

## The cold War: A world history

[Book review by Jonathan Steele, published in \*London Review of Books\*, print edition of Jan 25, 2018](#)

**Reviewing: The Cold War: A World History**, by Odd Arne Westad, Allen Lane, 710 pp, ISBN 9780241011317

More than a quarter of a century has elapsed since the Cold War ended and the surprise is that few historians have yet attempted to analyse it from start to finish, even though for two generations it threatened the world with nuclear armageddon. The balance of terror between the superpowers may have seemed to offer reassurance – as if it could last for ever – but that was always an illusion. Even the millions born since the Soviet Union’s collapse haven’t escaped the Cold War’s mindset, since many aspects of the old confrontation survive. Current tensions over countries that used to be unassailable parts of Soviet territory and are now NATO members, like the three Baltic states, or Ukraine and Georgia, which are seeking to become members, have led us towards a new Cold War.

It is different from the original one. Ideological conflict no longer pits Moscow against today’s enlarged ‘West’, since Russia’s elite unashamedly embraced capitalism after 1991. The Kremlin has ceased to stand at the head of a rival economic and social system that challenges the U.S. promise of individual freedom and global prosperity. Today’s struggle between Moscow and Washington involves traditional nation-state competition for political and economic influence. The scope is no longer global: it is limited to areas bordering Russia – in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia – and since 2015 to parts of the Middle East. The struggle is asymmetrical: NATO and the EU have extended their political and military alliances to areas that used to be aligned with Moscow; Russia’s response has been to sustain proxy armed groups in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – ensuring that all three are stuck in frozen conflicts which reduce their chances of NATO membership.

Another difference from the latter half of the Cold War is that Russia is allied with China again, but their relationship is now pragmatic, not ideological. They see themselves as forming an axis of resistance to U.S. efforts at promoting regime change in foreign countries. While the U.S. has marginalised or ignored the UN in recent years, Russia and China have increasingly used the Security Council to defend state sovereignty and non-interference as indispensable principles of international law. This doesn’t mean they haven’t violated or wouldn’t violate other countries’ sovereignty on occasion themselves – but neither state approved the U.S.-led invasions of Serbia, Iraq and Libya, the last two of which produced catastrophes that are still unfolding.

Russia and the U.S. are still the world’s most heavily armed nuclear states, but Russia’s power is hugely diminished. It has no ambitions for restoring anything like the Soviet Union, let alone becoming a global superpower again. It seeks international influence and respect, not empire. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia spent \$69 billion on defence in 2016, little more than a tenth of the U.S. spend of \$611 billion and substantially less

than the combined total of Britain and France. To imagine that Russia wants to provoke a hot war in Europe is fantasy. Its development of anti-Western cyber warfare and its efforts at political meddling abroad through social media (on which the facts are still highly unclear) reflect weakness rather than strength.

Yet another difference from the latter days of the Cold War: with rare exceptions, the Western mass media are now more partisan. Instead of trying to test the accusations made against Russia alongside Russians' own explanations, most European and American commentators, as well as political leaders, with the notable exceptions of Donald Trump and a number of right-wing populists in Europe, jump to worst-case views of Moscow's foreign policy. There is no equivalent to the debate between 'hawks' and 'doves' that took place in Western parliaments and the mainstream media in the 1970s and early 1980s over whether to pursue detente or confrontation, engagement or containment. Nowadays, in Europe, only the far right makes the case for seeking agreements with Russia, which prevents discussion of that case's potential merits. Or the case is put by Trump and promptly doused with contempt, as the U.S. media declare that his line is dictated by murky commercial self-interest, political payback for help during his election campaign or even blackmail. Whatever Trump's motives – and he clearly didn't think carefully before adopting most of his policies – the argument for trying to have better relationships with Moscow shouldn't automatically be discredited because he, for a time, seemed to favour it. But, regrettably, for experts even to suggest that any aspect of Russian policy may reflect legitimate interests is to invite the charge of being an appeaser, a dupe of Moscow or a Putin apologist. The distinction between understanding and justifying Kremlin policy gets blurred.

In this febrile atmosphere it may seem over-ambitious to attempt to produce a cool-headed analysis of the Cold War that explains Moscow's thinking as fairly as the West's. But Odd Arne Westad has impressive credentials. He was a founding editor of the journal *Cold War History*, which has an unrivalled record of publishing essays based on material in the Soviet and U.S. government archives. He co-edited the three volumes of the *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, published in 2010. And his latest book is a masterful survey that will set the standard for Cold War scholarship for years to come. Westad illuminates the way the competition between communism and capitalism over the route to modernity became enmeshed with the drive towards decolonisation after 1945. There may have been a nuclear stalemate on the central front in Europe – but the Cold War also provoked hot wars in East and South-East Asia and many parts of the Third World.

Until the end of the 1950s most Western historians tended to blame the Cold War on Stalin. They cited his policies in Europe, particularly the suppression of democratic choice in Poland and other countries where Soviet troops were stationed. But after the Bay of Pigs debacle in Cuba and the decade of disastrous U.S. intervention in Indochina, which undermined perceptions of U.S. foreign policy as inherently benign, a school of revisionist historians emerged. They argued that the driving force behind the Cold War was the U.S. ambition to create an international trading system of open markets and make the world safe for global capitalism. They laid much emphasis on the recently published National Security Council Paper 68 (NSC-68), a top secret strategy document drafted for Harry Truman in 1950. It advocated containment of the Soviet Union, described in the document as a 'policy of calculated and gradual coercion'. Globally, it

assigned the U.S. the role of international sheriff, claiming that ‘the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable. This fact imposes on us, in our own interests, the responsibility of world leadership.’ Thanks to NSC-68 the key questions – who started the Cold War, and could it have been avoided even if there had been no Stalin? – could be answered with the claim that U.S. global ambitions led inevitably to confrontation with the Soviet Union and local nationalists around the world. The initiative for exacerbating the rivalry thus came from Washington.

In his important 1997 book based on the newly opened Soviet archives, *We Now Know*, the Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis took a post-revisionist approach. He argued that Cold War studies should focus on the battle of ideas, and not just on military power, since the Soviet Union fell not as a result of military defeat or an economic crash but because of a collapse in legitimacy. While Gaddis’s goals were admirable, his critics pointed out that his conclusions echoed the Western orthodoxy of the 1950s. ‘Did Stalin seek a Cold War?’ Gaddis wrote. ‘The question is a little like asking: does a fish seek water?’ His book had other limitations. It ended with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Apart from one chapter on China, it confined itself to the U.S.-Soviet confrontation in Europe. Westad’s book ranges much more widely, and takes a longer view. He treats the Cold War as a phenomenon shaped by the radicalisation of the European labour movement in the 1890s and the emergence of Russia and the U.S. as transcontinental empires. ‘The Cold War was born from the global transformations of the late 19th century’, Westad writes,

and was buried as a result of tremendously rapid changes a hundred years later. It can be constituted as a stage in the advent of U.S. global hegemony ... It can be seen as the (slow) death of the socialist left, especially in the form espoused by Lenin. And it can be portrayed as an acute and dangerous phase in international rivalries which grew on the disasters of two world wars and then was overtaken by new global divides in the 1970s and 1980s.

He agrees with Gaddis that in Stalin’s final years the ‘ageing Soviet leader was increasingly getting caught in his own delusions’ – as shown by the purges of communists in Eastern Europe in the late 1940s, the many ‘plots’ against him that were allegedly discovered, and the irrational treatment of the Yugoslav and Chinese communist leaders with whom he had been allied. Nevertheless, Westad argues that in the immediate postwar period there was method in the madness.

Stalin hoped that his wartime alliance with the United States and Britain would continue, as part of a mutually accepted division of Europe into spheres of control. In January 1945 he told a group of Yugoslav and Bulgarian communists that ‘the alliance between ourselves and the democratic faction of capitalists came about because the latter had a stake in preventing Hitler’s domination.’ ‘In the future,’ he admitted, ‘we will be against the first faction of capitalists too’ – but it wasn’t clear when that switch would come. In the meantime Stalin was defensive, risk-averse and eager not to confront the United States, which he recognised was far and away the more powerful state, as well as having a monopoly of nuclear weapons. This attitude makes sense of his criticism of the Greek communists for trying to seize power when they weren’t able to win: he had agreed with Churchill that Greece belonged to the West, and he wanted the Western European communist parties to be moderate. He also proposed that Germany be unified

as long as it became a neutral state. Until the 1950s, after the creation of NATO, there is no evidence that the Soviet Union was planning for an offensive war in Europe. Yet, as Westad puts it, by the spring of 1947 most European and U.S. policymakers were already 'fixated on a seemingly relentless pattern of Soviet expansionism in eastern Europe'. Instead of hyping the Soviet threat in order to frighten Congress into approving massive military aid for Greece and Turkey, Truman should have done more to engage Moscow, difficult though that might have been. 'The intensity of the conflict, including the paranoia that it later produced on both sides,' Westad writes, 'might have been significantly reduced if more attempts had been made by the stronger power to entice Moscow towards forms of co-operation.'

In East Asia, too, aggressive Soviet policies took time to take shape. Stalin didn't expect Mao's forces to win the civil war in China, and it wasn't until early 1948 that he started to give them military aid. Until the end of that year he supported the peaceful unification of Korea. He turned down two proposals from Kim Il-sung for an attack on South Korea and only finally accepted the idea in April 1950, provided Mao agreed to back it. When it comes to U.S. motives in Asia, Westad skilfully teases out the contradictions between stated and real intentions. Ideologically, the U.S. opposed colonialism because of the legacy of its own foundation, but it also had a powerful economic self-interest in seeking an end to the British and French empires. Their system of imperial preferences put restrictions on free trade and U.S. access to foreign markets. Washington was worried, too, about the spread of communism as nationalist pressures for liberation grew within the former British, French and Dutch colonies in Asia. While the European powers sought to regain control over colonies that had fallen under Japanese occupation during the war, Washington saw things through the lens of the Cold War. Should it support its European allies in resisting change or get on board with the anticolonial movements so as to pre-empt communist takeovers? Westad argues that, with the exception of China and Vietnam, the communist parties in Asia were no match for more popular and better organised nationalist groups. Yet U.S. policymakers seemed unable or unwilling to distinguish between communism and radical nationalism – even though the two were not always in sync. (This was a conceptual error that was later to affect U.S. policymaking in Iran and the Middle East.) Washington feared that nationalists were paving the way for communists to seize power, or that they were anti-American and had to be thwarted anyway. Not surprisingly, the U.S. was suspicious of the concept of non-alignment when it emerged in 1954.

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Beyond its big themes, Westad's book is full of original nuances. The Marshall Plan, with which the United States primed the pump of a reviving capitalism in Western Europe, is usually praised as a programme of unparalleled scope. Westad points out that as a proportion of GDP Moscow's economic assistance to communist China was more than twice the size, and lasted for 14 years while the Marshall Plan only lasted for four. The revolution in Portugal in 1974 is usually treated by historians as a sideshow, but in Westad's view it had a greater impact on the Cold War than the ignominious end to the U.S. intervention in Indochina a year later. It led to Portugal's withdrawal from its African empire, prompting South African military intervention in Angola, civil war there, and the start of Cuban and Soviet engagement in a region where neither country had been involved militarily before. This in turn led to Soviet intervention in the Horn of Africa, another theatre with little previous Soviet involvement. The Portuguese revolution had

repercussions in Europe too, giving a lift to Eurocommunism independent of Soviet control. When the Italian and Spanish communist parties joined forces with European social democrats to oppose the coming to power in Lisbon of the Moscow-aligned Portuguese Communist Party, it was a dramatic sign that Moscow was losing its last crumbs of legitimacy in European left-wing circles already disillusioned by its crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968.

The Soviet leader who authorised the invasion of Czechoslovakia as well as the Kremlin's military forays into Africa was Leonid Brezhnev. Yet in what seems a somewhat strange judgment, Westad argues that Brezhnev was 'cautious, reactive, formulaic and technocratic'. Where Brezhnev and his colleagues were indeed cautious in foreign affairs was during the crisis over Solidarity's challenge to communist rule in Poland in 1981. The Polish communist leader, Wojciech Jaruzelski, who imposed martial law and interned Lech Walesa and the other Solidarity leaders, always argued that he was acting as a patriot and forestalling a Soviet invasion. Westad quotes from the Soviet archives, which show that the leadership had already decided against military intervention. Yuri Andropov, then head of the KGB and later Brezhnev's successor as Soviet leader, successfully urged his colleagues to adopt a kind of 'USSR First' strategy. 'I do not know how things will turn out in Poland but even if Poland falls under the control of Solidarity, that is the way it will be ... We must be concerned above all with our own country and the strengthening of the Soviet Union,' he told the Politburo on 10 December 1981, three days before Jaruzelski declared martial law. By then the Kremlin was entering the third year of its costly intervention in Afghanistan. It didn't want to embark on a second risky ground war. Andropov's words at that Politburo meeting were to have huge repercussions. The one-word answer to the question 'Why did the Cold War come to an end?' is of course 'Gorbachev'. But why did Gorbachev do what he did? One part of the explanation is that he was an admirer and follower of Andropov, both in terms of economic policy and in his view of the way Soviet relations with Eastern Europe should change.

Westad is on well-trodden ground when he describes Gorbachev's realisation, before he took over as Soviet leader in March 1985, that the Soviet growth rate was beginning to slow and the economy had to be reformed. He was assisted by a coterie of advisers who had either worked in the West, like Aleksandr Yakovlev (ten years as Soviet ambassador in Canada), or travelled there regularly on official trips. They had seen for themselves that the EEC and the social-democratic welfare state had brought unparalleled prosperity to Western Europe. Central planning in the East couldn't compete as a way of producing economic growth or as a source of political legitimacy. Add the fact that within months of Gorbachev's coming to power the world price of oil, which financed most of the Soviet Union's hard currency earnings, dropped by two-thirds. Gorbachev wanted East European states to start paying for oil and gas imports in hard currency instead of benefiting from massive Soviet subsidies. By 1987 he was telling their leaders to reform because, as with its policy over Poland in 1981, the Kremlin would no longer intervene militarily to protect them from internal rebellions.

The Cold War was essentially over by 1989, but it wasn't until the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later that its end was dramatically sealed. In his chapter on those final years, Westad underestimates the degree to which Yeltsin's rivalry with Gorbachev was a key factor in undermining the Soviet Union. To most of us who watched the two men on a daily basis in Moscow, it was clear that Yeltsin harboured a grudge because Gorbachev had pressured him to

resign as secretary of the Moscow branch of the Communist Party in 1987. In revenge, Yeltsin seized every opportunity to demand extra powers for the Russian parliament in order to build up the Russian presidency at the expense of the Soviet one. His aim was to deprive Gorbachev of his seat of power, even if it meant dismantling the Soviet Union. Gorbachev certainly thought as much. In an interview in 2011, after twenty years to reflect, Gorbachev told me he had made several errors that stopped him from saving the Soviet Union and moving it towards social democracy rather than the wild capitalism it was to suffer in the 1990s. One mistake was to have tried too long to reform the Communist Party. In April 1991, when hardliners openly attacked him at a central committee meeting, he should have resigned and formed a new party, taking centrists and liberals with him, four months before the Communist Party's conservative leadership discredited itself by mounting a coup. The second mistake was not to have created a looser Soviet federation as soon as the Baltic republics defected. The third was not to have offered Yeltsin a dignified job after he resigned from the party leadership in 1987. 'I should have sent him as ambassador to Great Britain or maybe a former British colony,' Gorbachev told me. He wasn't joking.

What then of the sequel to the Cold War? Westad offers a provocative judgment. From the Chinese perspective, the wrong superpower collapsed. They were terrified that, left on its own, the U.S. would hem them in. As regards Europe, he says the continent would be safer today if the door to the EU and NATO had been kept open for Russia in the 1990s. Instead of magnanimity we had short-sighted triumphalism. In the present climate of Russophobia his view is a minority position, but it is surely correct. The irony is that in spite of the many economic, ideological and technological changes between 1945 and 1989 the U.S. ended the Cold War with a similar mistake to the one with which it began. As the more powerful partner, the West failed to offer Russia genuine incentives to co-operate. In the 1940s the mistake was more excusable. The alliance against a third force, Nazi Germany, had been only a temporary and contingent diversion. Once Hitler was defeated, competition between communism as embodied in the USSR and capitalism as embodied in the U.S. was bound to continue until one side won: convergence was never a serious likelihood. But in the 1990s and 2000s the failure to offer Russia genuine partnership was foolish. For a decade under Yeltsin and during Putin's first term the Kremlin's foreign policy was nothing but collaborative and remained so even after George W. Bush unilaterally quit the anti-ballistic missile treaty in 2002 and called for new rockets to be deployed close to Russia. What finally led the Kremlin to play tough were the U.S. and EU-backed 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, and Western support for 'democracy-promotion' programmes leading to regime change, which were seen as a precedent aimed at Russia itself. In addition, Georgia and Ukraine were encouraged to join NATO and at a later stage the EU. In the 1990s Moscow had reluctantly acquiesced in Clinton's strategy of maintaining the West's old Cold War alliance and offering former Soviet allies the 'Euro-Atlantic choice'. For Georgia and Ukraine to go the same way was seen by Putin as a step too far. If the Bush and Obama administrations hadn't insisted on relentlessly expanding NATO and making it available as an instrument for global intervention, we would not be close to a new Cold War today.