anglo-French Alliance.

What did all of this mean for East–West relations? It is obvious that serious misunderstandings hampered accurate assessments by both sides. Stalin's Soviet Union, courtesy of a fallacious theory of historical change, mistakenly anticipated war among the capitalists. Liberal America and socialist Britain did not appreciate that their former Soviet ally regarded itself as being permanently in a state of war with them. Of course, that was a state that could be, and had been, at least semi-suspended for immediate tactical reasons from 1941 until 1944, or possibly early 1945. Stalin assumed that American and British policy-makers regarded the Soviet Union much as he regarded their countries. Such is the power of ideology to provide cultural assumptions that mislead.

Although Stalin had no intention of launching the Cold War, he never had any intention of cooperating with the Western Allies either, except when it suited his calculation of Soviet interests – and those interests did not mesh well with Western hopes. It is true that the United States took actions and launched policy initiatives that were regarded in Moscow as threatening to Soviet interests. The most serious of these pertained to the governance of Germany and, especially, to the prospective economic recovery of Europe through the Marshall Plan that was announced in 1947 and passed by Congress the following year. Stalin correctly identified American proposals for a UN monopoly of atomic technology as a threat to Soviet achievement of technical equivalence. He was also right in his reading of US and British moves to organize their zones of occupation in Germany as a threat to his plans to communize the whole of that country. Furthermore, he was surely correct in identifying the Marshall Plan as a deadly menace to Soviet political and economic intentions in East–Central Europe.

It is easy to find Soviet and Western initiatives which, by a process of interaction, fed suspicions, confirmed fears and reinforced ideological convictions. But the details of Soviet–American relations in the immediate post-war years really did not greatly matter. Mistakes were made by both sides, some conflicts probably could have been avoided, but, overall, a context of general hostility and antagonism was unavoidable. Although there

was fault on both sides, the record is clear enough in revealing that Stalin, personally, was principally responsible for what came to be known as the Cold War. However, one needs to add that regardless of the character of the Soviet leader, it was never likely that the two greatest powers left standing in 1945 would be able to forge a cooperative relationship for the joint ordering of a secure post-war world. When the logic of realpolitik is added to the unhelpful incompatibility of two ideologies with global pretensions – communism and democratic capitalism – the onset of the Cold War becomes anything but mysterious (Gray, 2009).

Into this political context intruded the military novelty of atomic weapons. Just when Soviet military power peaked in 1945, as indeed had American, the appearance of the atomic bomb threatened to alter all previous strategic calculations. But for four years, while the Soviet Union strove with maximum effort to recapture lost scientific and technological ground in the weaponization of nuclear physics, Western countries did not identify Moscow primarily as a military threat. The existence of the American atomic bomb proved a potent source of reassurance. In fact, it served almost as a talisman that seemed to preclude the necessity for rigorous thought about military strategy. Given the unprecedentedly destructive character of atomic weapons, one must be sympathetic to those in the late 1940s who were uncertain as to what the new weapons of mass destruction portended for future warfare.

Politically, though not militarily, the Cold War was up and running in the West by 1947. President Truman had proclaimed his expansive doctrine of supporting free people everywhere in March of that year. In June, Secretary of State George Marshall was persuaded, if not bullied, by the British to turn his rhetoric into a definite plan for European economic recovery and reconstruction. Both of those momentous policy initiatives were plainly anti-Soviet in purpose, though the Marshall Plan made sense regardless of the anti-Soviet dimension to American reasoning. Meanwhile, Stalin proceeded slowly but surely to secure his new empire in East–Central Europe, with the subordination of Czechoslovakia in February 1948 comprising the final move. His greatest disappointment was the failure to render the whole of Germany open to political control by a Soviet-directed communist – or more probably a left-leaning coalition ('popular front' – the noun is sincere, the adjective is not) – government. It should not be forgotten that Germany held the central place in the international politics of the period. In addition to its appalling record of repeated aggression, it was the geopolitical centre of Europe as well as the most highly industrialized country in the region, which meant that it had a large working class to whom the logic of Marxism should appeal. In addition, Germany was the birthplace of the ideology that provided legitimacy for the rule of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and of its General Secretary, Joseph Stalin. Last but not least, geostrategically, Germany was the meeting place of Soviet and American arms.

By 1949, the Cold War was a fact, though the conflict was yet to be pursued in its military dimension with the diligence that came to characterize the years after 1950. Stalin had failed to intimidate the West or the Germans with his blockade of Berlin, but inadvertently he had greatly assisted those who were organizing what became the NATO Alliance. The bare bones of what was to become an impressive structure were created on 4 April 1949 in Washington. Then, in September of that year, the new Federal Republic of Germany was created out of the former American, British and French zones of occupation. Soviet schemes to add what was to become West Germany, as well as West

Berlin, to its security barrier had failed conclusively. There is a great deal of merit in the following claim by historian Vojtech Mastny, passing sensible judgement on what he has seen with the benefit of hindsight:

> Meeting the Soviet threat as a moral challenge was congenial to the American mentality. What was not congenial was doing so over a prolonged period of time, with self-restraint and by avoiding military force to achieve a clear decision. In view of these limitations, the Marshall Plan and NATO were monuments to creative and imaginative statesmanship which in effect decided the outcome of the Cold War already by 1949, although the accomplishment would not become clear until all was over.
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> (Mastny, 1996: 196)

One should add that even though Mastny's argument is persuasive, the NATO 'victory' that was essentially secured in the late 1940s was contingent upon prudence in political and military behaviour by potentially fallible individual actors. So it may be more accurate to say that the Marshall Plan of 1947 and NATO in 1949 *enabled* the Cold War to be won, rather than that those wise policy measures *achieved* the grand success that was to become indisputable only after forty dangerous years had been survived.

The Cold War reconsidered

The plot

It would be convenient and satisfying were one able to identify a simple, one-dimensional master narrative which could explain the origins, outbreak, course and outcome of the Cold War. But one cannot. Historical perspective is still lacking for a conflict that concluded as recently as 1989 (or 25 December 1991 – the date of the formal dissolution of the USSR). Nevertheless, the accumulating body of multinational scholarship on the Cold War does lead to a few important, if as yet tentative, conclusions (Barrass, 2009; Gaddis, 2006; Gorlizki and Khlevniuk, 2004; Westad, 2000). It is useful to cite these explicitly before discussing the course of the conflict in detail. The events of 1947–89 are easier to comprehend once the plot of the Cold War is laid bare.

1. The conflict was about both ideology and geopolitics. Any explanation which effectively excludes either factor is fatally flawed.
2. It is not difficult to fault Stalin for his apparent policy turn early in 1946 towards non-cooperation with the Western Allies. But that turn was certain to happen, given that Western policies, especially towards Germany, were contrary to the Soviet definition of Soviet interests. Stalin, admittedly, was exceptionally paranoid, but it is highly improbable that any other Soviet leader of the period would have chosen to cooperate with the West in the reconstruction of Europe along lines favoured in Washington. Although Stalin died in 1953, the Cold War persisted until 1989. Had the conflict been strictly Stalin's personal project, it is likely that one or other of his successors would have managed to wind it down long before the 1980s.
3. It is clear enough from the evidence that neither side wanted war. It is also quite apparent that both genuinely believed they had good reason to fear attack. Ideologically and

geopolitically, the United States and the Soviet Union truly were enemies. Their reciprocated perceptions of enmity were correct. It was but a short step from enemy identification to the anticipation of threat, and then to the suspicion of malign conditional intention to take hostile military action. By mid-1950, at the latest, both sides had added military threat to the political menace that their ideologies defined for them.

4. In common with all wars, the Cold War was a duel. It was a protracted struggle that had periods of both greater and lesser political tension. Above all else, though, it proceeded by interaction. This popular, rather obvious, point lends itself to misunderstanding. Not everything about East–West relations from 1947 to 1989 can be explained in terms of interaction. The two superpowers, with their friends and allies generally in policy attendance, though sometimes in advance or behind on policy, behaved according to their own socio-cultural characters and in ways that fitted what each understood to be its geopolitical interests. However, that behaviour was shaped by a context of overarching conflict, and it was always liable to influence from initiatives emerging from the other side.
5. Despite the fact that neither party desired war, the Cold War was extraordinarily dangerous. It is probably just as well that a non-war outcome was the product of several mutually supporting factors, because the protagonists played with the most deadly of fires for forty years. The armed forces of East and West were permanently in contact on land in Central Europe, and they frequently harassed each other at sea and in the air. Also, the great engines of nuclear destruction that both sides constructed could not be 100 per cent proofed against accident, technical malfunction, command failure, launch by miscalculation or simple bad luck. If a nuclear strike on a modest scale had evolved rapidly into a nuclear 'exchange', it would probably have been impossible to arrest the process of escalation short of utter, general devastation. For example, a recent 'insider' history of the Cold War tells us that on 26 September 1983 a faulty computer on a Soviet early warning satellite detected the launch of five US intercontinental ballistic missiles. That led to a 'Missile Attack' warning on the Soviet threat board. In fact, the satellite had mistaken 'bursts of sunlight reflecting off clouds above Montana' for the light and heat of missile launches. Fortunately, Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov gambled that it was a false alarm and aborted the Soviet crisis response. Had he not done so, the gravely ill Soviet leader Yuri Andropov might well have ordered a massive strike on the United States (Barrass, 2009: 1–2). It goes without saying that this episode, unknown in the West until the late 1990s, was highly dangerous.

The adventurous leadership of Nikita Khrushchev

It is generally agreed that the Cold War divides fairly neatly into two periods: before and after the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. That shocking event, the most dangerous in all of human history, scared all of the participants on both sides (with the exception of Fidel Castro), not to mention their respective general publics. It brought home to everyone, as nothing quite had previously, just how necessary it was for the superpowers to exercise more self-discipline in both policy and actual military behaviour. Also, the crisis demonstrated the necessity of maintaining greater control over one's armed forces

and, in the Soviet case, over the actions of a local ally. It suggested to the frightened people in Moscow and Washington that limited amounts of cooperation, especially with respect to the provision of emergency means of crisis communication, as well as adoption of a generally more cautious style in foreign policy, were long overdue. On the Soviet side, Nikita Khrushchev's peers decided that the Cold War was far too perilous to be directed from Moscow by his impulsive adventurism. They had a long list of complaints about his leadership, but the brush with catastrophe in October 1962 was simply too much for them. However, Khrushchev survived in power until 14 October 1964, when he was permitted to retire to write his memoirs.

From 1958 until 1961, Khrushchev, acting under severe pressure from the all too independent Walter Ulbricht, had repeatedly threatened to sign a peace treaty with East Germany and pass control of East Berlin to his German satellite-ally. Thanks to a wartime agreement and to the final course of the war, Berlin was marooned as a four-power island deep inside what became the German Democratic Republic (a reluctant Soviet creation, to match the Federal Republic of Germany). It had not featured as an East–West flash-point since Stalin abandoned his blockade of the city in May 1949, but in the 1950s, geopolitically and geostrategically, it was a crisis waiting to be recreated and exploited.

West Berlin was NATO's most vulnerable asset. The city was literally indefensible, except by nuclear deterrence or in the context of actual nuclear use. To the relief of most thoughtful observers, Khrushchev reluctantly agreed to the building of a wall to seal off West Berlin from East Germany and East Berlin, and thereby prevent the undesirable emigration of East Germans from their dismal 'workers' state'. The Berlin Wall began to go up on 13 August 1961. Many in the West interpreted this as an aggressive Soviet move, intended to apply pressure upon West Germany, but really it was quite the opposite. The wall was a desperate measure to plug the hole through which East Germany was losing too many of its most educated people. Its construction was a humiliating confession of the failure of East Germany to hold its 'best and brightest', but Central Europe was considerably safer as a result of its appearance. The brutal material isolation of West Berlin at least foreclosed upon most, though not quite all, possibilities of accidental armed conflict erupting in the city.

Although the Cold War endured for forty-four years, with only two exceptions there was no direct clash of arms between the superpowers – and even those exceptions were unacknowledged by both sides. First, there were the air battles over North Korea between US and Soviet fighter pilots from 1950 to 1953. Second, there was heavy combat from 1965 to 1973 between US aircraft and Soviet crews manning some of the air-defence missile systems that protected North Vietnam. But, by and large, the Cold War was prosecuted indirectly by both sides, through local proxies in the Third World. This was because both sides considered it unduly risky to pursue conflict in Europe. The two Asian clashes aside, direct US–Soviet competition was restricted to a furious arms race. However, to their surprise, scholars have discovered since the end of the Cold War that Khrushchev's dominant motive for introducing intermediate and medium-range ballistic missiles into Cuba in 1962 was not to boost Soviet strength in the central balance of strategic nuclear power, but to render Cuba invasion-proof, and to encourage the spread of communism in Latin America (Gaddis, 2006: 75–7).

At the time, policy-makers in the Kennedy administration could not imagine that Moscow would take such a risky initiative on behalf of a distant client state. But those

American policy-makers did not know just how risk tolerant Soviet policy had become. While their attention was focused on the missiles that could reach the United States, they were blissfully unaware that Moscow had already deployed 162 tactical nuclear weapons on Cuba. A US invasion therefore probably would have been met with a local nuclear response. This reflected a failure of empathy with the Soviet worldview, or at least with the view of Khrushchev.

Despite its increasingly parlous economic condition from the 1960s to the 1980s, the Soviet Union devoted substantial resources to supporting unpromising clients in Asia and Africa. Sometimes the prime motive was simply to keep pace with China as a competitor, as in Vietnam, but elsewhere it was just poor judgement, as in the Horn of Africa. Moscow discovered that its role as ideological leader in a world that contained an erratic but active communist China obliged it to meet at least the minimum expectations of its allies for assistance. For example, the protracted Cuban adventure in Angola in the mid-1970s was an especially unwelcome drain on Soviet resources that Moscow had little option other than to suffer. To policy-makers in the West, the Soviet interventions in Ethiopia in 1977 (in opposition to its former client, Somalia) and Angola in 1976 were not interpreted as they should have been – as reluctant bowing to Cuban pressure – but rather as bold Soviet geopolitical moves. Moscow had its eyes on possible communist rule in Lisbon, not Luanda. But one of the genuine revelations of recent scholarship on the Cold War is the extent to which both superpowers were manipulated by their allies (Gaddis, 2006: 134). One of the lessons of strategic history is that alliance leaders are expected to look after their dependent allies. Recall that one of the reasons why Germany went to war in 1914 was the perceived necessity not to leave Austria-Hungary unsupported against Russia.

Détente

There were periods of lesser tension. Those years sparked speculation at the time and since to the effect that opportunities may have existed, but remained unexploited, to bring the Cold War to an early end. But it is improbable that there were any such genuine opportunities from 1947 to 1989. Although the two sides coexisted with few strategic alarms, especially after October 1962, the ideological contest was hard fought and mutually inalienable. Furthermore, the geopolitical confrontation in Europe did not allow for any disengagement by either side that would be judged safe. The first period of détente – a lessening of tension – characterized the mid-1950s (though the French term was not in general currency until the 1970s), and was occasioned by the new post-Stalin, somewhat collective Soviet leadership. In 1956, at the Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow (14–25 February), Khrushchev attacked Stalin's record and announced the new policy of 'peaceful coexistence'. These bold departures had unexpectedly destabilizing consequences in Eastern Europe, especially in Hungary and Poland. The disorder in the former escalated uncontrollably until a thoroughgoing revolution was under way. East–West détente could not survive the subsequent Soviet suppression of the revolt in November 1956. That Soviet military response was followed by its first experiment with rocket diplomacy when it threatened Britain and France with nuclear missiles unless they evacuated their troops from Egypt, a new Soviet client. It was all bluff by Moscow, but in the context of the action in Hungary it was more than sufficient to cast a further chill over East–West relations.

Détente prospered again in the 1960s and 1970s, albeit with occasional setbacks and some difficulty, given the political and strategic context of the US war in South Vietnam and Soviet (nominally Warsaw Pact) military intervention in Czechoslovakia on 20 August 1968. While the post-Khrushchev Soviet leadership team of Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin tentatively improved relations with the United States, the American half of the détente process was busy bombing communist North Vietnam. Allowing a decent interval of fifteen months to pass after the Soviet intervention in Prague, the new Nixon administration permitted an innovative process of strategic arms limitation talks (SALT) to begin in November 1969. While Soviet relations with its former ally and supposed ideological soulmate China had deteriorated to the point of actual combat along the Ussuri River in the Far East in March 1969, its relations with the United States gradually warmed. In fact, they warmed to such a degree that Moscow even suggested joint military action against China. The United States, led by the geopolitically astute Richard Nixon and his equally skilful right-hand man, Henry Kissinger (initially as National Security Adviser, later as Secretary of State), deftly played triangular and 'linkage' Cold War politics. They pursued détente not only with Moscow but, from 1972, and to most of the world's surprise, with China.

The Soviet–American détente of the early 1970s registered its most signal achievement with the SALT agreements of May 1972. These comprised a five-year interim agreement constraining further growth in the number of missile 'launchers', and an ABM (anti-ballistic missile) Treaty that prohibited defence of the superpowers' homelands, although ABM deployment at a single site was allowed. However, the ink was scarcely dry on what became known as SALT I before the political context which sustained détente began to deteriorate. (SALT I was so labelled because it was intended to be succeeded within five years by a more enduring SALT II.)

The dominant narrative of the Cold War in the 1970s was a combination of the return of acute distrust on the American part and evidence of a gradual slackening of grip and loss of judgement on the Soviet side. The SALT I package proved exceptionally controversial in the United States. Anti-détente opinion in Washington sought to embarrass both US and Soviet governments over Moscow's dreadful human rights record. That determination, focused especially upon the issue of Soviet policy towards Jewish emigration, secured a historic victory which was to have unexpectedly far-reaching results. It achieved reluctant Soviet endorsement of the human rights provisions of the accord produced by the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe on 1 August 1975. The conference had been up and running – well, ambling – since September 1973.

It is ironic that this conference was greatly favoured by the Soviet Union, because Soviet policy-makers saw it, as they saw détente as a whole, as a significant endorsement of the permanence of the status quo in Europe. In practice, inadvertently, the Soviet Union signed up to a standard of behaviour towards the rights of individuals to which it could be held embarrassingly by critical domestic monitoring groups. At the time, in 1975, cynical geopoliticians in the West assumed that the Helsinki Accords were simply empty verbiage. Meanwhile, the critics of détente were unhappy that so blatant a violator of human rights as the Soviet Union should be allowed to be a party to an agreement on standards of behaviour that it was certain to ignore. They were all wrong. Kissinger, by then Secretary of State, was to comment, 'Rarely has a diplomatic process so illuminated the limitations of human foresight' (Kissinger, 1999: 635). The 'Final Act' (on human

rights) of the Helsinki Accords sowed seeds that were to grow in both the Soviet Union and the rest of Eastern Europe, until they became a significant factor threatening to destabilize the imperium.

The SALT process limped on through the 1970s until, in 1979, a draft treaty emerged that was both exceedingly complex and highly controversial. However, despite the historically unusual public attention that strategic arms control attracted in those years, the real story was political, not military–technical. While experts debated the fine print of a strategic arms limitation treaty, and the problems of its verification, the political climate deteriorated from bad, to worse, to impossible. The United States was not in a mood to be active in the world in the 1970s. Congress had pulled the plug on the executive's ability to assist or even provide military resupply to America's established political clients in South East Asia. It had also passed a War Powers Act on 7 November 1973 which, in theory at least, greatly constrained the President's freedom of action to employ force at his own discretion as Commander-in-Chief. And America was badly wounded in two further ways as a Cold War competitor in the 1970s. First, there was the collapse of the US strategic mission in Vietnam; and, second, there was the self-destruction of presidential authority when the Nixon presidency imploded and was destroyed by the Watergate scandal. Nixon resigned on 10 August 1974, rather than face impeachment.

The fragile détente of the early 1970s was stressed to breaking point by political developments on both sides and by the interaction between them. The White House lacked authority in the wake of Watergate, and the United States generally was content to lick its wounds, both the self-inflicted ones and the other kind, such as those suffered in Vietnam. America's client in Saigon finally fell to a North Vietnamese military offensive on 30 April 1975. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was producing a new generation of long-range ballistic missiles and appeared determined to achieve some variant of strategic superiority. Whether such a condition was militarily possible, and whether it would be politically or strategically exploitable, was debatable, and was duly debated acrimoniously in Washington.

Soviet foreign policy was highly active. For the first time, the Soviet Union was assisting clients and allies in Africa (especially, as has been said, in Ethiopia and Angola). This new activism, and demonstration of long-distance logistical competence, helped sour the political context of Soviet–American relations. The new Carter administration, which succeeded Gerald Ford's caretaker government in January 1977, attempted to keep détente alive, but it proved to be an impossible mission. The final straw was the extremely ill-judged Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. With exquisitely awful timing, the Soviet Union invaded on 25 December with 75,000 troops and murdered its own client leader, Hafizullah Amin, who was believed to be ineffective. The SALT process, which by then had produced the SALT II Treaty, was dead in the water, at least for a while. Soviet–American relations sank to their lowest point since the heyday of Khrushchev's missile diplomacy in 1958–62. In the presidential election of 1980, both candidates, President Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, in effect ran against the Soviet Union.

Contributing to the mood of international crisis in Washington was the fall of the Shah of Iran on 16 January 1979. Iran had been America's principal client in the Gulf, and the assumption of power on 12 February by an Islamic fundamentalist regime led by the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini did not augur at all well for the prospects of that continuing. The seizure of the US Embassy in Teheran on 3 November 1979, and as a

consequence the taking of sixty-three (principally) American hostages, convinced many Americans that their superpower was impotent while it was in the unsteady, if well-meaning, hands of Jimmy Carter.

From crisis to collapse: the 1980s

The crisis of public confidence in leadership in the United States that led to the election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980 was dwarfed by the protracted leadership crisis in Moscow. Between November 1982 and March 1985 the Soviet Union had no fewer than four leaders. Leonid Brezhnev, who had been visibly ailing for several years, finally succumbed to a heart attack on 10 November 1982. He was succeeded by the head of the KGB, the gifted but similarly ailing Yuri Andropov, who died on 9 February 1984. Next, and emphatically least, an apparatchik of no known distinction, Konstantin Chernenko, reigned (one can hardly say ruled) for barely thirteen months, until on 10 March 1985 he too succumbed to the ravages of age, illness and the Soviet lifestyle. Which led to the fateful – and, for the Soviet Union, fatal – stewardship of the Politburo's agricultural expert, Mikhail Gorbachev.

While it was musical chairs in the Kremlin, the Cold War passed through a period of exceptional peril. Indeed, the period from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan until the elevation of Gorbachev has been labelled 'the second Cold War'. But that characterization, though somewhat merited, is probably misleading. There was no first or second Cold War; there was only a single conflict, albeit one with periods of lower and higher tension. The period from December 1979 until March 1985 was a case of the latter. Indeed, the political tension between the superpowers became so acute that the Soviet government persuaded itself that the hostile rhetoric from the Reagan administration signalled an intention to launch an attack. In May 1981, Soviet intelligence agencies were placed on the highest alert status, charged with identifying warning signs of an anticipated attack (Pry, 1999: ch. 2). This paranoid condition, of which the United States and NATO were blissfully, if dangerously, unaware, produced a unilateral crisis of the most severe kind in 1983. An annual US and NATO military command exercise, codenamed 'Able Archer 83' (2–11 November), was misinterpreted by some suspicious elements in Moscow as being preparatory to an attack. The crisis passed, but it could have led to World War III. Evidence of the shortness of the fuse to military action in Moscow in 1983 had already been provided on 1 September, when Soviet air defences shot down a South Korean civilian Boeing 747 (KAL007). It had been mistaken for a US reconnaissance aircraft. This event also had the potential to trigger a military confrontation.

Individuals can make a vital difference to the course of history. It is true that their options will be limited by the contexts in which they find themselves, but still they usually have choices. For two potent reasons, the Soviet Union could not possibly win the Cold War: it was thoroughly outclassed economically by the United States, and its ideology dictated a character of political, economic and social organization that did not work adequately. The ideology, the Marxist theory of historical change, that it bore was false. However, although the Soviet Union had no prospect of winning the Cold War, a fact not recognized in Moscow until the early 1980s, it certainly had the military means to guarantee that the United States would not win either. The world has reason to be grateful to Gorbachev for his brave willingness to face the facts of Soviet incapacity, to

seek systemic remedies and to eschew desperate military measures in an attempt to hold on to the Soviet Empire and buy time for domestic reform to effect some miracle cure for his country's ills.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Cold War ended gradually between 1987 and 1989 because Mikhail Gorbachev decided to end it. A twofold explanation is required. First, Gorbachev recognized, as indeed did almost everybody else in the Soviet Union, that the Soviet system had proved an abysmal failure: it had not delivered the good life predicted by theory and promised by politicians. This undeniable comprehensive failure did not merely have implications for policy; in addition, it had the most traumatic meaning for the legitimacy of the Soviet Union itself. The state and the character of its rule rested wholly on the presumed infallibility of Marxist theory. But by the 1980s, if not earlier, it was almost impossible to argue convincingly against claims that the ideology behind the state was wrong. It had been proved false by history. The capitalist powers had not fought among themselves, as the ideology insisted they must, and those powers had outperformed the Soviet Union economically to a degree that could no longer be explained away glibly. In order to maintain its strategic military position as a worthy superpower competitor, since the 1960s the Soviet Union had shifted scarce resources, especially talented individuals, from the civilian to the military sector of the economy. The result, predictably, was an ever more embarrassing decline in the Soviet standard of living.

Coming to power in March 1985, Gorbachev first attempted to reform the Soviet system, but a combination of his own limitations and, of greater significance, the resistance of the system to radical change foredoomed the effort. His novel watchwords of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, openness and restructuring, could not point the way to the rescue of the system. Gorbachev had been a fairly slow learner. For example, when a reactor at Chernobyl exploded on 26 April 1986, Soviet citizens heard the truth only from Western broadcasts which exposed the lies that Moscow was telling its people about the accident. Nevertheless, it is to Gorbachev's credit that eventually he recognized the impracticality of reform and decided that instead the entire basis and character of Soviet rule and life must alter. He abandoned the ideology that both legitimized the authority of the Communist Party, of which he was General Secretary, and mandated permanent hostility to the capitalist powers. The change of course in Moscow was flagged by the signing of the long-languishing treaty on intermediate-range nuclear forces on 8 December 1987. Suddenly, with Moscow determined no longer to be an enemy of the West, arms control agreements became negotiable. When the political context warms, the barriers to agreement that render substantive arms control agreements a forlorn hope simply fade away (as, one might note, does most of the need for those agreements).

The Cold War did not end on some magic date, any more than it had begun on a particular day. It is convenient and plausible, however, to pick 9 November 1989 as a date of extraordinary significance. That was when the Berlin Wall was breached as a result of popular pressure, both political and physical. Gorbachev had decided that the Soviet imperium in Eastern Europe was an expensive drag upon, and political embarrassment to, an impoverished Soviet Union. Contrary to much Western commentary at the time, the intervention in Czechoslovakia in August 1968 had been a sign of weakness, not strength. It was not attractive for a superpower that was just attaining strategic nuclear parity with the United States to be seen coercing its Czech client into maintaining good behaviour. It was noticeable that when the Solidarity trade union movement created a revolutionary

situation in Poland in 1981, the Soviet Union decided not to take control of events itself by military means. The so-called Brezhnev Doctrine, which held that once a state was communist it must remain communist – on pain of enforcement by Soviet arms (recall Hungary in 1956) – was dead and buried a year before its author went the same way.

Some interim judgements

The beginning of the Cold War was not at all surprising. The combination of antagonistic ideologies, geopolitics, the personalities of Stalin and Truman and the historical context of victory in World War II made Soviet–American rivalry as close to inevitable as anything in the history of international relations could be. But, in contrast, the conclusion to the struggle was as extraordinary as it was unexpected. The 1980s began with several years of intense verbal fencing between Moscow and Washington, with a large escalation in the level of American defence spending and a coordinated US grand strategy to put pressure on the Soviet economy. Washington had considerable success in depressing the price of oil, thereby draining Moscow's convertible currency reserves and causing trouble for Soviet clients in Asia, Africa and Central America. The decade concluded with the leader of the Soviet Union, a man scarcely known in the West in 1980, abandoning the ideology that legitimized the state. Gorbachev left Soviet client states on their own to make peace with their peoples if they could, and he abandoned the forty-plus years of enmity with the United States. Remarkably, although the Soviet economy was in a terrible condition, the state and its essential services were still functioning, and by the mid-1980s the country's military power was more formidable than it had ever been. Gorbachev ended the Cold War as a discretionary act, not out of immediate desperation. Another leader – any of Gorbachev's three immediate predecessors, for example – probably would have attempted to maintain the Soviet Union on its steady course to economic ruin. Moreover, they might well not have left the satraps in Eastern Europe to find their own salvation if they could.

It is unusual in strategic history for great empires that have not suffered military catastrophe or domestic revolution simply to stand down from international competition. The West had been right to worry that if the Soviet Union did implode politically, for whatever reasons, the consequences could well include interstate warfare. During the Cold War it was an article of faith among Western security experts that the rule of the Soviet Communist Party, the maintenance of political control, was the highest value of the Soviet state. And that article of Western faith came to be reflected in the nuclear war plans of the United States. In the late 1970s, US nuclear strategy was partially reoriented towards being able to menace the Soviet political control structure as a discrete target set (for example, central government and party relocation 'bunkers' away from Moscow in provincial cities).

What had it been about? How could a virtual 'war' that endured for more than forty years end so tamely? Had it all been a dreadful mistake? If the Soviet Union could collapse so precipitately, so unexpectedly and with so little violence, had it really been the formidable menace that the Western powers had assumed for so many years?

It is too soon to make truly confident judgements about many aspects of the Cold War's origins, course and conclusion. But one is in a position to offer some interim opinions. Also, given that the Russian story, as well as the nuclear era, in world politics is far from over, it is necessary to do one's best to understand what happened and why. While

admitting readily their controversial nature, this chapter now offers five broad points which attempt to explain the course and outcome of the Cold War.

First, the Soviet Union and its empire imploded for reasons of internal weakness. With respect to the delivery of goods and services to its citizens, the Soviet Union was a failed state whose failure provided demonstrable proof that the official ideology was unsound. Since the infallibility of Marxist ideology was the basis for the legitimacy of the state, its failure had to call into question the system of government, and especially the right to rule of the Communist Party, supposedly the vanguard of the proletariat.

Second, it is relevant to ask whether the Soviet Union fell in the 1980s because of its own weakness or because it was pushed (Barrass, 2009). The answer would seem to be that although the Soviet system was doomed to lose an economic competition with a democratic capitalist rival, American competitive moves, particularly in the military and economic fields, aggravated Soviet domestic problems. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the robust rhetoric and policies of the Reagan administration were responsible for the Soviet demise, but one should give some credit to US policy and strategy for accentuating the crisis that Gorbachev initially sought to meet with reform, and later to answer with systemic change.

Third, although the Soviet Union had competed effectively with the United States in military power throughout the Cold War years, by the 1980s the true limitations of its economy and its system of central planning were revealed by the emergence of the Information Age in the West. If any one thing condemned the Soviet Union to defeat in the Cold War, it was the computer. Moscow lacked a vibrant civilian economy to explore and exploit information technologies, while its effective, if scarcely efficient, defence industrial sector lagged behind that of the United States by a generation or two in the crucial field of electronics. Militarily, and therefore strategically, this meant that by the 1980s senior Soviet soldiers were anticipating critical technical shortfalls. It seemed as if the West's lead in computer technology, when translated into military effectiveness, would enable the development of what Soviet military theorists called 'reconnaissance-strike complexes'. Soviet armour would be massacred at a distance by smart conventional sub-munitions delivered by missile or by long-range artillery shells. The menace of the Soviet armoured *Blitzkrieg* would be cancelled by Western technology.

Fourth, the United States performed well and generally responsibly during the forty years of the conflict. One can see today that the Soviet threat probably was overestimated, but there were plausible contemporary reasons for that error. The American doctrine of 'containment', with its origins in the famous 'Long Telegram' (an 8,000-word cable) sent from Moscow by American diplomat George F. Kennan on 22 February 1946, provided conceptual navigation for the struggle (Etzold and Gaddis, 1978: 50–63). On balance, with the benefit of hindsight, one may judge that Kennan exaggerated the need for the Soviet imperium to expand, and hence he overstated the necessity to contain Soviet power and influence. But when one bears in mind the historical context of his message, his emphasis upon the need to resist Soviet political expansion becomes entirely understandable. In 1946, pre-Marshall Plan Europe was an economic ruin alive with active communist parties seeking power. Truman's America, and indeed Attlee's Britain, correctly identified Stalin's Soviet Union as an enemy. That enemy came to be defined heavily in military terms only after the shock of the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950. In reaction to the war that followed, NATO was reshaped and developed as a

notably military, as well as a political, alliance deploying forces for an integrated multinational defence. Eventually, from 1955, that defence included (initially controversially) a German contribution. American defence expenditure tripled, a fact which enabled the Strategic Air Command to procure the new all-jet B-47 and then B-52 medium- and long-range bombers, respectively. Stalin therefore had much to regret about his decision to allow Kim Il-sung to invade the South in June 1950.

For forty years the United States performed the containment function, though whether the Soviet Union required much containing is a controversial matter. American policy, even if occasionally indiscriminately overactive in its anti-communism and prone to confuse nationalist sentiment with Soviet or Chinese influence, was prosecuted at bearable economic cost at home and in a military manner that was at least safe enough, vis-à-vis nuclear dangers. This is not to ignore American mistakes, particularly in the Middle East, South East Asia and Central America, but it is to claim that, as a country with no history of protracted conflict in peacetime, indeed with no prior history of intense involvement in world security politics except during periods of declared war, the United States performed competently or better, if not always admirably. When one considers the historical record, it is important not to judge contemporary leaders in terms of a standard of perfection. Historical figures should be assessed only with reference to what they could know at the time, as well as with some empathy for normal human frailties.

Fifth, nuclear war was a real possibility, so much so that many officials and commentators occasionally viewed it as a probability. There is no way of knowing whether the latent menace of nuclear weapons kept the Cold War cold. On the one hand, according to the available evidence, neither side was ever motivated to launch an attack. That should mean that nuclear deterrence was never actively in play to discourage military action. On the other, had there been no nuclear dimension to East–West strategic relations, it is not unduly fanciful to speculate that the Soviet Union might have decided to solve its German problems by force of arms. So-called 'virtual histories' built on 'what ifs' can be misleading. One can invent a general war triggered by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in a world without nuclear weapons. But what would NATO's military posture have been in such a world? The most that can be said with absolute confidence is that the nuclear reality encouraged, but could not guarantee, great caution on both sides. As often as not, the more perilous moments of the Cold War were the result of a superpower patron attempting to meet the needs or wishes of an ally to which it was, in some undesired measure, politically hostage.

Conclusion

It is plausible to interpret the entire history of the Cold War with reference to a series of Soviet failures. Such an approach may seem to emphasize Soviet policy unduly, but the historical record is fairly clear in suggesting that the initiative in the conflict typically was taken by Moscow, albeit often probably for defensive reasons. So what were these major failures?

1. Stalin failed to consolidate the Soviet security zone, or barrier, in Eastern Europe without alarming the West. He triggered the beginning of an organized political and economic resistance led by the United States.

2. Stalin failed to secure the real prize in Central Europe: the whole of Germany. Instead, with his blockade of Berlin in 1948–9, he galvanized Western resistance, inadvertently stilled much Western criticism of the creation of a new Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), and greatly facilitated American membership in and leadership of the novel NATO Alliance.
3. By permitting Kim Il-sung to invade South Korea, Stalin led, or misled, the United States to redefine the conflict in far more military terms than it had before. The Korean adventure both failed in and of itself and triggered a threefold jump in American defence expenditure. That jump enabled the United States to fund a new generation of strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, bombers and eventually missiles, and to expand its nuclear arsenal exponentially.
4. Khrushchev's missile diplomacy in its several forms was a complete and embarrassing failure. The Soviet Union derived no benefit from its missile threats, and it appeared irresponsibly adventurous in its dangerous failure over Cuba in October 1962.
5. The Soviet forward policy in Africa and Asia in the 1970s under Brezhnev was an expensive failure that helped bankrupt the state.
6. Gorbachev's well-intentioned efforts, initially to reform the Soviet system and then to transform it rapidly into a capitalist-model economic system, failed in almost all respects. The Soviet system could not be reformed and nor could it be transformed from above by officials who did not understand how a capitalist economy functioned. The result, as history records (unambiguously for once), was Gorbachev's ouster and the demise of the Soviet Union on 25 December 1991.

Why was it so difficult for the West to make peace with the Soviet Union (and vice versa)? Why did the Cold War endure for more than forty years? One could cite geopolitical rivalry, the key roles of individuals, and contingency, but pride of place needs to be accorded to ideology. The evidence strongly suggests that the Cold War could not end until the Soviet Union abandoned a state ideology which mandated definition of capitalist powers as enemies. When Gorbachev retired the ideology, the Cold War was over. Unfortunately for him, though, the abrupt retirement of Marxism to the dustbin of history also removed the basis for the legitimacy of the Soviet state. It may be worth noting that, at the time of writing (slightly more than a decade into the twenty-first century), the People's Republic of China has not renounced its legitimizing political ideology, yet that legacy (or burden) from the past is not a noteworthy player in contemporary Sino-American security relations. The master narrative of global international relations has to accommodate significant variations from historical case to case.

The story now must turn to consider explicitly the meaning of the nuclear discovery and the implications of the subsequent strategic revolution.

Key points

1. Cold War history is hotly contested today.
2. World War II had revolutionary consequences for all the contexts of international relations.

continued

3. The Cold War emerged slowly, by a process of interaction between rivals, from 1944 until 1947, or even 1950 (the war in Korea).
4. Because of geopolitics, ideology and personality (especially Stalin's), the conflict was unavoidable.
5. The Soviet Union was fatally outclassed in economic strength by the United States.
6. Although it was inevitable that the Soviet Union would lose the competition, it was not inevitable that it would accept such defeat peacefully.

Questions

1. **Who or what caused the Cold War?**
2. **Why did the Cold War last for forty years?**
3. **Why did the Cold War not conclude with World War III?**
4. **Did the Soviet Union expire mainly for internal reasons or was external pressure an important factor?**

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