

The Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, and the Division of Europe

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, OCT 13 2009

The Cold War grew out of anxiety over Soviet expansionism and widespread economic problems in Europe following the Second World War. It was institutionalised in minds by 1947, and in reality in 1950 during the Korean war. The Cold War then became a system of carefully managed “irreconcilable antagonism” that evolved out of the plan to rehabilitate Europe (Cox 1990: 30). The Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine of Containment together defined the structure of the emerging Cold War between America and the Soviet Union. Europe, the location of Churchill’s infamous ‘Iron Curtain’ dividing line between the rival powers, would see its future geopolitical orientation defined by the creation and consolidation of these spheres of influence.

One way of viewing the division of Europe is as two areas under the dominance of Great powers. Whilst there is no doubt some truth in this for the West of Europe, it is clearly historically demonstrated in the Soviet bloc particularly through its military presence and the manipulation of elections. Western Europe is therefore a more interesting candidate to analyse when viewing the effects of the Marshall Plan and the doctrine of Containment. The formation and direction of the western bloc was much less outwardly directed by America. One interesting position is the ‘empire by invitation’ thesis, where America allowed flexible and individual policies amongst the governments of Western Europe, but still managed to frame the overall workings of said countries in such a way that it achieved all its foreign policy objectives. Those objectives being a contained Soviet Union, integrated economies within an Atlantic framework, the opening of Western Europe to American culture, the establishment of permanent American bases, and keeping the leftist socialist, fascist and communist parties out of power in their respective countries (Lundestad 2003: 1-2). This thesis maintains that, although on the surface this sounds similar to Soviet domination in the Eastern bloc, both America and Western Europe had compatible goals. Western governments needed both political help and economic help, which the American national interest was served by providing, and simultaneously the interests of the Western governments were served (Lundestad: 2003: 59).

The Truman doctrine was outwardly a reaction to political problems in Greece. In early 1947, the British decided it was not in their interests to keep providing financial aid to the Greek government, which was under attack by communist guerrillas (Frazier 1984: 715; Kousoulas 1965: 88). This left an important strategically placed state susceptible to political upheaval and communist takeover. In George Kennan’s famous ‘X’ article later that year he articulated publicly his views of the Soviet Union. He warned that the Soviet Union was committed to destroying capitalism, and that it could not coexist with capitalist nations (Kennan 1947: 572). With a background of Soviet troops moving southwards towards Tehran and Turkey it did appear that there was a Soviet desire and a willingness to control the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Although diplomatic pressure eased this particular example, there were widespread fears within the Truman administration that if so inclined, the Soviet Union *could* conquer much of Western Europe. At the very least they would have a significant initial advantage in any such move (Poole 1978: 14). Kennan noted that the answer to this threat was “long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment” (Kennan 1947: 575). He believed that the Soviet Union would be patient, moving slowly forward in a multitude of geopolitical and ideological advances. The answer was for the United States to contain them and inhibit their ability to do so. Providing assistance to Greece, replacing British aid, was to be the first application of this strategy. Although Kennan later emphasised his disagreement with the confrontational language and the military emphasis of the doctrine (Mayers 1986: 140), Truman declared that like the Greek example, America would “support

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free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures" (Truman 1947). Turkey also received help, and the European continent became a front line of the 'first' Cold War.

It has been proposed that either directly or indirectly the blame for starting the Cold War actually rests within British politics, not that of the Soviet Union or America. The thesis rests with the assertion that British foreign secretary Ernest Bevin deliberately and abruptly ended British aid to Greece knowing that it would draw the Americans into an interventionist path in Europe. This move was the catalyst of the Truman doctrine and of the Cold War itself. Upon analysing this theory, Robert Frazier concludes that it is doubtful Bevin was engaged in an underhand plot and the decision to withdraw from Greece was a simple decision made through extenuating and valid circumstances, mainly due to a lack of financial and political will to remain supporting Greece (Frazier 1984: 715-727). The usefulness of this theory, despite its dismissal by Frazier is in the fact that it allows for the possibility that the beginning of the Cold War was not a simple matter and that it may have been borne through the diminished stature of the traditional powers within Europe, no longer able to project their power. As Europe became a vacuum, the two remaining powers felt it imperative to step in to protect and project their own foreign policy interests (Gaddis 1981: 74). Therefore in this sense, the Cold War was simply a continuance of normal realist balancing and bandwagoning politics, the sort that had been developing for centuries.

The Marshall Plan is inescapably linked to the policy of containing the Soviet Union and is perhaps more than any other single element was "of pivotal significance in crystallising the East-West conflict in Europe" (Cromwell 1979: 422). Together with the Truman doctrine it consolidated two clear 'sides' in an ideological and economic conflict. It is often described as a corollary of the Truman doctrine as both are directed against Soviet expansion. However, both differ in their tactical deployment. The Truman doctrine focuses on military aid, such as that lent to Greece and Turkey in the 1940's whilst the Marshall Plan was a package of purely economic aid, at least outwardly (Borchard 1947: 885). In the words of Hadley Arkes, the Marshall Plan dissolved the ambiguity in the post war European arena and consummated the Cold War (Cromwell 1979: 422). Also known as the European Recovery Plan, it was a package of aid totalling \$13 billion over a duration of four years received by 16 European nations. It was "an important example of the overt use of economic power in foreign policy" (Burk 2001: 268). Much has been written of the initial American offer of this aid to all of Europe (excluding Spain), including nations aligned or under the influence of the Soviet Union, and to the Soviet Union itself, which was included in the plan as both an aid recipient and an aid provider – which Stalin rejected. It is unclear whether that offer was sincere or not. After all, perhaps there would have been no division of Europe if the offer had been accepted by all parties it was offered to. Accepting the validity of the American offer places the blame for the division of Europe squarely on Stalin.

If the revisionist position is to be accepted, America only offered aid to the Eastern European nations and to the Soviet Union to avoid blame for dividing Europe. Revisionist historians see the Marshall Plan as an extension of the Truman doctrine's design to create political and economic buffers to contain the Soviet Union. Richard Freeland elaborates noting that the aid package was deliberately designed so that it would be rejected by Stalin due to its requirement of multilateral economic policies – which the Stalin had frequently and consistently rejected in the past as incompatible with the Soviet economy (Cromwell 1979: 424). However Cromwell notes that this approach, whilst making some interesting points, ignores the domestic factors that contributed to the Marshall Plan in Washington. Congress was hostile to further bilateral aid packages to European nations and there was already an accepted inevitability within American statesmen that the division of Europe was inevitable. The collective continental approach to the aid was one made to ensure its approval in the Congress, and it was therefore as much an exercise of domestic policy in action than just foreign policy (Cromwell 1979: 432-437). Where Cromwell and the revisionists agree is in the certainty that the Marshall Plan was designed to fit an already divided Europe in perception, and was not intended inwardly or outwardly as a measure to reverse or ease that division. America was simply acting in its best interests by consolidating its allies and rewarding them in a mutually beneficial way. In this sense, both donor and recipients had their cake and eat it.

The traditional position, although fiercely debated, is that after 1945, the only alternative to "massive" American intervention in Western Europe was "chaos" (Gillingham 2003: 18). It enabled the rebuilding of the German locomotive, safely integrated and constrained within a common European framework, and enabled the expansion of the economic prosperity enjoyed domestically in America to Europe, and to the wider world. In this sense, pushing for

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integration in Europe – albeit something that was only really intergovernmental cooperation at this early stage in reality – enabled America to remake the battered and bruised old world in the new world image of a successful and stable economic order (Marsh 2005: 6-7). In this sense, the economic aid given through the Marshall Plan was significant in dividing Europe up not just ideologically and politically – but also economically. Europe's 'East' and 'West' developed two distinct economic systems that were basically incompatible with each other.

Of course, the role of Stalin cannot be ignored. His refusal of the American plan was (with the benefit of hindsight) a miscalculation made through overconfidence in communist power in Western Europe and a reliance upon his rigid Marxist economics. According to this doctrine, capitalism was approaching a crisis which would cut off the flow of America aid leaving Europe ultimately in the hands of the Communists. This situation simplified the task of American leadership and led to the alienation of Communist parties in Western Europe as the public were clearly forming a consensus in support of the American economic intervention (Mallalieu 1958: 491-502). Therefore Stalin's actions are equally to blame for the division of Europe as the polarising climate created by the Truman doctrine and the Marshall Plan. His role underplays perfectly the much commented upon conclusion that both the Soviet Union and America were resigned and accepting of a division of Europe shortly after the Second World War, certainly by mid 1947. With the Marshall Plan being accepted by some and rejected by others, it is also safe to say that this fate was also accepted within Europe. Additionally the belligerence of Stalin gave America a degree of influence it would not have otherwise had in Europe, helping to transform American power into a position of dominance over the 'West' (Cox 1990: 31). Of course the mirror opposite can be said as Stalin's position did the same within his own 'bloc' albeit on different terms.

Taking into account the role of the internal politics in the Soviet Union beyond Stalin's role is also interesting in relation to the Marshall Plan. Andrei Zhdanov proclaimed a 'Two Camps doctrine' in September 1947 in which he stated that the world was divided into an imperialist camp headed by America, and a democratic camp headed by the Soviet Union. This was adopted as internal policy after the failed Paris negotiations in June-July 1947 and the rejection of the Marshall Plan (Roberts 1994: 1371-1372). There is no doubt that the Marshall Plan solidified this line of reasoning, and it is worth noting again the sense of inevitability in the division of Europe as both the Soviet and the American thought processes were at least in part converging on this division before the fact of its final existence. Soviet rejection of the American offer led to the Molotov Plan, in which a series of bilateral treaties were made between the Soviet Union and Eastern European nations, beginning the process that led to the establishment of Comecon in 1949 (Roberts 1994: 1383). With Comecon and the Marshall Plan operating in parallel, and the Truman doctrine of Containment outwardly involving America in a reactionary process against the Soviet Union, it is certainly safe to state that by late 1947 Europe was divided in two.

John Lewis Gaddis offers the possibility that the Marshall Plan was carried out and designed by America to establish an independent European power centre, not a hegemonic American bloc. He adds additionally that NATO was adopted reluctantly by America due to the anxieties of European leaders, not pioneered as a tool of American hegemony (Thompson 1994: 750). In this case, again shades of grey appear. It may be possible that focusing on American and Soviet motives in dividing Europe underplay the influence of the European nations themselves in determining their fate. This is a similar line of reasoning to the analysis offered earlier in the discussion over the British involvement in the inception of the Truman doctrine. In context however, it may be sensible to heed Mervyn Leffler's analysis. This revolves around the fact that domestic policy was of little consequence across all the nations involved in the outbreak of the Cold War. Simply, the way the Second World War ended with the decline of British and German power propelled the world's two emerging powers, particularly America with its unique position of military and economic power, to make the best of the situation (Thompson 1994: 747-748). This again, draws on a traditional reading of international relations paradigms in concluding that the structure of the international system created the Cold War and the division of Europe. In this sense, the Truman doctrine and the Marshall Plan, and indeed the Molotov doctrine were borne out of the inevitability of foreign politics as it was then constituted. They were merely reactions to the already constituted structure of the post-war system, not determining factors of the formation of the new structure. It is entirely possible in this sense, to account for the division of Europe through a reading of Structural Realism.

In conclusion, it is clear the division of Europe had its roots in the way that the Second World War ended. The

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Truman doctrine was a manifestation of foreign policy resulting from the insecurities and fears of Soviet power filling the vacuum in Europe. Together with the Marshall Plan, it solidified the Western nations of Europe into accepting the reality of a divided Europe, indeed a divided world in which two distinct economic, ideological and political systems were in conflict. In the strict sense of the word the combined effect of the Marshall Plan and the policy of Containment created the structure with which the previously uncodified and loosely felt, yet inevitable tensions were spiralling around before mid 1947. Coupled with the Soviet reaction and the establishment of Comecon, the impetus whether intentional or not for the division of Europe was certainly within the realm of American foreign policy. It is not necessary to apportion blame in this analysis, but it is certainly accurate to state that all parties involved in the division of Europe did less to prevent it than to accept its perceived inevitability.

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