

American Pre-eminence and the Cold War

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ANTONY LEWIS, JUN 8 2010

‘The actions and policies of the United States in establishing itself as the pre-eminent power in international affairs after the Second World War caused the Cold War’. Do you agree?

The actions and policies of the United States (U.S.) were only partially responsible for the onset of the Cold War, as its origins can only be fully understood through a complex, multi-layered synthesis of revisionist, post-revisionist and constructivist perspectives. Consequently, those monochromatic schools of interpretation which view the Cold War as a zero-sum game and seek to apportion total responsibility or “blame” to one side, fail to provide us with a deeper understanding of its origins. The revisionist view clearly falls within this category, as it suggests that the U.S. deliberately implemented an expansionist foreign policy in order to establish itself as the pre-eminent power in international affairs after the Second World War.[1] Consequently, the Soviet Union viewed these expansionist plans in hostile terms and as incompatible with its own interests, leading to direct confrontation with the United States. Put simply, the revisionist view argues that the U.S. started the Cold War and Moscow merely reacted in order to defend its interests.[2] This perspective was developed in the 1960s as a direct response to the traditional or orthodox view, which regards the Soviet Union as entirely responsible for the onset of the Cold War.[3] Unfortunately, these simplistic views of Cold War origins suffer from a number of inherent weaknesses, such as: they were written during the early Cold War period and lacked the benefit of hindsight; they lacked equivalent access to archives on both sides; they focused almost exclusively on material interests and viewed ideas and ideology as largely irrelevant.[4] Most importantly, they failed to recognize that “it takes two to tango”, such that neither superpower could be held as entirely responsible for the onset of the Cold War. On the plus side, these simplistic views were invaluable in providing the foundations for more complex interpretations, such as post-revisionism, which emphasizes a wide range of economic, ideological and moral considerations.[5] In conclusion, scholarship on the origins of the Cold War has become increasingly complex and contentious, such that no single perspective can be promulgated as the “definitive master narrative”. [6] However, it is argued that the deepest and most complete understanding of its origins is only possible through a synthesis of the revisionist, post-revisionist and constructivist perspectives.

Revisionism

The revisionist or ‘New Left’ school of thought surfaced in the United States in the early 1960s, mainly due to: a decline in McCarthyism and greater freedom of expression.[7] Like any revisionist school of thought, it sought to challenge the fundamental understandings on which the official or traditional explanation is based.[8] In particular, early revisionist scholars argued that the orthodox view was incredibly one-sided and failed to consider any significant interaction between the two great powers.[9] Interestingly enough, early revisionist scholars then proceeded to conclude that the United States was responsible for causing the Cold War.[10]

The crux of the revisionist argument is overly simplistic and fails to consider significant interaction as part of its explanation, despite some suggestions to the contrary.[11] In this view, the United States was responsible for starting the Cold War, due to its deliberate, systematic and expansionist economic foreign policy, specifically designed in order to create an American “empire”. [12] Further, it argues that survival of the American capitalist system was entirely dependent on its economic expansion overseas, placing the U.S. in direct confrontation with the Soviet Union.[13] In simple terms, the United States acted and the Soviet Union reacted. Cold War scholar Schlesinger expanded upon this standard revisionist thesis[14] in the following manner:

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... after the death of Franklin Roosevelt and the end of the Second World War, the United States deliberately abandoned the wartime policy of collaboration and, exhilarated by the possession of the atomic bomb, undertook a course of aggression of its own designed to expel all Russian influence and to establish democratic-capitalist states on the very border of the Soviet Union.[15]

It is generally agreed that four essential propositions form the core of revisionist thought.[16] First, post-war American foreign policy approximated the classical Leninist view of imperialism. As such, its capitalist system could only possibly survive through an aggressive search for new overseas markets and investment opportunities. In other words, they sought to create an economic empire, their equivalent of Lenin Imperialism.[17] These claims are supported by the language of National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68), developed by the Truman administration in response to the fall of China. NSC-68 stressed that '... the US must lead in building a successfully functioning political and economic system in the free world.'[18] It then goes on to stress the critical role of American economic policy, stating: 'Foreign economic policy is a major instrument in the conduct of US foreign relations [and] ... peculiarly appropriate to the Cold War.'[19]

Second, their internal motivations were behind the expansionist drive for an American empire. Consequently, the legitimate security interests of the Soviet Union could not possibly be accommodated within the context of this framework, leading to an ultimate breakdown in wartime cooperation.[20] Third, the United States forced its empire onto (mostly) an unwilling world through bribery, intimidation and covert intervention. In other words, nations were forced to become economically dependent and unwilling subjects of the United States Empire.[21] Finally, the Government tricked the American people into believing that the survival of the American nation was entirely dependent on the defeat of Communism. As such, this victory could only be assured through the construction of an American economic empire.[22] Accordingly, the American Government was able to gain public support for both massive increases in defence expenditure and its expansionist plans overseas.

Traditional or Orthodox View

The essence of the traditionalist view was best expressed by Paterson, when he said: 'the menacing Russian bear grasped the globe with both hands while Uncle Sam scurried about trying to contain the giant out of the East'.[23] In other words, Russia acted and the United States reacted.[24] In this view, the Russians had a long-term, strategic plan based on Lenin's "world revolution" and was aggressively pursuing this goal. Consequently, the US could not have possibly affected the origins of the Cold War through its behaviour.

Post-Revisionism

Post-revisionist thought was best described by historian Samuel Walker as 'a new consensus which draws from both traditional and revisionist interpretations to present a more balanced explanation of the beginning of the Cold War.'[25] This school of thought moves away from a simplistic interpretation through its emphasis on a wide range of forces, including: economic, ideological and moral considerations.[26] In particular, leading post-revisionist scholar John Lewis Gaddis, has clarified key similarities and differences between revisionist and post-revisionist thought.[27]

First, both revisionists and post-revisionists stressed that America was aware of its status as an "economic giant" and prepared to use this "economic might" in order to accomplish its political objectives.[28] For example, General Marshall and his political allies were clearly prepared to use the Marshall Plan in order to prevent a devastated Europe from turning to Communism.[29] In the unveiling of the Marshall Plan at Harvard, the General explicitly stated that: '... its purpose should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist ...'.[30] However, this cannot be interpreted to suggest that capitalism was suffering a crisis of confidence, which clearly lacked supporting evidence.[31] In actual fact, the American Government was much more preoccupied with national security concerns, including external threats, rather than any question of economic collapse.[32] Contrast traditionalist scholars, who failed to incorporate the concept of economic concerns into their line of thinking. It is suggested that this was largely due to their perception of the U.S. administration as naive and innocent.[33] However, I would suggest that it was more likely due to a convenient case of myopia, as any evidence along these lines would have weakened their key arguments.

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Second, revisionist and post-revisionist scholars emphasize that Stalin had no grand master plan for a Leninist world revolution or even a long-term strategy relating to an increase in the Communist sphere of influence. Rather, he was more of an insecure opportunist, who would take advantage of such openings to increase and expand the Soviet influence.[34] Contrast traditionalist views, which viewed Stalin as a man with a long-term blueprint for Communist expansion and world domination. Third, both revisionist and post-revisionist scholars argue that the U.S. government would exaggerate external dangers at times in order to manipulate the public and achieve its desired domestic goals.[35] Unfortunately, some division amongst post-revisionist scholars remains on this point. Regardless, it is unlikely that policymakers would have had much difficulty in convincing the American public to support containment.[36]

Finally, the revisionists were the first to raise the existence of an American empire.[37] In particular, they believed that the United States forced its empire on (mostly) an unwilling world through military alliances and economic subjugation.[38] Unfortunately, the revisionist view focused heavily on the American side of the equation and relied on intuition, as they had minimal information about the Soviet Union or other third countries at this stage.[39] Post-revisionist Gaddis rejects this revisionist perspective, arguing that the American sphere of influence 'arose as much by invitation as by imposition'.[40] He uses Iran as an illustration, which welcomed the American nation after World War Two, as a counterweight to the Russians.[41] Finally, post-revisionist scholars argued that this expansion was "defensive" in nature. In other words, it resulted from improvisation over a long period of time, rather than deliberate, long-term strategic planning.[42]

The New Traditionalism

John Lewis Gaddis was the founder of post-revisionism in the 1970s, but has "changed his spots once again", returning to his "traditional" roots after an examination of Russian archival material in the 1990s.[43] This new school of thought has been christened "the New Traditionalism", as traditionalist views regarding the origins of the Cold War have been "confirmed" by recent access to Russian archives.[44]

The essential nature of this new version of "traditionalism" can be summarized as follows. First, it argues that Stalin had a master plan to dominate Europe from the outset, such that he was largely responsible for the onset of the Cold War.[45] Second, ideology is fundamentally important to an understanding of the origins of the Cold War, as the outward behaviour of Soviet leaders reflected their ideological bent and private thinking.[46] Finally, Gaddis has returned to a simplistic version of Cold War origins, defining it as 'a moral struggle between good and evil, and he has no doubt that the world ... is a better place for that conflict having been fought in the way it was and won by the side that won it.'[47] Unfortunately, this "new approach" is simplistic, regressive and highly moralistic. As such, it adds nothing further to Cold War scholarship.[48]

Conclusion

The origins of the Cold War cannot be fully understood through simplistic, monochromatic interpretations. Consequently, traditionalist and revisionist interpretations are inadequate as explanatory tools, but act as the foundation for more complex interpretations, such as post-revisionism. In particular, post-revisionism has provided us with greater insights into the origins of the Cold War through its consideration of a wide range of factors. However, it is limited by its reliance on realism, which focuses exclusively on material interests and power. In other words, this school of thought fails to incorporate the importance of ideas and ideology into its perspective. Interestingly enough, large parts of the parallel 'New' Cold War history have recently focused on the "imported" concepts of ideas, ideology and culture, as transplanted from International Relations theory.[49] Unfortunately, this has led to a disjointed Cold War history, where realist and ideological factors are viewed separately. Accordingly, synthesis is only possible through the application of a hermeneutical-constructivist framework, thus remedying the problem of theoretical fragmentation.[50] In conclusion, no master narrative on the origins of the Cold War exists. However, the complementary application of a post-revisionist and constructivist approach provide us with a deeper understanding of the origins of the Cold War.

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[9] Paterson, p. 6.

[10] Ibid.

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[25] Gaddis, p. 172.

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[27] Gaddis, p. 173

[28] Gaddis, p. 180.

[29] Walker, p. 48.

[30] Walker, p. 51.

[31] Gaddis, p. 173.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Gaddis, p. 180.

[34] Gaddis, p. 180.

[35] Gaddis, p. 181.

[36] Gaddis, p. 178.

[37] Gaddis, p. 181-2.

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[38] Gaddis, p. 177.

[39] Ibid.

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