

Inside the
Kremlin's Cold War

From Stalin to Khrushchev

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Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1996



Prologue: The View from the Kremlin, 1945

Soviet Russia has been looked upon as the very incarnation of all evil; hence her ideas have assumed the quality of the devilish.

Erich Fromm

Late on the morning of June 24, 1945, the golden clocks on the Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower chimed and everyone in the Soviet Union with a radio listened to those familiar sounds. The great Parade of Victory was about to begin. All along Red Square and the area surrounding it, victorious troops in decorated uniforms, with captured Nazi banners, in formations and in the turrets of tanks, all perfectly still, waited for a signal to march. Thousands of people crowded into the guest stalls. Suddenly, thunderous applause spread through the crowd as the ruling State Committee of Defense emerged from the Kremlin and began to climb the stairs of Lenin's Mausoleum. It was this group that had replaced the Communist Politburo during the four years of the most devastating war in the world's history. Leading the others, walking at some distance from them, was Joseph Stalin, the head of the USSR.

In just a few years the same leaders who celebrated the triumph over Nazi Germany would clash with their former allies, the United States and Great Britain, in a costly and protracted struggle. To understand how the Soviets perceived a conflict with the West, one has to understand what happened in the deep recesses of the Kremlin. Joseph Stalin and his lieutenants were rulers of a special type—tyrannical, cruel, and certainly loathsome in many ways—who defined their legitimacy in the terms they themselves set and harshly imposed on

the people of the USSR. Nevertheless, in 1945, with the defeat of Nazi Germany still fresh in everyone's mind, these men were united in victory with the people they ruled. The Kremlin leaders and their regime experienced their golden hour representing the triumphant forces of history. They carried on the legacy of Russia as the savior of the world, a legacy willingly shared by millions of their countrymen. In order to understand the Cold War from the Soviet perspective, one must understand the importance of that moment and the larger historic legacy of Russia and the Russian Revolution, vindicated by the victory of 1945.

The Soviet worldview had been shaped by a history that was dramatically different from that of the West. The legacy of czarist history, the Bolshevik revolution, the Civil War, and the experience of World War II all contributed to a unique Soviet perspective. Another, important factor that significantly shaped the Soviet perspective was that Russia represented not only a nation but also a distinctive imperial civilization. One could argue that, with the exception of the period of the Mongol yoke (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries), Russia has always been an empire. And even during the Mongol interlude, when its land had become a province of a grandiose nomadic mega-state, Russia still remained in the imperial framework. The traditional imperial legacy was an insurmountable obstacle to Russia's becoming an "ordinary" nation-state. Despite their intentions to build a brave new world from scratch, Russian Communists simply could not break with the imperial mode of thinking.¹

At the end of the fifteenth century the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome had emerged; two previous Romes had fallen, for they had sinned, and (after the collapse of Constantinople) it was now time for Moscow to be the eternal keeper of the Christian faith. This Russian messianism became the spiritual backbone of the expanding Russian empire, which perceived itself as nothing short of sacred. After the revolution of 1917, however, Soviet Russia assumed the responsibility of spreading the Marxist message. Now, as the keeper of the Marxist faith, it would emancipate mankind rather than Orthodox Christianity.

History gave the Russians more concrete reasons to see themselves as saviors of the world. Russians credited themselves with having rescued Europe from two invading powers—the Mongols in the thirteenth century and Napoleon's army in the early nineteenth century.

The belief that Russia was the protector of mankind against a militant anti-Christ was strongly reinforced by the victory over the Nazis in 1945. In the European war theater the Soviet contribution to victory was decisive and costly. The enormous sacrifice of the Russian people in the Second World War had led the Soviet leaders to believe that the Allies owed them a great deal.

The fact that the Soviet regime had been founded by Communist revolutionaries further alienated Russia from the West and contributed to its messianic legacy. The proletarian revolution, as envisaged by Marx and Engels, was meant to create an unprecedented universal proletarian empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Marxism in Western Europe was becoming more and more national, and was being transformed into the Social-Democratic projects of a welfare nation-state. The Socialists of France and Germany and even of Russia supported World War I as a war between nation-states. V. I. Lenin, the founder of bolshevism, found himself alone when he called for transforming the imperialist European war into a civil class war. His call, after the defeat of a leftist revolution in Germany in 1918, failed to ignite any other nations. Only in Russia, where the concept of a nation-state had totally failed, did Lenin lead the people to the utopia of a universal proletarian empire without borders. The imperial implications of both Marxist thought and Russian history provide the broad background and context for understanding Soviet involvement in the Cold War.

The origins of Cold War thinking from the Soviet side are often interpreted in the West in a simplistic manner: Stalin wanted to conquer the world and so switched from cooperation to confrontation. The American revisionist school generally regards the Cold War as a bilateral process, with Stalin reacting to certain assertive actions by Washington. In the case of Stalin's leadership, however, we are facing something more complicated than just expansionism or "reactions."² Stalin and generations of Soviet bureaucrats who grew up with him or under his rule shared a complex attitude toward the outside world that had its roots in Russian history, Marxism, and, in its modified version, Leninism. It would be wrong to interpret Communist behavior in the world arena in terms of either geopolitics or ideology. We prefer to conceive of this conduct as the result of the symbiosis of imperial expansionism and ideological proselytism.

When Lenin came to power in 1917, he was driven by a utopian

dream that the fire of the world revolution, having started in Russia, would engulf the world. In this context in 1918 he attempted to abandon the world of geopolitics.³ If Russia were to prevail over Germany in the First World War, any regime in Russia would have to collaborate with the Allies. Instead, Lenin signed a separate peace treaty (the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk) with Kaiser Germany in which he sacrificed the most developed areas of European Russia, even those that Germany had not yet occupied. The loss of these crucial territories—a geopolitical catastrophe—could have been averted only through military cooperation with the major allies of czarist Russia: Great Britain, France, and the United States. But this was unacceptable to Lenin, for the leader of the Russian Revolution had his eyes only on consolidation of the new regime—and for a particular purpose. Preserving Russia as the headquarters of world revolution promised the spread of the revolutionary ideology around the globe, or at least in Eastern and Central Europe.

In 1922, after signing the Treaty of Rapallo with Germany, Lenin switched to a more complex model of Marxist state behavior, coming very close to elaborating the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. But the father of the Russian Revolution did not have the slightest intention of canceling ideology as a motivation in the making of foreign policy.⁴ The result was a strange amalgam of ideological proselytism and geopolitical pragmatism that began to evolve in Soviet Russia in the early 1920s. Marxism was a utopian teaching, but since it proclaimed that the goal of the material transformation of the world was to be realized in a violent confrontation with its opponents, Communist proselytes developed a whole set of highly effective political institutions. Utopian ideals gave way to a ruthless and cynical interpretation of the realpolitik tradition.⁵

The combination of traditional Russian messianism and Marxist ideology produced something larger (though more fragile) than its parts taken separately. The two phenomena became completely blurred in the USSR by the 1920s and remained that way until the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991. Together they provide a theoretical explanation of Soviet foreign policy behavior—the revolutionary-imperial paradigm.

Lenin's comrades-in-arms, such as Stalin and Molotov, and even the

younger generation of Soviet leaders represented by Khrushchev, would inherit this ambivalent worldview. Each of them would make his own intricate Cold War journey, guided by the two misleading suns of empire and revolution. The story of their journeys will provide us with some new insights into their motivation and goals at various points in the Cold War. Fascinating in and of themselves, these characters are also representatives of the sunken Soviet empire, a latter-day Atlantis, the lore of which is already starting to be forgotten.

This book is constructed around key Soviet leaders. The issue of the role of personality in Soviet policy-making is a crucial one. Marxism had always asserted that the role of the leader or, for that matter, any individual was insignificant compared with the role of the masses in the class struggle.⁶ The examples of Lenin, Stalin, or Khrushchev had proved just the opposite. The Kremlin had always been an Olympus—first chaired by Lenin, then terrorized by Stalin, then chaired again by Khrushchev.

Instrumental to any society, leaders were the driving force of the USSR. The changing society and the international environment at some points were even ignored by the Soviet demigods, though none of them could disregard entirely the world around them. Stalin throughout his life carefully monitored the possible dangerous consequences of Western ideological influence on his regime. Similarly, the problem of international security was never ignored during the Cold War years. The ominous and almost lethal German invasion of Russia in 1941 took the Soviet leadership by surprise and taught them a tragic lesson. The nuclear issue in particular was one of the major factors predetermining the actions of all members of the Kremlin leadership.

None of the Soviet leaders had ever approached the status Stalin zealously coveted. But every one of them was a tyrant in his own right. Gray and dull, Molotov would be Stalin's representative in the satrapy of foreign policy; the obnoxious Beria would rule over the spheres of the secret police and the atomic project. The articulate Zhdanov would bully the leaders of the East European Communist parties, while the sophisticated Malenkov would reshuffle party apparatchiks and state managers like a deck of cards. Even Khrushchev, having ousted all his rivals by 1957, would build up his own nationwide cult of personality and control everything—from emulation of American

agriculture (his notorious “corn” campaign) to suppression of the intellectual opposition and the supervision of Moscow’s bohemian circles.

Many questions must be asked in connection with leaders other than Stalin: What were the specific attitudes and activities of Stalin’s lieutenants—such as Molotov, Zhdanov, Beria, and Malenkov—during the first years of the Cold War? What were Nikita Khrushchev’s motivations throughout the international crises of 1953–1962? What can explain Khrushchev’s inconsistent performance in the international arena and his eccentric escapades in his relations with Western powers? What about the Asian front of the Cold War? Was a split between Khrushchev’s USSR and Mao Zedong’s China just a clash of personalities, or can it be attributed to fundamentally different approaches by the leadership of the two countries toward key international issues? Should we regard the Sino-Soviet schism simply as a matter of bilateral relations or should we put it into a broad Cold War perspective?

Another major issue concerns the extent to which the Soviet Union wanted the Cold War. Without a doubt the imperial tradition of Russia, reinforced by Marxist globalism, predestined Soviet expansionism. But the Cold War emerged from the ruins of World War II, and this hard fact raises three problems. First, there was the issue of the appropriate rewards for the Soviet contribution to the war. Of paramount importance in Europe and recognized as such by Britain and the United States, the Soviet war effort had almost unimaginable costs. More than twenty-seven million people died—the majority of them young men between the ages of eighteen and thirty, but also women and children. The European sphere of the USSR was devastated by the German war machine. Shouldn’t Stalin’s leadership expect special treatment from Western powers after such a sacrifice? And how did this expectation affect Soviet relations with the West after 1945—be it concerning economic assistance (generous reparations from Germany, direct American aid) or recognized spheres of influence for the Soviet Union in Europe (each territory—Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia—having been fertilized with Soviet blood)?

Second, given the scale of human and material losses, the Soviet Union, though it had troops almost all over Eurasia from Germany to Manchuria, could not sustain the stress of another war. In this

respect, it is hard to imagine that Stalin could have deliberately chosen to pursue brinkmanship with the West. The nuclear disability of the Soviet Union in 1945–1949 also argues for the belief that Stalin's original intention of 1945–1947 was to proceed with some kind of partnership with the West.

Third, there was the issue of complete Soviet cooperation with the United States and Britain during the war. The tension this cooperation often engendered did not preclude a search for solutions and even unilateral concessions on both sides. Stalin disbanded the Comintern in 1943; Roosevelt and Churchill formally recognized the Soviet zone of security in Eastern Europe in 1943–1945.⁷ Could Stalin have believed that this intense interaction was to end abruptly as soon as the war was won? Or did this new mode of understanding based upon mutual compromise imply postwar cooperation? Could Stalin—especially given his fascination with the Russian imperial past—envisage some sort of jointly managed system of international relations, not unlike that which followed the Napoleonic Wars? We do have evidence that Stalin identified himself with Alexander I, a victorious emperor and a postwar partner of his wartime allies at the Vienna Congress of 1815.

The Soviet wartime experience did not in itself regulate Stalin's attitude toward the West. There was also the xenophobic nature of Stalin's regime, which had deep roots in the past. Stalin was aware that any openness toward the outside world could mean the seeds of political opposition in the USSR. Russian czarist history taught a lesson from the Napoleonic Wars, after which Russian officers, having seen Europe, did try to abolish autocracy in their own country in the Decembrists' mutiny of 1825.

This book is limited not only in the choice of key leaders and issues discussed but also in its time frame. We have good reasons for bringing our research only up to 1962.⁸ There were two distinct phases of the Cold War: first, bipolar brinkmanship; and second, multilateral permanent truce.⁹ The Cold War of bipolar brinkmanship had begun amid the blooming linden trees of Berlin in 1948 and ended in the green waters of the Caribbean in 1962. It had expired for two reasons: the Cuban missile crisis had proved the insanity of brinkmanship, and the Sino-Soviet schism had eliminated absolute bipolarity by 1962. The multilateral permanent truce that dominated international relations from 1962 to 1989 provided for a more manageable confron-

tation that at the same time became more diversified as more nations, including Red China, became independent players.

Every one of Stalin's men discussed here was able to act as a statesman, according to his own ideas and perceptions. The time frame of this book also allows a panoramic view of the Stalinist power elite and enables us to reflect on the shaping of their worldview, under the impact of the milestone events of Soviet history—the Russian Revolution, Stalin's "revolution from above," and finally World War II. Despite the fire and blood of Stalin's purges, his inner circle, from which his successors later emerged, included men representing three generations of the Soviet elite. There was the generation of professional revolutionaries, Bolsheviks, who stormed the skies to put an end to the old world and build the new. This group of believers was represented by Molotov. His is the case of a revolutionary who became a state-builder and later a statesman. Next came the generation of the children of the Russian Revolution. Khrushchev represented its peasant-worker strand. Zhdanov was related to another strand, that of middle-class intelligentsia. Both became ardent Stalinists primarily because they were proud of the Revolution and saw the strong Soviet empire as its justification. Those from the last generation, Stalin's apparatchiks, were Beria and Malenkov. For them not the revolution of 1917 but Stalin's "revolution from above" was a formative experience. They were the cynics of power, not the dreamers. Malenkov reflected an evolution among the post-purges generation of Soviet elites from ideological fervor to techno-bureaucracy, their instincts to build a more harmonious environment out of Stalin's prison for people, to create a less dangerous environment for the Soviet empire. This generation was a direct precursor to the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko.

A book about the Brezhnevites, however, is another story—that of a senile Cold War. It is with the earlier and more virulent Cold War that we must concern ourselves in order to understand the ways in which the Kremlin perceived the world and waged its side of the conflict in the aftermath of World War II.