

## 1946: A Year of Ideological Preconceptions

Written by Brendan Thomas-Noone

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# 1946: A Year of Ideological Preconceptions

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/01/25/1946-a-year-of-ideological-preconceptions/>

BRENDAN THOMAS-NOONE, JAN 25 2012

Throughout 1946, the administration of Harry S. Truman interpreted Soviet foreign policy as a doctrine based fundamentally upon ideology, which in turn fed into a growing sense of global American security and mutual distrust that eventuated with the implementation of the Truman Doctrine. The first sign of cooling relations between the two powers was arguably during the Potsdam conference in Germany, in July 1945. Major disagreements at the conference eventually became Cold War flashpoints, such as competing visions for the future of Germany and the testing of the first nuclear bomb. The Potsdam conference set the stage for 1946, the first year of the Cold War. 1946 would see the United States and the Soviet Union take the first serious steps towards confrontation, global security competition, and open ideological hostility.[1] Ideological perceptions within the United States, namely from George Kennan and Clark Clifford, would contribute to shaping the U.S. government's post-war view of Soviet foreign policy actions. The belief in Truman's administration that Soviet expansionism was caused by communist ideals of world revolution was supplemented with a growing sense in the United States that national security could only be achieved by acting globally, pulling the U.S. out of its traditional isolationist policies. This essay will show that Soviet pressure on Iran, Turkey, and Greece, as well as throughout Europe, fed into and encouraged the growing ideological divide between the two new world powers, further justifying the ideological assumptions of the U.S.S.R., in the eyes of U.S. policy makers. While Soviet policy in 1946 was expansionist in nature and was influenced to some degree by communist ideology, in reality Stalin was acting upon historical precedent, post-war euphoria, and opportunism, not world domination.

The view that the Truman administration took in the lead up to, and during, the critical year of 1946 consequently affected the government's actions when dealing with the Soviet Union. The perception of both the people of the United States and its government was a combination of fear, distrust, and ideological anxiety when it came to dealing with the U.S.S.R. Perhaps the two most important documents that influenced American policy in 1946 were George Kennan's Long Telegram and the Clifford-Elsey report that compiled the views of top American officials. Kennan's Long Telegram, which circulated widely among the Truman administration, claimed that the Soviet view of world affairs was a fundamental conflict between capitalism and communism, and that the battle would decide the "fate of communism and capitalism and the entire world." [2] In turn, he continued to outline that the ideological basis from which the Soviet Union operated would eventually lead them to "advance the U.S.S.R. as a factor in international society" and would not miss any chance to "reduce strength and influence, collectively as well as individually, of capitalist powers." [3] Although Kennan limited this communist ideology to Communist Party leaders, the Soviet secret services, and Stalin's inner-circle, and not to the whole of the Russian people, he did go on to say that this policy would lead to Soviet subversion and aggression against foreign governments. Building upon the rising ideological threat that the Soviet Union presented, the Clifford-Elsey report synthesized the views of top administration officials and presented a possible foreign policy response to this perceived threat. As Clark Clifford noted in his memoirs, the timing of the report was crucial in the formation of American policy. It reported many of the ideological and security concerns that had already been made by Winston Churchill and Kennan, it did however, suggest that a doctrine be formed to create an "integrated policy and coherent strategy to resist the Soviet Union." [4] The report suggested that the Soviet Union was leading "their nation on a course of aggrandizement designed to lead to eventual world domination by the U.S.S.R." and importantly that their "goals and policies designed to reach it, are in direct conflict with American ideals . . ." [5] The combination and timing of these reports led to the wide belief within the Truman administration, and within the President himself, that the Soviet Union was an ideological threat to the United States, using communists around the world to influence foreign governments and spread their ideology

## 1946: A Year of Ideological Preconceptions

Written by Brendan Thomas-Noone

around the world.

The American response to what they believed was Soviet expansionism was a policy of containment, which would lead to American intervention in Turkey, Iran, and Greece, as well as expressing concern over events in Germany. Years later, Kennan would comment that at the time the Soviet Union did not represent a “military threat to this country,” and indeed they did not. In 1946, the Soviet Union was reeling from the savages of World War Two as reconstruction of their infrastructure would take years, and as Kennan said himself, “the need for peace, and the thirst for peace, among the Russian people was overwhelming . . .”[6] What was feared was that large parts of Western Europe and Japan had been “destabilized, socially, spiritually, and politically . . .” and were susceptible to the Stalinist regime, which Kennan characterized as “more sinister, more cruel, more devious, more cynically contemptuous of us – than anything we face today.”[7] This view led to the unfortunate assumption by U.S. policy makers that the U.S.S.R. were “fanatics, alien to western traditions” and were impossible to negotiate with, which led to a period of “no real diplomacy.”[8] Other American sources were equally pessimistic, with the American Joint Intelligence Committee reporting that the Soviet government was using “every means short of war to bring nations along the USSR’s periphery under its complete control,” in addition to using communist parties in other nations to conduct espionage and sabotage.[9]

Another theory concerning American public conceptions of the Soviet Union during the tenure of President Truman suggests that American nationalism was the main source of support for Cold War foreign policy in the United States. While the Second World War itself helped to bring about a new vision of America’s role in the world geopolitically, with the need to look beyond the U.S.’s immediate borders with the development of long-range bombers and the atomic bomb, a new American idealism started to take shape.[10] In the book, *To Lead the Free World*, John Fousek argues that President Truman’s public discourse “continuously linked U.S. global responsibility to anticommunism . . .”[11] and that this resulted in cultivating an atmosphere within the American public that believed that America’s new role was a global, and not a hemispheric or continental, one. This idea of American power arguably led to a belief that it was now the role of the United States to “provide moral leadership in the name of American democratic values . . .”[12] While the U.S. in a geopolitical sense certainly considered Russian aggression towards Turkey, Iran, and Eastern Europe a national security threat to the peace of the post-war world and itself, the reason behind this feeling was ideologically based, not geopolitically. George F. Kennan himself summarized this new idealistic feeling: “To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.”[13] American national security had shifted to a global perspective that was symbolized in the Truman doctrine speech of March 12, 1947.[14]

The aggressive actions of the Soviet Union in 1946 played into the developing preconceptions that the U.S. public, and policy makers within the government, had of the communist state. The administration of President Truman in 1946, laden with experienced foreign policy staffers but encumbered by an inexperienced first term president, saw Soviet foreign policy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece to be aggressive and subversive to American interests. Certain staff within the administration, specifically the influential George Kennan and advisor to the president Clark Clifford, saw Soviet actions in the Middle East and Eastern Europe as proof of their ideological assumptions about the Soviet Union. It is important to note that Stalin’s speech on February 9th, 1946 was seen by some circles in the United States as a justification for their views on the Soviet Union, a nation that viewed capitalism as the source of “general crisis and military conflicts.”[15] Soviet aggression was also coupled with the fear of growing communist parties in Western Europe and other parts of the world, as well as fears of the United States’ militarily weak position due to demobilization after the Second World War.

One of the major concerns in American foreign relations in 1946 was the Soviet Union’s intentions and activities in Iran and Turkey. Traditionally, Russian interest in access to the Black Sea through the Dardanelles straits, and oil in northern Iran, was not new to the nation’s foreign policy. England and France had secretly agreed upon allowing Russian access to the Black Sea through Turkey during World War One in return for Tsarist support in the war. Iran, in Stalin’s mind, represented the Soviet Union’s natural sphere of influence in the post-world war world.[16] As historian Martin McCauley has said, one of the major goals for Stalin during World War Two was to conquer all the territory which had been under the “Tsarist Russian empire . . .”[17] With the end of World War Two and Russian losses totaling almost 27 million, Stalin saw Russian access to Iranian oil and control of the Turkish straits as natural

## 1946: A Year of Ideological Preconceptions

Written by Brendan Thomas-Noone

per the Soviet Union's geographic location, as well as for its contribution to the Allied war effort and Tsarist historical precedent.[18] With this view in mind, the Soviet Union proceeded to demand from the Iranian Prime Minister, Ebrahim Hakimi, an "indefinite retention of Soviet troops in northern Iran," the recognition of the autonomy of Azerbaijan and control of oil in the north of the country.[19] As Russian historian Vladislav Zubok has made clear, at the time Soviet interference in Iran and the creation of two Soviet controlled territories in the Kurdish and Azerbaijani Republics were widely seen as "tools in Stalin's hands to obtain oil concessions in Iran, to subjugate Iran, to turn it into a Russian sphere of influence." [20] At the same time, diplomatic pressure from the Soviet Union was mounting on Turkey in an effort to acquire Soviet military bases in the Dardanelles straits and further annexation of Turkish territory.[21] The Iranian case was eventually brought before the United Nations by the United States, which led to the eventual withdrawal of Soviet forces. In Turkey, diplomatic pressure from the U.S. as well as a show of force by the United States Navy forced the Soviet Union to back down.[22]

While the situations in Iran and Turkey occurred almost a year apart, they were significantly different from the economic commitment that the United States made in Greece. Greece, reeling from civil war between its national government and a coalition of communist partisans had been financially and materially supported by Great Britain during World War Two. Unable to maintain that commitment in February of 1947 the British government notified the U.S. that it had "already strained their resources to the most" and requested the U.S. government to assume the role that the British had.[23] While occurring in 1947, the administration of Harry Truman had known for some time that British support for Greece was soon to be withdrawn and importantly this was included within the Clifford-Elsey report: "The Soviet Union is interested in obtaining the withdrawal of British troops from Greece and the establishment of a "friendly" government there." [24] It was thought at the time that the Soviet Union could exploit the precarious situation within Greece, leading to the collapse of the national government and its replacement with one that was controlled from the Kremlin.[25] This informal knowledge of British withdrawal was crucial in the gradual formation of a coherent strategy that the Clifford-Elsey report called for, a strategy that was to eventuate with the Truman Doctrine. This developing situation in Greece was built upon the growing ideological fear of communist expansion throughout Europe, a preconception that was enforced by a speech Stalin gave earlier in the year on February 9th, 1946. Stalin, speaking in Moscow, declared that the Soviet system was the reason why Germany had been unable to defeat them and that World War Two had proved that the "Soviet social system [had] successfully passed the test of fire in the war and proved that it is fully viable." [26] Seen as a return to ideological rhetoric within the U.S. government, Stalin's speech provided the necessary proof for U.S. policy makers, and the president himself, that the Soviet Union was working towards purely communist goals.

While U.S. actions in response to Soviet expansionism in Turkey, Iran, and Greece were based upon the growing idealistic nature of American foreign policy and the changing conception of the ideological threat that the Soviet Union represented, it can be argued that Stalin directed his foreign policy not based on ideology, but opportunity. The post-war world for Stalin conceptually needed to contain a "Soviet sphere of interest" that would guarantee security for the Soviet state in Europe and also throughout its south and southeastern borders.[27] This natural security interest, combined with the historical precedent of Soviet antagonism with Turkey and claims on Iranian oil, were the main reasons for Soviet aggression with these states.[28] Stalin did use ideology to bolster support within the Soviet Union for his foreign policy objectives in Europe and for his own personal popularity, often using propaganda in the late 1940's to claim that "war was inevitable as long as capitalism existed" and commanding that more 5-year plans be undertaken in preparation.[29] This communist ideology did flow through some foreign deputies of the Soviet Union, notably the Soviet deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Vishinsky, who stated in London in early 1946, that it was "historically impossible for Soviet policy to accord with British ideas of democracy and human rights." [30] This Soviet view of English ideals was also extended to American capitalism by the end of the year, with Soviet Ambassador to the United States Nikolai Novikov sending a telegram to Soviet leadership in late 1946, stating that "U.S. foreign policy has been characterized in the post-war period by a desire for world domination" followed by his belief that the American "imperialist" government was preparing for future war "against the Soviet Union." [31]

However, even with some evidence to suggest that Soviet policy in Iran, Turkey, and Europe was ideologically based in 1946, most post-revisionist historians would agree that this was not entirely the case.[32] The Soviet Union's expansionist foreign policy in 1946 was primarily based upon historical precedent that occurred during the Tsarist Empire, a fact ignored in American assessments of Soviet foreign policy. That is not to say that U.S.S.R. intentions

## 1946: A Year of Ideological Preconceptions

Written by Brendan Thomas-Noone

within Turkey, Iran, and Greece were not legitimate national security situations for the United States, for they were; it is to say that the U.S. government's ideological fear of communist subversion throughout Europe and Asia being orchestrated from the Kremlin was. As historian David Reynolds makes clear, Stalin thought he could get what he wanted by "state politics,"[33] for Stalin himself was an opportunist that believed in a gradual growth of Soviet strength, with or without the help of his communist followers.[34] U.S. concern over the Soviet Union, and in turn their actions in response to Soviet expansionism, was based upon a combination of their own growing sense of global security and their, in some respects, false interpretation of Soviet actions. It seems that the ideological fear that the United States government possessed over the Soviet Union was true, to a certain extent, however more importantly they failed to take into account recent Russian history, their own growing anxiety over communism, and finally, that Stalin operated his foreign policy upon more traditional motives than his communist ideology preached, such as power and influence.[35]

The result of the U.S. government's ideological perceptions of the Soviet Union throughout 1946 culminated with President Harry S. Truman's speech before a Joint Session of Congress on March 12, 1947. The speech would eventually come to be known as the outline of the Truman Doctrine, a policy that would guarantee that the U.S. would support "free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." [36] However, it was the idealistic and ideological basis that this policy was based upon that explains the reasoning behind Cold War policy. President Truman outlined that at that moment in world history "nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life . . ." and that one way of life consisted of "free institutions, representative government, free elections . . ." and so on. The other way consisted of repression, subjugation, fixed elections and "suppression of personal freedoms." [37] The absolute nature of Truman's speech and the ideological basis of his containment policy show the nature of American interpretations of Soviet policy. Containment would shape American foreign policy for the next several decades, the "modification of Soviet behavior through a combination of deterrents and rewards . . ." that was designed to counter the "ideological-political threat." [38] Perhaps historian Vladislav Zubok has put it best when analyzing U.S. and Soviet relations in the lead up to the Truman Doctrine. Beginning by explaining that from Stalin's perspective, Soviet demands on Turkey and Iran were limited in light of historical precedent, however he did not explain a "clear rationale for his foreign policy." [39] U.S. policy makers interpreted these actions and others as a "combination of Communist universalism with old Czarist, Czarist expansionism . . ." in what motivated Russia. [40] In this light, the assumptions of the Truman Administration and its subsequent actions throughout 1946 were a result of misconceived views of Soviet intentions in the post-war world.

[1] Martin Thornton, Times of Heroism, *Times of Terror: American Presidents and the Cold War* (Westport: Praeger, 2005), 21.

[2] George Kennan, "George Kennan to George Marshall," Harry S. Truman Library and Museum; available from [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/coldwar/documents/index.php?pagenumber=2&documentid=6-6&documentdate=1946-02-33&studentcollectionid=coldwar&groupid](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/index.php?pagenumber=2&documentid=6-6&documentdate=1946-02-33&studentcollectionid=coldwar&groupid); [20 August 2010].

[3] Ibid.

[4] Clark Clifford and Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: a Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 124.

[5] Ibid, 126.

[6] George F. Kennan, "Reflections on Containment," in *Containing the Soviet Union: A Critique of U.S. Policy*, eds. Terry L. Deibel and John Lewis Gaddis (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defence Publishers, 1987), 16.

[7] Ibid, 16.

[8] Anders Stephanson, "The United States," in *Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives*, eds. David Reynolds (London: Yale University Press, 1994), 23.

## 1946: A Year of Ideological Preconceptions

Written by Brendan Thomas-Noone

- [9] Larry A. Valero, "An Impressive Record – The American Joint Intelligence Committee and Estimates of the Soviet Union," CIA Online Library; available [Online] <http://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi/publications/csi/studies/studies/summer00/art06/html>; [19 August 2010].
- [10] Robert A. Pollard, *Economic Security and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 20.
- [11] John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.
- [12] Ibid, 63.
- [13] George F. Kennan, "Containing the Soviet Union," in *Sources of Twentieth Century Europe*, eds. Marvin Perry, Matthew Berg and James Krukones (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 320.
- [14] Fousek, *To Lead the Free World*, 103.
- [15] Joseph Stalin, "Speech Delivered by J. V. Stalin at a Meeting of Voters of the Stalin Electoral District, Moscow," *From Mao to Marx*; available [Online] <http://www.marx2mao.com/Stalin/SS46.html>; [20 August 2010]
- [16] William R. Keylor, *The Twentieth Century World: An International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 271.
- [17] Martin McCauley, *The Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1949* (London: Pearson Education, 2003), 33.
- [18] Walter Lafeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War 1945-1975* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1976), 37.
- [19] Keylor, *The Twentieth Century World: An International History*, 277.
- [20] Vladislav Zubok, "Vladislav Zubok on Stalin's 1946 Speech," PBS American Experience; available from <http://www.pbs.org/wghb/amex/bomb/filmmore/reference/interview/zubok3.html>; [19 August 2010].
- [21] Zubok, Stalin's 1946 Speech, [19 August 2010].
- [22] James Wilkinson and H. Stuart Hughes, *Contemporary Europe: A History* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 413.
- [23] Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir*, 131.
- [24] Ibid, 131.
- [25] Martin Thornton, *Times of Heroism, Times of Terror: American Presidents and the Cold War* (Westport: Praeger, 2005), 34.
- [26] Joseph Stalin, "Speech Delivered by J.V. Stalin at a Meeting of Voters of the Stalin Electoral District, Moscow," *From Mao to Marx*.
- [27] McCauley, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 48.
- [28] Lafeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War*, 37.
- [29] Ibid, 39.
- [30] David Reynolds ed. *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives* (New Haven and

## 1946: A Year of Ideological Preconceptions

Written by Brendan Thomas-Noone

London: Yale University Press, 1994), 5.

[31] Nikolai Novikov, "Telegram from N. Novikov, Soviet Ambassador to the US, to the Soviet Leadership 09/27.1946," Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, available from [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&document&identifier=953E8C7F-423B-763D-D5662C42502C9BEA&sort=Collection&item=Cold%20War%20Origins](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&document&identifier=953E8C7F-423B-763D-D5662C42502C9BEA&sort=Collection&item=Cold%20War%20Origins); [18 August 2010].

[32] McCauley, *The Origins of the Cold War*, 14.

[33] Reynolds, *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe*, 4.

[34] Vojtech Mastny, "Russia's Road to the Cold War," in *An Age of Conflict: Readings in Twentieth-Century European History*, eds. Leslie Derfler Patricia Kollander (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002), 224.

[35] *Ibid*, 224.

[36] Harry S. Truman, "President Harry S. Truman's Address Before a Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947," Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, available from [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp); [18 August 2010].

[37] *Ibid*.

[38] Terry L. Diebel and John Lewis Gaddis, ed. *Containing the Soviet Union: A Critique of U.S. Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defence Publishers, 1987), 10.

[39] Zubok, *Stalin's 1946 Speech*, [19 August 2010].

[40] *Ibid*.

—

*Written by: Brendan Thomas-Noone*

*Written at: University of Melbourne*

*Written for: Dr. Barbara Keys*

*Date written: August, 2010*