

Western Historiography on the Origins of the Cold War

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Summer 2001**

For many people in the world, the Cold War dominated every aspect of foreign relations for the last half of the twentieth century. The classic battle of words between the United States of American and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics polarized the nations of the world. Agencies from both sides attempted to use information and propoganda to influence opinion. Trillions of dollars were spent as each side attempted to prove economic, military and political superiority. Amazingly, despite the fact the United States and Soviet Union hated each other so much, the war only became hot in isolated incidents, notably Korea and Vietnam.

As with any conflict, those who have studied the war have attempted to define the cause of the war that put the world at the brink of nuclear war on several occasions. Early western historians of the Cold War, in the 1950s and under heavy conservative political influence, placed the blame for the conflict squarely on the Soviet Union. By the beginning of the 1960s, historians developed the antithesis to the conservative interpretation by placing the blame for the Cold War and the United States' post-World War II policies. In the great western political tradition of middle-of-the-road thinking, the historians of the 1970s began to argue the origins of the Cold War began with a misunderstanding and mistrust between both the United States and the Soviet Union. This interpretation of the origins of the Cold War held firm until the opening of the Soviet archives. Since the new material became available to western historians after the end of the Cold War, the arguments have become centered on the actual policies of expansion from the Soviet Union as the cause of the Cold War.

Original interpretation of the origins of the Cold War was not made by an historian, but instead by a policy maker of the United States, George Kennan. At the time of his 1947 article in Foreign Affairs, “Sources of Soviet Conduct,” Kennan was serving as the Director of Planning for the United States Department of State. His article was published under the pseudonym Mr. X¹. Kennan argues that the Soviet’s desired to expand their empire as a result of a paranoid insecurity arising from the Civil War. He further wrote that the Communist ideology demanded that capitalism be viewed as a threat.

...Belief is maintained in the basic badness of capitalism, in the inevitability of its destruction, in the obligation of the proletariat to assist in that destruction and to take power into its own hands. But stress has come to be laid primarily on those concepts which relate most specifically to the Soviet regime itself: to its position as the sole truly Socialist regime in a dark and misguided world, and to the relationships of power within it.²

Kennan believed the Soviet Union could not be trusted because of its ideological commitment to destroying capitalism, which Kennan believed the Soviets would do whatever they could to insure this would happen in order to maintain their position of influence in the world. Kennan pointed to the 1917 revolution of the Bolsheviks as an example of the lengths the Soviets would go to secure their power. Thus, the Soviet Union must not be allowed to expand and gain any momentum that could threaten the United States.³

¹ Kennan hoped to not have his argument discredited as biased. However, Mr. X’s identity was discovered within a few months of the publication of the article.

² Kennan, George F. “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” Foreign Affairs 12 (Spring 1947), page 583.

³ *Ibid.*, 579. Kennan, however, never argued for the United States to provoke the Soviet Union. His article hints at the superiority of the American system that would defeat Soviet ideology over time. This meant, according to Kennan, not letting the Soviets expand beyond its current sphere of influence and waiting until the US system wins.

Kennan's influence can be seen in the early histories of the origins of the Cold War. University of Chicago Professor, William Hardy McNeill blamed the entire conflict on Joseph Stalin. According to McNeill, Stalin was responsible for the Cold War by not going through with his promise to hold popular elections in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. Because of this, the United States could not trust anything Stalin promised, and began to view him with great mistrust. Also, McNeill argues, Stalin reverted back to Bolshevik slogans and ideology, which led to the idea of a worldwide communist movement. These actions again put the U.S. on the defensive in its effort to protect its interests in western Europe.⁴

Agreeing with McNeill's interpretation of the Cold War was Martin F. Hertz. Professor Hertz argues that when Stalin refused to allow Poland a free election, the western democracies, already feeling guilt for allowing the Poles to be sacrificed in 1939 by the Nazis, objected to allowing Stalin to force a "friendly" regime on his border. Hertz believes if Stalin would have allowed Poland and the other eastern European countries to retain some resemblance of independence or autonomy, there would have been no Cold War.⁵

The original interpretations of the Cold War are important to understanding the development of the war itself. However, these accounts do not take into consideration any of the United States' foreign policies and their effect on the Soviet Union. According to Kennan, McNeill and Hertz, the only way to have avoided the Cold War was to have someone else in charge of the Soviet Union. Any reader of these histories must also take

⁴ McNeill, William Hardy. America, Britain and Russia: Their Cooperation and Conflict, 1941-1946. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957).

⁵ Hertz, Martin F. Beginnings of the Cold War. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1966).

into account the political climate of the 1950s. McNeill's book was published in 1957, only 4 years after the Joseph McCarthy hearings and at a time when Americans were increasingly conservative in their views of the Soviet Union. Hertz's book was not published until the mid-1960s, after the country had liberalized in reaction to the over-conservative 1950s. However, Hertz was finishing his schooling during the 1950s, which undoubtedly played a role in his outlook on the world. In addition, for at least the first three-quarters of the 1950s, the tensions between the United States and Soviet Union were lessening to the point where many forecasters of political events were stating the Cold War was coming to an end. These lessening of tensions made many Americans feel as though their postwar ideals of self-determination for all nations was becoming true, which led to the popularization of some feel-good history, which McNeill's book, and to a certain extent Hertz's book even though it was written later, is a nice, feel-good about America history book.

As Americans began to liberalize their nation again in the 1960s, Cold War histories changed as well when William Appleman Williams blamed the Cold War on the United States. In his landmark 1962 book, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy, Williams, who called himself "a self-proclaimed radical," argued that the United States had historically considered the "open door" policy as essential to the continuous prosperity of the United States. Williams uses several historical examples of this policy and concludes that the United States could not reach any post-war agreement with the Soviet Union until the Soviets allowed the U.S. free trade in eastern Europe, which is opposite of the socialist states the Soviet Union wished to have in the region. Because of this, the author further argues that America put too much pressure on the Soviets through

plans such as NATO and the Marshall Plan, which put the Soviet Union on the defensive. Once the Soviet Union entrenched itself in order to protect its interests, there was no room to compromise on the makeup of post war Europe.⁶

Agreeing with Williams' viewpoint was Norman Graebner. Graebner's 1962 book argues that American leaders used rhetoric too hostile to the Soviet Union in hopes of convincing the people of America and western Europe that any Soviet threat could be easily removed.⁷ This led to the leaders of the United States to be able to concede nothing to the Soviets without looking weak to the masses.

The language of American diplomacy, admirably designed to reassure a citizenry at home, promised no less than the gradual erosion, before the superior appeal of freedom, of those forces in the world that defied American purpose (a purpose identified generally with the exclusion of Communist influence from international politics)...the national preoccupation with goals of universal freedom and justice denied that coexistence with communism was an acceptable agreement at all.⁸

Other revisionist historians have placed other American actions and policies at the center of the cause of the cold War. For Gar Alperovitz, the United States deserved the credit for beginning the Cold War because of its use of the atomic bomb on Japan. Alperovitz, argues Truman did not drop the bomb in order to save lives and end the war with Japan, but instead dropped the bomb in order to scare the Soviets into allowing the United States to set the policy for the post war world. However, according to Alperovitz, Stalin viewed eastern Europe as even more critical for the security of the Soviet Union.

⁶ Williams, William Appleman. *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. (New York: Delta, 1962).
Writer/historian Shelby Foote at a 1999 meeting of the National Endowment for the Humanities referred to Williams as a socialist.

⁷ Graebner, Norman. *Cold War Diplomacy, 1945-1960*. (New York: D. Von Nostrand, 1962).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 129. This ideological definition of American policy did not fit in with Graebner's more pragmatic political philosophy. In an interview printed in the *Contemporary Authors* series, Graebner states "US national interests must be precisely defined and never permitted to exceed those intentions."

After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Stalin need a buffer zone in order to detect any attempt by the United States to drop an atomic bomb on Moscow.⁹

Other revisionist interpretations of the Cold War have focused on the war time meetings of the leaders of the Allies against Germany. Adam Ulam and Jerald Combs both argue that the United States and Great Britain's failure to open the western front of the war until the summer of 1944, after the Soviets won at Stalingrad and began pushing the Germans out of Russia, led to a breakdown of trust between the American and Soviet leaders. In retaliation, both authors argue, Stalin was slow to declare war on the Japanese after the German surrender, which then led to a further breakdown in trust between the leaders of the two emerging superpowers.¹⁰

Just as the original interpreters of the Cold War ignored US actions and placed the blame on the Soviet Union, all the revisionist historians do is shift the blame away from the Soviet Union, ignoring their actions, and place blame squarely on the United States. While many of the revisionists make sound logical arguments, very few of them address the arguments that oppose their viewpoints. While pop culture in the 1960s seemed to ostracize anything that was pro-government. The revisionists seem to do the same thing about American policy in postwar period. The revisionist school of thought, it must be remembered was born in a time when the Cold War was beginning to heat up again. Throughout most of the fifties, it seemed that most of the postwar tensions were coming to an end since the death of Stalin and the Eisenhower administration friendly gestures to the new Soviet leadership. However, by the end of the fifties, the U-2 spy plane incident

⁹ Alperovitz, Gar. Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

and the beginning of Communism in Cuba were viewed as colossal failures of American policy, which the revisionists seemed to jump on. These anti-government biases are evident when the revisionists fail to mention the billions of dollars worth of aid that Franklin Roosevelt and the Congress sent to the Russians in order to aid their efforts against the Nazis in the summer of 1941. The revisionists also completely discount the role of the United States early in its participation in the war as a mediator between Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin. In fact, it was Churchill who did not want to open the western front of the war because he felt the British owed something to the Poles. It was Roosevelt who was able to broker an agreement among the three powers. The revisionists completely ignore these facts, possibly because it deflates their argument. In the late 1960s, the answer to what was to blame for the Cold War probably lied somewhere in the middle of the two opposing schools of thought on the subject.

The idea that the fault of the Cold War lie with both the United States and Soviet Union was put forth by John Lewis Gaddis in his landmark book, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947. In the book, Gaddis argues that both the United States and Soviet Union desired a peaceful post war Europe. Using western sources, Professor Gaddis writes that the United States foreign policy after the defeat of the Nazis was designed to keep the grand wartime alliance together, provide for self-determination in all the nations of the world and allow for organizations to be created and used to help insure the peace would be everlasting. However, these American initiatives would need the cooperation of the Soviet Union, which had its own ideas for the post war world.

¹⁰ Ulam, Adam. Expansions and Coexistence, 2nd Edition. (New York: Praeger, 1974), pages 334-338. and Combs, Jerald. American Diplomatic History: Two Centuries of Changing Interpretation. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pages 232-233.

According to Gaddis, the Soviets felt they needed a buffer zone from the west, the source of their problems since 1914, in order to secure their interests.¹¹ These two opposing post war visions, according to the author, made the conflict between the two nations unavoidable.

The Cold War grew out of complicated interaction of external and internal developments inside both the United States and the Soviet Union. The external situation - circumstances beyond the control of either power - left Americans and Russians facing one another across prostrated Europe at the end of World War II. Internal influences in the Soviet Union - the search for security, the role of ideology, massive postwar construction needs, the personality of Stalin - together with those in the United States - the ideal of self-determination, fear of communism, the illusion of omnipotence fostered by American economic strength and the atomic bomb - made the resulting confrontation a hostile one. Leaders of both superpowers sought peace, but in doing so yielded to considerations which, while they did not precipitate war, made a resolution of differences impossible.¹²

Other arguments made by post-revisionists have fallen along similar lines to the Gaddis argument for the origins of the Cold War. George Herring focused his work around the United States' inability to predict Stalin's behavior as a major cause of the Cold War. In addition, Herring speculated that Stalin saw the United States' economic plans as a direct threat to the Soviet Union. Herring concedes that he has no evidence to support his Stalin claim, but uses psychological profiling of Stalin's reactions to American decisions, most notably Berlin in 1947, to reach his conclusion.¹³ Robert Messer continued the work of the post-revisionists by focusing on the misunderstanding of each other by the leaders of the two superpowers. According to Messer, the United States and Soviet Union could not come to an agreement on the actual definition of what

¹¹ Gaddis, John Lewis. The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

¹² Ibid., 361. Gaddis' work was considered the most influential history of the Cold War until the 1990s. In a 1995 review of Cold War histories, International Social Science Review referred to the book as the single book to read to understand the pre-glasnost American view of the Cold War.

¹³ Herring, George C. Aid to Russia 1941-1947: Strategy, Diplomacy and the Origins of the Cold War. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973).

a free election would entail and who would be in charge of guaranteeing the election be free from fraud.¹⁴

In the ongoing search among western historians for the origins of the Cold War, the post-revisionists seem to have achieved more objectivity than the previous two schools that developed. In their arguments, there was no flag-waving, nor were there any criticisms of the United States government such for the sake of criticizing the United States government. However, the revisionists remove all blame for the Cold War and come to the conclusion the Cold War was an unavoidable fate. However, history is full of great people who rose up against insurmountable odds to change fate and, therefore, history. A scan of leaders of both the Soviet Union and United States will produce several men that were more than capable of changing this fate, but these men did not trust one another to carry out what they had promised to do. Becoming untrustworthy is not an unavoidable fate as the revisionists would want their readers to believe. Something has to cause that mistrust, and when that mistrust is uncovered, then the cause of the origins of the Cold War will have been found.

Despite the flaws in their argument, the post-revisionists histories of the Cold War were the predominate interpretations of the origins of the Cold War.¹⁵ However, since the end of the Cold War, the archives of the former Soviet Union have been opened. This has been allowing for new interpretations of the Cold War to come forth with a better understanding of what the Soviets were thinking and planning during the beginnings of

¹⁴ Messer, Robert L. The End of an Alliance: James F. Byrnes, Roosevelt, Truman and the Origins of the Cold War. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1982).

¹⁵ Contemporary Authors: New Revised Edition states in its biographical sketch of John Lewis Gaddis that "After the publication of his 1972 book, Gaddis became the foremost Cold War origins expert in the west. He is often referred to as the Dean of Cold War studies."

the Cold War. New research has been done concerning the ideological conflict between the two superpowers, Joseph Stalin's role, and post-war empire building by both sides are now receiving considerable research. In addition, this new post Cold War era is allowing Russian historians to make their arguments about the origins of the Cold War.

Martin P. Lefler argued in his 1992 book that the Soviet archives have tended to support the idea that power considerations were the reasons for the Cold War. Lefler contends that the Soviet Union and United States competed to create spheres of influence that they believed were vital to their national security and economic interests. Unfortunately, these two powers, according to Lefler, competed next to each other on the European continent, which led to tension along border countries, which can be most easily seen in the conflicts over the city of Berlin.¹⁶

This idea of the Cold War being a conflict between two great political and economic powers has also been used by Russian historians Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov. While Lefler's argument placed the blame for the Cold War on both the United States and Soviet Union, Zubok and Pleshakov maintain the Cold War was due to the Soviet Union's desire to conquer the western democracies and force them into a communist/socialist world state just as the Soviet government had done to the Russians in October 1917. This desire was picked up on by American leaders, the authors credit George Kennan for the American policy, and forced them to face and contain the expansionist nature of the Kremlin.¹⁷

¹⁶ Lefler, Martin P. A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Zubok, Vladislav and Constantine Pleshakov. Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Another school of thought emerging in the origins of the Cold War study is that the Cold War was caused by Joseph Stalin. Robert C. Tucker argues that Stalin had a dream of a postwar Soviet empire that would rule the world. This dream became the center of Soviet postwar diplomacy. Following along these lines, Tucker argues that Stalin could not allow free elections, as defined by the United State, in eastern Europe and hope to keep any momentum for socialism he had achieved with the people of the Soviet Union following the defeat of the Germans.¹⁸

Even John Lewis Gaddis has been forced to reevaluate his opinion on the origins of the Cold War. Since the new sources have been made public, Gaddis no longer sees the Cold War as an unavoidable fate of history. Instead, Gaddis placed the entire blame of the Cold War on Joseph Stalin.

For all of their importance, once could have removed Roosevelt, Churchill, Truman, Bevin, Marshall, or Acheson, and cold war would still have probably followed the world war. If one could have eliminated Stalin, alternative paths become quite conceivable....No twentieth century leader imprinted himself upon his country as thoroughly and with such lasting effect as Stalin did...Once Stalin wound up at the top in Moscow and once it was clear his state would survive the war with Germany, then the new sources seem quite clear that there was going to be a Cold War whatever the west did. Who then is responsible? The answer, I think, is authoritarianism in general, and Stalin in particular.¹⁹

Whether or not Harry Truman dropped the atomic bomb to intimidate the Soviets, as Alperovitz argued he did, or Truman dropped the bomb to end the war with the Japanese is now just as important as how the Soviets viewed the bomb. Again, Joseph Stalin comes to the front and center of the Cold War debate. A memoir was released by the Russians in 1994 has shown that Stalin did not see the atomic bomb as a useful

¹⁸ Tucker, Robert C. "The Cold War in Stalin's Time: What the New Sources Reveal," Diplomatic History 21, (Spring 1997), pages 273-281.

¹⁹ Gaddis, John Lewis, We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). Page 294.

weapon in ending the war with the Japanese. Instead, according to the memoir, Stalin saw the atomic bomb as a secret weapon designed to intimidate the Soviets into bowing before American demands for postwar Europe. This reaction to the bomb forced Stalin to desire the creation of buffer states between the Soviet Union and the western democracies, which led to the uncompromising positions by both the United States and Soviet Union over postwar Europe.²⁰

Another post-Cold War interpretation of the origins of the conflict has centered around the role ideology played in the creating a bipolar world. Ronald Powalski argues in his 1998 book, The Cold War: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1917-1991, that the Cold War developed between two superpowers that had diametrically opposed visions of the world. Powalski agrees with the revisionist Graebner about the role of United States ideology played in the creation of tensions. The United States, according to Powalski, envisioned a world of free market democracies with complete open trade, a world similar to the one described by Adam Smith in the 1770s. However, the author argues that the release of the new documents shows the Soviet Union envisioned a world dominated by communal socialist governments, a world similar to the one described by Karl Marx in the mid 19th century. Powalski challenges anyone who reads his book to find a compromise between these two ideologies. He concludes that the Cold War was an inevitable conflict after the world war because of the history of development of these two ideologies in the two superpowers.²¹

²⁰ Berezhev, Valentin M. At Stalin's Side: His Interpreter's Memoirs from the October Revolution to the Fall of the Dictator's Empire, trans. Sergei I. Mikheyev (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1994), pages 268-270.

²¹ Powalski, Ronald. The Cold War: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1917-1991. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Ideological propaganda was the main cause of the Cold War according to Nigel Gould Davis. Davis argues that the structure of both of the superpowers government created a need to advance their political and economic ideologies. With the release of the Soviet archives, Davis believes the power structure within the Kremlin demanded that the leader of the Communist Party be active in the creation of the world wide socialist revolution so that the Soviets would be in a position to be the lone power in the newly created world. Davis compares this system in Moscow with the role of the elections in the United States. During the initial elections, Congressional and Presidential, of the Cold War, American politicians became increasingly tough in their promises about how they would deal with the evil Soviets. Davis gives credit for this development in the United States to Kennan's 1947 article. According to Davis, these two systems could not afford to compromise and allow the people who compromised to remain in political life.²²

Another new Soviet archive interpretation of the Cold War's focus on ideology comes from Russian historian Vojtech Mastny. He writes that the propaganda wars over Europe played the key part in creating a paranoid Stalin. Reacting to American aid to help rebuild postwar Europe, Stalin saw the postwar continent as ripe for rebellion against the capitalistic two world wars. The creation of the propaganda agency, Cominform, was designed to spread socialist propaganda and discredit the promises of capitalism. In response, the west, according to Mastny, created the propaganda machine known as Radio Free Europe, which was designed to discredit socialist propaganda, while explaining the opportunities of democracy and capitalism. Mastny believes that these two

²² Davis, Nigel Gould. "Rethinking the role

agencies led to increasing tensions on the continent, which would then spread throughout the world.²³

From the publication of Gaddis' 1972 landmark book until the end of the Cold War in 1991, the western historians were beginning to agree on the question of who/what caused that Cold War. However, the release of the Soviet archives has sent historiography about the Cold War into new debates. While it would seem that the new documents would lead the world closer to the truth, it has done the opposite. Russian historians have been extremely critical of the Soviet's postwar policies in much the same way that the early western historians blamed the Cold War on the actions of the Soviet Union. Along the same lines, many historians, most notably Gaddis, have been putting an increasing amount of blame for the Cold War on Stalin. However, both of these schools of thought seriously downplay the role of the United States. Gaddis claims that if you remove Stalin from the postwar landscape, then there would not have been a Cold War. What about the role of the United States in their attempt to unify Germany in 1946? If this does not occur, then what would be the biggest development of the Cold War in the late 1940s? If Stalin was the main cause of the Cold War, then what about the postwar rhetoric put forth by Winston Churchill, which Americans seem to believe every word he said?

The other post-Cold War school of thought places the opposing ideology of the two superpowers as the cause of the conflict. These historians, however, downplay the role of individual action in the course of mankind. A study of political/economic/social theories would find that none of them work as they were planned out on paper. Adam

²³ Mastny, Vojtech. The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years. (New York: Oxford

Smith's capitalism did not work exactly as he planned it. Baron Montesquieu's political theories did not work out quite the way he planned it. This does not mean to downplay the work of these philosopher/historians, their plans did work in some contexts, however, no theory on paper will work exactly as planned because the philosopher/historian cannot predict the individual actions of people. Place Henry Wallace in charge of the United States and Nikita Krushchev in charge of the Soviet Union as the Germans and Japanese are surrendering and think of how Cold War history would be different.²⁴

The release of the Soviet archives as thrown the history of the origins of the Cold War into disarray. The history of the western history of the origins of the Cold War was progressing along a nice pace toward conclusion. Originally, the western historians placed the blame squarely on the Soviet Union. As an antithesis, the revisionists placed the blame squarely on the United States. Soon the synthesis was put forth that equal blame on the United States and Soviet Union for the Cold War was cause of the Cold War. However, since 1991, the historians are arguing again. Was the main cause of the Cold War the use of ideology, Joseph Stalin, the creation of spheres of influence, Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb, or was Gaddis correct in 1972 that the Cold War was one big misunderstanding?

While the cause of the Cold War was probably a combination of all of these things, historians will continue to work to find the main cause in hopes of defining the

University Press, 1996).

²⁴ It is an impossible task to predict how the histories would be different if you changed factor X and/or Y. However, these "what if" games are written about all the time. It is no different in Cold War histories. Many of the authors surveyed in this paper used these "what if" questions to help to prove their point. Therefore, it is fair game to use the same methodology to question their work.

problem so that we can learn from the past, and hopefully avoid making the same mistakes.

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