

Questioning the Inevitability of the Cold War

Written by Constantinos Onesilou

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CONSTANTINOS ONESILOU, AUG 10 2016

Any question about the inevitability of a historical development compels, voluntarily or otherwise, the resurrection of a centuries-old debate about the existence of natural laws that dictate the course of history. In his Lectures on the 'Philosophy of History', Georg Hegel considers the individual as unable to surpass her own time, acting as a means-agent towards a predetermined outcome[1]. This notion of historical determinism (historicism) directly rejects the capacity of individuals, from Lenin and Wilson to Stalin and Truman, to have acted as free-agents in controlling, influencing and even averting the occurrence of the Cold War. However, to assume a fatalistic approach emphasizing the inevitability of conflict between two aspiring hegemonies with competing ideologies, simply undervalues the importance of individuals responding unpredictably and even irrationally to the given circumstances.

Therefore, in this essay I argue in favour of an atomistic-reductionist explanation for the origins of the Cold War. In other words, after exposing the instrumental involvement of individuals in micro-historical events, I attempt to reveal what Karl Popper called the 'Poverty of Historicism'; there are no inexorable laws of historical destiny[2]. In essence, Cold War was an avertable product of impulsive and unpredictable actions of individuals operating in accordance to their free will. To make this argument clear, I synthesise orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist interpretations to support three main points. The first proposes that while ideology constituted the central characteristic of conflict, its influence was subject to its interpretation by President Wilson and Lenin. The second rejects the realist claim of unavoidability in the context of two power-maximising nations clashing regardless of ideology, to argue that Stalin's succession to Lenin in 1922 was instrumental for the outbreak of the Cold War. Finally, my third argument considers Truman's personal role in foreign policy to conclude that had Henry Wallace succeeded FDR instead of Truman, the Cold War could have been avoided.

To start with, it is important to examine the claim that the 1917 Bolshevik revolution had triggered an unavoidable battle of ideas: American liberalism vs. Soviet Communism. According to Engerman, the key factor for such a definitive and hostile disagreement between the two ideologies was not simply their antithetical visions of social organization but their explicitly proclaimed universalism[3]. On the one hand, the new Soviet government claimed to have identified the class struggle as the ultimate driver of historical progress. Proletarian revolution was indispensable for human liberation leading to the creation of a communist society[4]. On the other hand, the foreign policy of the United States, going beyond the Lockean ideas of individual liberty and equality under law, equated the spread of American influence through the consolidation of free markets with the spread of general prosperity. In fact, both ideologies exhibited narratives of determinism and messianism, but most importantly "neither side was willing to stand aside and let history take its course"[5]. In this context, the over-ambitious and vague aspirations of Soviet and American foreign policy meant that peaceful coexistence was unsustainable.

However, to attribute the origins of the Cold War to an inevitable clash of ideologies undermines the personal contributions of Wilson and Lenin in shaping American messianic liberalism and Soviet revolutionary radicalism respectively. Ideologies were simply the lenses used by policymakers to interpret and admittedly to distort understandings of external events while the actions taken in response can be directly attributed to individuals. President Wilson, a highly ideological and religious man, was able to extrapolate in global terms the providential 'Manifest Destiny' of the American westward expansion against the natural lands of native tribes[6]. Indeed, what makes Wilson not a mere surrogate of pure ideological action is his personal support for racial hierarchy; his belief that not all people are worthy of the 'blessings of liberty'[7]. Russians, he had noted are "a people dumb and without

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knowledge of speech” in political matters[8]. In this context, Wilson decision in July 1918 to militarily intervene in the Russian Civil War against the advice of his chief officials, indicates how his passionate anti-Bolshevism and perhaps racial prejudices were enough to circumvent his reservations about fighting on the side of the monarch. In fact, prominent revisionist historians such as W.A. Williams and LaFeber, stress the importance of President Wilson’s expansive global vision as fundamental in justifying the subsequent enmity and distrust of the Soviet Union towards the United States[9]. Nevertheless, Lenin’s universalist proclamations constituted an equal threat to the world. While Wilson aimed at altering the international system through the promotion of self-determination, open markets, and collective security, Lenin promised nothing less than the “ultimate interference in other states’ internal affairs”; to encourage proletarians around the world in overthrowing their capitalist oppressors[10]. In an open letter following Wilson’s decision to intervene in the Russian Civil War, Lenin famously prompted the “American revolutionary workers to...play an exceptionally important role as enemies of American imperialism”[11]. In essence, the above instances indicate how ideology alone would have acted in vacuum, had not been for Wilson’s and Lenin’s universalist aspirations. In this context the Cold War cannot be considered as an inevitable clash of antithetical ideologies but rather as a result of a coincidental clash of two highly ambitious men who according to Gaddis, “responded to the situations in which they found themselves with a combination of improvisation, purposefulness, and sheer audacity”[12].

In order to reinforce this argument, it is useful to consider what Edward Lorenz, a prominent American mathematician, called the ‘butterfly’ effect in chaos theory. In historical terms, this effect hypothesises how a minuscule change in the initial conditions of a conflict can result in large differences at a later stage[13]. For instance, Gaddis stresses the impact of ‘bumbling’ German diplomacy on the initial conditions of the Cold War[14]. After the outbreak of the February Revolution and in an attempt to undermine the Russian war effort during the first world war, German authorities allowed Lenin to travel from his exile in Switzerland back to Russia where he was able to orchestrate the revolution. Similarly, in January 1917, just three months before Lenin’s arrival in Petrograd, the German Foreign Office proposed a military alliance with Mexico. Most importantly, however, according to the notorious Zimmermann telegram, Germany promised Mexico to “reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona”[15]. According to Andrew, the revelation of the contents of the telegram, alongside the German all-out submarine warfare, had been instrumental in allowing Wilson to gain support for American intervention in Europe[16]. In a sense, it can be argued that the ideological confrontation between Lenin and Wilson was more coincidental than predetermined. After all, had not been for Lenin’s powerful “Peace, Land, and Bread” ideological crusade the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 would never have taken place[17]. In the same way, Wilson’s ability to bypass isolationist tendencies in Congress in order to fight “a war to end all wars” was depended upon specific actions of Germany’s foreign ministry[18]. Essentially, the origins of the Cold War, as far they can be traced in the antithesis of Lenin and Wilson’s universalist aspirations, were avoidable to a large extent.

Even though this anthropocentric interpretation seems to have prioritised human agency over the determinism of unrestricted ideology, it continues to be subjected to a different kind of determinism; that the Cold War was inevitable because the anarchic nature of the international system determined US and Soviet Union policy decisions. This type of structural determinism, which derives from Kenneth Waltz’s theory of neorealism, is explicitly used as the point of departure for Kramer’s ‘Ideology and the Cold War’.[19] He argues that “even if the regime in Moscow had not been Communist” the US would have wanted to confront the rising power of the Soviet Union[20]. Similarly, Woods describes the wartime Anglo-American relationship as a considerably turbulent one. This can be explained by the fact that American free trade deliberations clashed with Britain’s efforts to maintain its economic interests by protracting the imperial preference system[21]. In this context, it can be inferred that while the US, through the Loan Agreement of 1946, was able to coerce declining Britain into accepting American hegemony, the rising Soviet Union had to be actively opposed as the only viable contender in the post-war power vacuum. If this notion is supported, it could be argued on the basis of the numerous legacies of distrust that divided both powers. Namely, the lack of disclosure on the Manhattan project (until the Potsdam Conference of 1945), the delay in opening a second front against Germany in the west, and the Marshall Plan, all illustrate what revisionist historians such as Williams, Calhoun and Kolko would see as US overarching concern with establishing a firm international hegemony that would serve American commercial interests[22]. In this sense, the Cold War was inevitable as the US was prepared to take every possible action that would secure, not the spread of democracy, but its national interests. On the other hand, post-revisionists such as Gaddis, mention the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 but also the 1948 Berlin Blockade as signs of

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Soviet aggressiveness which suggest that the Cold War was a contest of two mutually suspicious super-powers[23]. Clearly, this condition implicitly alludes to the Hobbesian state of nature; a parable used by classical realist thinkers to describe the behaviour of states in the anarchic international system. In fact, Morgenthau and Carr would consider that the mutual distrust which naturally exists between states inevitably leads to conflict[24]. In this context, ideology and human agency were of little or no relevance to the inescapable laws of an unsustainable bipolarity in the international system. Ultimately, both sides according to Kramer, “used rhetoric to conceal their real interests and intentions”[25].

Nevertheless, both revisionist and post-revisionist historians, either departing from structural or ideological determinism, seem to reach a conceptual convergence by the end of their scholarship. In fact, after the examination of the long-sealed Soviet archives, Kramer and Gaddis direct their Cold War analyses on a specific individual: Joseph Stalin[26]. Kramer, for instance, concludes that we should not “move too far in the realist direction” as Stalin’s personal role in the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 does not vindicate any realist or ideological motive but simply his lust for power[27]. Indeed, his earlier attempts in presenting Stalin’s decision to support Kim Il sung’s attack against South Korea as exemplifying the broad Soviet ambitions towards an Asian sphere of influence, conceal the implicit suggestion that Stalin personal involvement was instrumental. This is further clarified when Kramer refers to a Soviet Council of Ministers confidential document to argue how Stalin’s death in 1953 was an opportunity for his predecessors to “reverse a number of mistaken policies” including Stalin’s aggressive intervention in Korea[28]. This clearly illustrates the great extent that Stalin was responsible for Soviet foreign policy and ultimately points to the possibility of reversal. Similarly, Gaddis makes an explicit reference to Stalin’s ‘geriatric romanticism’ which made him “naïve and sentimental as well as a brutal old man” trying to “recapture his revolutionary youth”[29]. In this context, the Korean War is presented as a direct product of Stalin’s personal considerations and not as part of an inevitable sequence of events. Notably, Westad goes a step further by suggesting that Stalin’s ‘ideological jealousy’ in relation to Mao’s revolutionary success, urged him to singlehandedly approve North Korea’s actions without consulting China[30]. Likewise, Zubok speculates that Stalin’s aggressive strategy in Asia was an attempt not to appear less revolutionary than Mao[31].

Therefore, it has to be examined whether the Cold War could have been avoided had Stalin not succeeded Lenin in 1922. Firstly, to do this it is important to consider George F. Kennan’s well-known ‘X Article’ (or Long Telegram). Kennan, who was the American Deputy Chief of Mission in Moscow at the time, asserts that “had [Lenin] lived, might have proved a great enough man” to reconcile the contradictions of the communist system[32]. In fact, he refers to Lenin’s implementation of the “New Economic Policy” in 1921 which ultimately limited state control in the economy to the ‘commanding heights’ and allowed free trade to some extent. Even though this policy according to Kennan “alleviated some of the economic distress”, once Stalin assumed Soviet leadership he brutally implemented the detrimental First-Five-Year Plan[33]. In this context, while Lenin’s state capitalism would have formed somewhat of an ideological convergence with Roosevelt’s New Deal in 1933, Stalin ordered the large-scale industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture. Remarkably, Maier notices that the number of deaths caused by Stalin’s policies were more than double the number of Hitler’s victims during the Holocaust[34]. It can be argued, therefore, that Stalin’s domestic policies during the 1930’s transformed the Soviet Union as “a gargantuan extension of his own pathologically suspicious personality”[35].

While the above argument only considers the domestic implications of Stalin’s authoritarianism, it ultimately signifies how the diminishing moral capital of the Soviet Union resulted in the asymmetric consolidation of the American and the Soviet spheres of influence; the former would arise by consent and the latter mostly by coercion. According to Gaddis, the case of Poland best illustrates that Stalin’s totalitarian aspirations necessitated a counteractive Western response[36]. In fact, when Soviet troops entered Poland in 1940, Stalin personally ordered the assassination of approximately 22,000 Polish officials to ensure the subsequent security of the communist administration[37]. Most importantly, as Kennan notes in his memoirs, Stalin’s ruthlessness quickly erased the sympathy that the Soviet war effort had gained in the West and ultimately made it clear that even when the fight for Nazism was over, the US would have to confront an equally dangerous and expansionist absolutism[38]. In spite of Roosevelt and Churchill’s concessions in favour of a unifying government in Poland, the Yalta Conference in 1945 manifestly concealed Stalin’s ambitions. Perhaps with a dose of cynical arrogance, Stalin declared that “they all say I am a dictator but I have enough democratic feeling not to set up a Polish government without the Poles” only to establish, by 1947, a

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Soviet-dominated Polish satellite government through the violent suppression of anti-communist opposition[39]. In essence, the violent expansion of Stalin's totalitarianism not only in Poland but also in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, greatly delegitimises the revisionist perception that Stalin's actions were mainly of a defensive nature. By and large, orthodox interpretations such as Bailey's 'America Faces Russia', consider Stalin's violation of his Yalta pledge to free elections and the subsequent instalment of Soviet-friendly regimes in Eastern Europe as responsible for the Cold War[40]. Similarly, Feis implies that post-war Soviet aggression had forced the US to respond with the policy of containment and the Marshall Plan[41]. Ultimately, as communist intellectual Djilas suggests, Stalin "who had subjected all activities in his own country to his views and his personality...could not behave differently outside"[42]. In this context, even though this essay consciously avoids reference to the numerous 'psychiatric' evaluations of Stalin's alleged paranoia, one could easily conceptualise how Stalin's absolute control over domestic and international policy meant that the Cold War was inevitable only after his accession to power in 1922.

However, such a strong emphasis on Stalin's totalitarian aspirations erroneously underestimates the contribution of President Truman to the outbreak of the Cold War. Therefore, in order to avoid the causal superficiality of the orthodox interpretation, it is imperative to examine the impact that the Truman Doctrine had on enhancing Stalin's fears of a looming capitalist encirclement of the Soviet Union. In fact, Offner presents Truman as a narrow-minded nationalist who was unable to compromise his fervent anti-communist sentiment for the sake of an early détente with the Soviets[43]. Instead, he followed a policy of military containment through the creation of NATO in 1949 and the economic restoration of Western Europe with the Marshall Plan. Offner further notes how Truman's inflated beliefs of American hegemony coupled with his inadequate knowledge of global affairs contributed to the origins of the Cold War. For instance, during the Potsdam Conference, Truman "heavily analogised diplomacy with his poker playing"[44]. Indeed, in a personal letter to his wife Truman boasted that "he [Stalin] doesn't know it but I have an ace in the hole" considering the atomic bomb as a tool to achieve concessions from Stalin[45]. Further indicating his ignorance in national security issues, Truman was informed about the Manhattan project only 12 days after Roosevelt's death in April 1945[46]. Moreover, while Stalin showed little interest in supporting the local Communist Party during the Greek Civil War, Truman directed huge amounts of military and economic aid to help re-establish liberal democracy in Greece[47]. This incident, apart from marking the first American post-war intervention in the internal affairs of another country, clearly rejects the aforementioned revolutionary persona attached to Stalin. In fact, Stalin's decision to avoid intervention in the Greek Civil War demonstrates his commitment to the so-called 'Percentages Agreement', according to which 90% of Greece was to remain under Western influence[48]. Even though this argument is significantly weakened by the fact that Stalin did not keep his promise in the cases of Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary (which were eventually transformed into one-party states), Truman's impulsive aggressiveness in Greece is clear. Also, Alperovitz considers Truman's decision in August 1945 to use atomic weapons against an already defeated Japan, as an attempt to intimidate the Soviets thereby enhancing Stalin's insecurity[49]. Finally, it can be argued that had Henry Wallace remained Vice President for the 1944 American election, and then became President after Roosevelt's death in 1945, the Cold War could not have happened. Evidently, Wallace strongly criticised Truman's containment policies. When Churchill, in his famous 'Iron Curtain' speech, called for a "fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples" against the Soviet Union, Wallace caustically responded that "we can get cooperation once Russia understands that our primary objective is neither saving the British Empire nor purchasing oil in the near East with the lives of American soldiers"[50]. Essentially, the isolationist nature of Wallace's statements implies that the outbreak of the Cold War was avoidable to a large extent as it was directly influenced by a simple Democratic Party Vice-Presidential nomination.

Overall, this essay puts forward three main arguments. All verify that the instrumental involvement of individuals in the historical events which led to the Cold War was avoidable to a great extent. Firstly, had it not been for a coincidental clash of Wilson's and Lenin's universalist aspirations, the subsequent antagonism between the US and the Soviet Union could have been avoided. Secondly, Stalin's brutal control over Soviet domestic and foreign policies could not have taken place in case of a different outcome in the power struggle after Lenin's death in 1924. Thirdly, had Henry Wallace remained the Vice President to succeed FDR instead of Truman, the Cold War could have been prevented. While it is not clear that different individuals could have decisively altered the course of events, what is clear is that Lenin's and Wilson's universalism, Stalin's totalitarianism and Truman's nationalism, had forged a specific chain of causation that led to more than four decades of fear, mistrust and nuclear precariousness.

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Written by: Constantinos Onesilou

Written at: King's College London

Written for: Dr. Walter Ladwig

Date written: April 2016