Was There a Soviet-led Menace to Global Stability and Freedom in the Late 1940s?

The end of the World War II saw the rise of two ideologically opposed superpowers – the USA and the USSR – whose relationship vis-à-vis each other would define the structure of the international order for decades to come. Although allies during the wartime, it soon became clear that, due to their ingrained differences and colliding expectations for the new world order, the US-Soviet 'friendship' would have an expiration date. While the Americans saw themselves as champions of the 'free world', they regarded the Soviets as a direct threat to it. Haunted by the Munich legacy, they were also convinced that all aggression must be "contained" in its inception.[1] Thus, to prevent this dreaded spread of Soviet power, the US President Henry S. Truman announced the so-called Truman Doctrine, which would be the first concrete step in the grand-scale US policy of Containment. This policy was based on the work of George F. Kennan on the "evils of Soviet Communism", which called for "a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendency."[2] Problematically, Kennan was somewhat ambiguous about the actual extent of the potential expansion, which led to the belief that "Stalin, like Hitler, would not stop until he dominated the entire world."[3] Yet, contrary to the US conviction, the Soviet Union did not constitute a menace to the global stability and freedom in the late 1940s because it was hamstrung by its economic weakness, preoccupied with its national security, and only vaguely committed to the actual construction of World Communism.

The most conspicuous reason why the Soviet Union could not be such a menace was its postwar lack of material capabilities. As Vladislav Zubok aptly points out, "[d]espite its victory, the Soviet Union was an exhausted giant."[4] With more than 25 million human losses, depletion of "about a quarter of its reproducible wealth", and overall territorial destruction, "the country faced a huge task of postwar reconstruction".[5] This is not to say that it would not be interested in constructing the 'new world order'; on the contrary, and particularly in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union was keen on "shaping a new international, social, and political structure"[6] In addition, there were voices within the high circles of the Soviet leadership calling for expansion as far as "into such traditional zones of British influence as the zone of the Suez Canal, Syria, Libya, and Palestine."[7] Nevertheless, such adventurous approach would not be realized as the Soviet material inferiority in comparison with the USA significantly limited their postwar scope of action. Mindful of the US economic preponderance, Stalin knew that, for the time being, they best avoid any potential confrontation with the Western powers, lest they jeopardize their hopes for reconstruction.[8] As a result, the actions taken by the Kremlin in the late 1940s were ones of concession and compromise, as can be witnessed by their retreat from Iran in 1946, limited support for Greek Communist revolutionaries, or limited meddling in Western European affairs. This goes on to show that, at least in the short term, Stalin was eager to preserve the stable relationship with the West and hoped for a period of prolonged cooperation.

Unfortunately, the implementation of the European Recovery Program put an abrupt end to the period. Introduced in 1948, the so-called Marshall Plan was a large-scale US aid aimed at stimulating growth and facilitating reconstruction in the war-torn Europe. The reasoning behind it was simple – the economic stimulus would provide both "psychological" and "material" benefits, and thus "reverse" the support for Communism in all of Europe.[9] Unsurprisingly, this was exactly what the Soviets feared the most. Owing to their economic frailty, they could not devise a similarly-oriented program that would, in turn, foster the spread of their influence in Eastern Europe. In this light, they saw the American aid as a direct threat to their control over the region and felt compelled to ward it off at all costs. Thus, although at first considering participation, Stalin eventually withdrew the Soviet Union from the program,

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ordering subsequently the Eastern European countries to do likewise.[10] Ironically, in doing so, he unintendedly uncovered how insecure and nervous the Soviet Union truly was about its ailing state of economic power. Hence, it is safe to assume that given such circumstances, it was would have been illogical and counterproductive for the USSR to actively extend its influence on any larger scale. The actions in Eastern Europe must, therefore, be seen not as expansionist but rather as highly defensive in nature.

In fact, national security, not global domination, was in the early postwar years the primary concern of the Soviet leadership. In the wake of the World War II, Stalin wanted to ensure that "no external threats would ever again place his country at risk."[11] Paranoid as he was, he believed that no long-term coexistence could be achieved with the Western Capitalists, who, in his opinion, were dedicated to annihilating his country.[12] Thus, following a somewhat old-fashioned model of territorial security – meaning that "the more you have got, the safe you are"[13] – Stalin devoted himself to building a buffer belt around the Soviet Union's western border. As Pechatnov notes: "[H]is aim was to turn the USSR into an invincible fortress against [the hostile world of] foreign enemies."[14] The area this buffer zone was to encompass – the Eastern and Central Europe, and the Balkans – was not chosen randomly. Be it by the French or Germans, especially Eastern Europe had historically proven to be an easy pathway for invading the Russian mainland. It is no wonder then that Stalin, deciding to follow the same geopolitical imperatives that had been faced by Russian tsars[15], maintained that non-negotiable control over the territory was the number-one precondition for the Soviet national security. To achieve this, he would work ruthlessly to bring the region under the auspices of the Kremlin, thus creating the Soviet sphere of influence.

However, it is important to emphasize that the creation of the sphere was largely strategic and did not amount to spreading the Soviet ideology as such. In fact, Stalin was at first quite lenient when it came to implementing the Soviet state model. Although he most probably remained committed to 'socialism in one country', he was willing to give the countries a free hand in finding their "national paths" towards Communism.[16] In other words, it was more important at the time that the Eastern buffer states were loyal to the Kremlin than whether they were actually Communist. Admittedly, this changed with the introduction of the Truman Doctrine and, especially, the abovementioned Marshall Plan. In order to ensure effective isolation from the undue Western influence, the Soviet Union commenced a thorough process of the so-called "Stalinization" of what would become the Eastern bloc.[17] Nevertheless, even in the course of this action, the actual ideology was of minor importance. Replicating the policies taken between 1945 and 1947 in the Soviet Union itself, the main goal of the Stalinization was merely to consolidate power over a territory it deemed vital. As such, it effectively exported its state totalitarianism, but the Communist ideology, for which it may have been mistaken, did not necessarily take seed in the overtaken countries. On the contrary, it dramatically "deepened the unpopularity of Communists in Eastern Europe,"[18] and although it fulfilled the goal of fostering the Soviet national security, it raised questions about the legitimacy of the Soviet ideology as a result.

Actually, the Soviet ambiguity regarding the 'world revolution' was an overriding reason why there was to be no global Soviet-led menace in the late 1940s. As argued above, there was initially no rush to spread the Communist ideology on the part of the Soviet Union, and even after the crucial year of 1948, it would still remain a rather distant and intangible objective. Why the world's greatest champion of socialism chose such a latent approach towards what was thought in the US was its ultimate goal can be attributed to Stalin's ideological delusions. Somewhat blindly following Lenin's prophecies, he believed that the "imperialist contradictions" of the Capitalist countries would gradually bring about their mutual destruction, thus paving way for the World Communism.[19] In other words, people, appalled by the constant profit-based warmongering, would automatically seek Communism as a desirable alternative to the ills of the past. For its part, there was certain validity in this thinking as the Marxist-Leninist ideology grew increasingly popular in the aftermath of the war, making it "at least as easy to believe, in 1945, that authoritarian communism was the wave of the future as the democratic capitalism was."[20] Paradoxically, the spread of Communism did not necessarily entail the spread of the Soviet influence, as the latter came gradually to be seen as overly totalitarian, hierarchical, and chauvinist – miles away from the alleged equality of the Marxist teaching. Thus, while Stalin and his entourage rested assured of the inevitable course of history, the wide embracement of the official Soviet state ideology did actually little to enhance the Soviet power as such.

Of course, such notion runs counter to the mainstream underpinnings of the US foreign policy at the time, which

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failed to make a distinction between the alleged Soviet-led menace and Communism itself. The fact that the two were often, and perhaps also on purpose, used interchangeably is evident in the announcement of the Truman Doctrine in 1947. For while he was declaring the beginning of the US Cold War policy to contain the Russian aggression, Truman, by the same token, strove to commit the country to a global crusade against Communism.[21] However, the next year's events were a clear sign that Communist and Soviet need not inexorably be one and the same. In 1948, the animosity that had been growing between the Yugoslav leader Tito and Stalin culminated in the former's break from the Soviet bloc. The reason for this was simple; Tito did not wish to merely follow in the footsteps laid out for him by the Soviet masters and eventually assume a subordinate position in a Communist World dominated by the Soviet Union.[22] This Tito-Stalin split was but the first manifestation of a series of crises within the Soviet sphere of influence that would ultimately shatter the illusion of the monolithic world of communism.[23] Be it giants like China or various 'Third World' countries, many would find the Marxist teaching appealing while frowning upon the idea of having their actions dictated from Moscow. Therefore, the relaxed approach towards constructing the World-Communist order did not only mean that at the moment there was no imminent danger of aggressive expansion of the Soviet Communism, it also gave rise to numerous Marxist movements that would grow independent of the Soviet bloc, firmly shattering the illusion that there ever could be a monolithic Soviet-led menace to the global freedom and stability in the first place.

Given these points, if there ever was a global Soviet menace, it was most likely not in the late 1940s when the Soviet Union, drained off its resources, sought to extend the cooperation with the West to ensure its internal reconstruction and foster national security, and, due to its preoccupation with the latter, paid little attention to spreading its ideology and influence on a global scale. The material deficiency and bitter memories of being invaded were perhaps the practical and pragmatic reasons why the Soviets formulated their postwar foreign policy in a defensive manner; however, it was the lack of soft power that demonstrated how unrealistic it truly was for the USSR to expand globally. After the nervous 'takeover' of Eastern Europe and the Tito-Stalin split, it became apparent that the hitherto half-hearted attitude towards the World Communism would not suffice. Furthermore, coercion and imposition proved to be unavailing by the same token. Thus, even though the US were correct in identifying the Soviet postwar actions as aggressive and threatening to freedom, they largely exaggerated the potential reach of these actions. Despite the widespread demonization of the Soviet Communism in the USA at the time, Stalin was simply bereft of both ambition and capacity – be it material or ideological – to act as a global menace. And with reference to an abovementioned comparison, it must be emphasized that Hitler no doubt lacked neither of these.

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[1] Geir Lundestad, *East, West, North, South: Major Developments in International Relations since 1945* (London: Sage, 2014), 13.

[2] Ralph B. Levering, *The Cold War: A Post-Cold War History* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 37.

[3] John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 323.

[4] Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 43.

[5] Vladimir O. Pechatnov, "The Soviet Union and the world," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Origins* , ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 90.

[6] Henry A. Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the character of nations and the course of history* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 281.

[7] Quoted in Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 53.

[8] Pechatnov, *The Soviet Union*, 94.

[9] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Penguin, 2007), 32.

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid, 11.

[12] Zubok, *A Failed Empire,* 72-75.

[13] Pechatnov, *The Cold War*, 92.

[14] Ibid, 91.

[15] Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 72-74.

[16] John Lamberton Harper, *The Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 44.

[17] Ted Hopf, *Reconstructing the Cold War: The Early Years, 1945-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 83-106. *Stalinization was a totalitarian 'takeover' of the countries' political systems and governance.

[18] Ibid, 97.

[19] Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 12; Pechatnov, *The Cold War*, 93; Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 70.

[20] Gaddis, *The Cold War,* 10.

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[21] Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War 1945-2006* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 57.

[22] Hopf, *Reconstructing the Cold War*, 108.

[23] Anthony Best, Jussi M. Hanhimăki, Joseph A. Maiolo and Kristen E. Schulze, *International History of the Twentieth Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 279.

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