

The Origin of the Cold War: A Historiography

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Abstract

This modest paper argues that the Cold War not only determined the contours of international relations between 1945 and 1991 but also shaped our lives in a variety of ways. The Cold War which is generally regarded as a power rivalry short of direct military confrontation between the two superpowers, the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the post-World War II period in world politics, was also a geopolitical, political, economic, ideological and cultural competition between them. Divided into three schools of thought such as the Orthodox or Traditional School, the Revisionist School and the Post-Revisionist or Realist School, historians are still involved in a never-ending debate about the origin of the Cold War. The Traditional School lays the blame for the origin of the Cold War on the USSR and its leader, Joseph Stalin. On the other hand, the Revisionist School blames both the USA and the USSR for the origin of the Cold War but this school blames the USA more significantly in this regard since the USA, a capitalist- imperial power, wanted a global market for its post-World War II industries. The post-Revisionist school blames the USSR while simultaneously arguing that the Cold War originated because of the breakdown of communication between the superpowers. To be sure, the origin of the Cold War is embedded in multi-causality. However, it is better to be involved in ceaseless debates for better understanding and meaning in this regard.

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The Cold War is one of the most important phenomena that shaped the contours of International Relations for almost half a century (Calvocoressi, 2001). It was not only a military competition short of war between the superpowers, the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States of America (USA) but also an all-out ideological, political and economic competition between them for the domination of the world. However, different historians have interpreted the origin of the cold war from a variety of historical perspectives. There have been pungent debates about the origins of the Cold War in historical literature from the end of the Cold war to the present. Some historians find that World War II was a fruit of World War I and World War II produced the Cold War (Hoffman and Fleron, 1971: 218). ¹Another school of thought attributed the cause of the Cold War to the contention between the United States and the Soviet Union to fill the residual vacuum when both of them appeared as two superpowers following the end of World War II (Lundestad, 1997: 11). ²Moreover, another group of historians have argued that foreign policies between the two blocs were a significant element to cause a profound tension since both sides aimed to achieve their respective security objectives in order to defend themselves against each other.

There are, however, three major schools of interpretations for the origin of the Cold War (McCauley, 2003:10). ³The first school of interpretation, which emerged between 1950-1960 is called an orthodox or traditional school. The revisionist that appeared between 1960-1970 is the second school. Finally, the post-revisionist or realist school arose between 1970-1980. These schools adopted several different standpoints of analysis as to how we can study and interpret the origins of the Cold War.

First, there were differences between President Roosevelt's foreign policy and that of his successor Truman. For instance, Thomas Paterson in his 1988 book *Meeting the Communist Threat* examines the United States' exaggeration of foreign policy against the Soviet Union, established by Truman. Also, the interpretations of Stalin's doctrine and his foreign policy, which was elaborated in Gaddis's book, *The United States and the*

Origins of the Cold War. Third, the economic perspective, especially for the United States and how it tried to play a pivotal role in the global system, particularly after a long period of isolationism. Fourth, the reasons for using the atomic bomb against Japan. Fifth, the spheres of influence to export both United States and Soviet Union ideologies in the entire world. In short, all these schools challenge each other as to how we could comprehend the origins of the Cold War and who was responsible for the aggravation.

The traditional school represented by such historians as Herbert Feis (1957) and Arthur Schlesinger (1967) argue that since the former Soviet Union was a communist country, it was the Soviet dogma to undermine the authority of non-communist powers in order to expand its ideology, therefore; the United States containment policy was a reaction to communist expansion. Though the United States was willing to cooperate with the Soviet Union, she had to defend herself and her allies by following legitimate security interests in Western Europe when the former stretched in Eastern Europe. Hence, the traditionalists assert that Truman's doctrine, Marshall Plan, and containment policy were logical answers to the aggressive expansion of the Soviet Union. To illustrate the traditional school's viewpoint about the origins of the Cold War, we should shed some light on the arguments of these scholars. Regarding the differences between Roosevelt and Truman, Herbert Feis argues that if Roosevelt's foreign policy had been fruitful, Truman would have never abandoned his foreign policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

Arthur Schlesinger shows that since the Soviet Union was only interested in its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, it was determined to dominate its neighbors by any means. The United States, on the other hand, was not at all interested in that type of policy that sought to stabilize the world by division into the sphere of influence and insisted on an East European strategy (Schlesinger, Jr, 1967). Thus the United States showed opposition to the sphere of influence solution and rejected the Soviet point. Instead, the United States showed genuine interest in the independence of the countries in Eastern Europe which the Soviet Union rejected. As a result, the Cold War became inevitable.

The foremost traditional scholar among the orthodox school is John Lewis Gaddis who has turned out to be one of the most important scholars not only on the Cold War but also on American foreign policy in the twentieth century. Indeed, Gaddis not only won the Bancroft Prize in 1972 (Leffler, 1999: 501-524) but also published several books about the argument on the origins of the Cold War such as, *The Cold War: A New History*, *The United States and The Origins of the Cold War 1941-1947*, *The United States and the End of Cold War* and *We Now Know*. Generally, Gaddis believes in the good versus evil theory. He states "that American leaders did not want a Cold War, but they wanted insecurity even less" (Gaddis, 1972: 353). From an economic standpoint, he argues that the US did not seek to expand its economy as a promotion of capitalism to the entire world. Rather, United States adopted an empire by invitation policy (Hunter, 1998:84), which allowed the US to establish its empire and let her allies exercise their autonomy and allies were happy to be part of this empire (Leffler, 1999: 501-524). Also the characteristic of Stalin as a revolutionary, according to Gaddis, was one important reason that let the US be cautious of the Soviet Union because Stalin had never deserted his determination to foster world revolution (2006).

The controversy in regard to the use of the atomic bombs against Japan is another aspect that sheds light on the traditional school of historiography in analyzing the origin of the Cold War. Indeed, Gaddis asserts that using the bomb against Japan was fundamentally to accomplish victory as fast as possible (Gaddis, 1997:87). Louis Halle, another traditional scholar, offers similar arguments. He emphasizes military needs, but the perception of dropping the bombs was distorted by what he called "neurotic exaggeration" of Japanese pugnacity and inhumanity (Halle, 1967).

Historians such as Gabriel Kolko, Gar Alperowitz, Williams Appleman Williams, Lloyd Garden, and Thomas Paterson, represent the revisionist school. They have an extremely different interpretation of the origins of the Cold War. As a matter of fact, they believe that the Soviet Union was not responsible for the Cold War (McCauley, 2003:12). Rather, United States foreign policies played a substantial role to aggravate the situation. Thomas Paterson suggests that the United States was looking for a globalism project and to achieve this project, it adopted political, ideological and economic strategies that happened to encounter Soviet opposition. Even there existed no Soviet threat, the US would follow the same globalist dream as well as policy (Paterson, 1988:44).

"These several explanations for American globalism suggest that the United States would have been an expansionist power whether or not the obstructionist Soviet were lurking about. That is, America's own needs-ideological, political, economic, strategic- encouraged such a projection of power. As the influential National Security Council Paper Paper No. 68 (NSC-68) noted in April 1950, the "overall policy" of the United States was "designed to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish". This Policy "we would probably pursue even if there were no Soviet threat" (Ibid).

To realize this dream successfully, President Truman exaggerated the Soviet Union threat. One can raise a question as to why the United exaggerated the Soviet threat. Thomas Peterson has rightly said:

"why dwell on this question on the American exaggeration of the Soviet threat? because it oversimplified international realities by under-estimating local conditions that might thwart Soviet Communist

successes and by overestimating the Soviet ability to act. Because it encouraged the Soviets to fear encirclement and to enlarge their military establishment, thereby contributing to a dangerous weapons race. Because it led to indiscriminate globalism. Because it put a damper on diplomacy American officials were hesitant to negotiate with an opponent variously described as malevolent, deceitful, and inhuman. They especially did not warm to negotiations when some critics were ready to cry that diplomacy, which could produce a compromise, was evidence in itself of softness toward Communism” (Ibid: 48).

William A. Williams in his study *The Tragedy of American Policy* proposes an "open door" theory as a foreign policy of the United States to let the US not only participate economically, culturally and politically in the global system but also to penetrate and influence every angle of the earth (Williams, 1959). For example, because the United States pursued a capitalist system, that system would never survive if it did not expand in the foreign market, especially after the United States had just faced depression in the 1930s. From the standpoint of ideology and power, William states that the Soviet Union was certainly weak and could not attack the US. Indeed, Stalin was eager to get a loan from the US to rebuild his devastated country. Thus, Stalin has had three choices. First, Stalin would accept the American peace program which meant accepting hostile governments in Eastern Europe. Second, he could complete his revolutionary dogma in his own country. Finally, he could repair his fragile economy. He wanted amicable rather than communist governments in Eastern Europe against possible German threat and he conveyed his viewpoint to Churchill and Roosevelt in this regard (Ibid).

On the subject of atomic diplomacy, revisionists have divergent views than those of the traditionalists. They believe that dropping the atomic bomb on Japan let the United States kill two birds in one stone. It not only ended the war as quickly as possible as traditionalists proclaimed, but it was rather a message of showing atomic monopoly to shock the Soviet Union. To elaborate, we should pinpoint some revisionists' arguments about this matter. Thomas McCormick in his book *America's Half-Century* indicates that "For President Truman, however, the atomic bomb meant not merely death but life. It meant not only the military capacity to be the destroyer of the world, but the political capacity to help create a new world, unitary and open under America's protective aegis (McCormick, 2003).

Walter Lafeber provides three significant reasons that steered President Truman to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. First, since the weapon was ready to use, it was expected to be used. Second, instead of invading Japan in 1945, it would be worthwhile to save American blood by using an atomic bomb. Third, it was for the diplomatic object as other revisionists claimed (Lafeber, 2008: 24). Moreover, D.F. Fleming stressed pressure from the military of using the atomic bomb against Japan (Fleming, 1961). However, Gar Alperovitz has an approach that differs from that of Fleming's. He argues that Japan was already defeated at that time, thus; political, economic and diplomatic goals determined the use of the atomic bomb against Japan to avoid political consequences of not using the bomb (Alperovitz, 1965). Alperovitz also propounds that Truman delayed his trip to Potsdam until the bomb had been ready clarified that his purpose was not to end the war but to demonstrate a new power to his rival the Soviet Union (Ibid).

The differences between Roosevelt's and Truman's administrations' policy toward the Soviet Union is another aspect to analyze the revisionist school. D.F. Fleming argues that there was an instantaneous shift in the foreign policy of the Truman administration from that of the Roosevelt administration. According to Fleming, the latter sought to minimize the inescapable postwar squabble whereas Truman pursued to maximize it (Fleming, 1961).

The last debate from a revisionist perspective is about communist ideology and Soviet behavior. On this theme, Vojtech Mastny asserts that Soviet leaders knew that their regime was not based on popular will. In fact, Stalin's revolution was a means of power rather than a goal of itself (Mastny, 1998). So communist ideology did not mean the promotion of an offensive, expansive and revolutionary foreign policy, rather it was to build an internally strong Soviet Union ((Ibid). In addition, Mastny argues that Stalin might be an insecure and paranoid leader but he was not a revolutionary romanticist who stood for the world revolution of communism (Ibid). Finally, Thomas Paterson argues that even if the Soviet Union intended to dominate the world, its capabilities to do so was excessively flimsy because of its lack of modern navy, economy, military and troops, atomic bomb, air force strategy and foreign aid (Paterson, 1988:45). Paterson argues that American leaders exaggerated Soviet threats which created problems for the Soviets and their insecurity (Ibid: 1945-46).

Post- revisionist scholars such as Daniel Yergin, George Herring and Fred Halliday attempt to unravel the complexities of the issue that contributed to escalating the onset of the Cold War (McCauley, 2003:27). According to Geir Lundestad, post revisionists, however, attribute mutual blame or responsibilities to both the United States and the Soviet Union's foreign policy (Lundestad, 1997: 8). Robert Pollard, a post-revisionist scholar thinks that the United States did not want domination over any country; rather, she wanted an open and interdependent world economy (Pollard, 1985). As a result, the United States managed to get a number of allies in Western Europe and in the Middle East who supplied the US both the market for its products and raw materials including the oil in the Middle East. Robert Pollard's interpretation of interdependence makes sense because the very business of the US, as American president Herbert Hoover once said, is business. From that

standpoint, Pollard's view is elegant in the sense that the US always wanted an international economic system regardless of what the Soviet Union believed or did. However, the problem with Pollard's argument is that he is still not willing to casually blame US multilateralism as the cause of the origin of the Cold War (Stephanson, 2009). This line of reasoning which has come to be known as the post-revisionist view of the origin of the Cold War can also be termed a new orthodoxy school as well since it justifies what the orthodox scholars dealt earlier (Crapol, 1987: 251-262).

Martin McCauley, a journalist has dedicated his short book *The Origin of the Cold War 1941-1949* has primarily blamed Stalin on the origin of the Cold War but at the same time, he blames both Stalin and Truman for the inevitability of the Cold War (McCauley, 2003: 106). Fred Halliday, a Marxist scholar has been an authority on the Cold War and written an interesting book both on the First Cold War I and Second Cold War II and seeks to argue that the main cause of the origin of the Cold War has been the breakdown of communication between the USA and the USSR (Halliday, 1983).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interminable debate about the origin of the Cold War is still subject to more debate even today. More information or knowledge might be added to these three different schools if Cold War historians get more access to the archives of the countries like China and Japan. Russian archives have to be further opened because historians need to get more information about the inner working culture of the Soviet leadership. Moreover, the nature of the historical debate is open-ended in the sense that there is no closure in the historiography. From this standpoint, we will not be able to say anything conclusively about the origin of the Cold War. In this backdrop, it is better to take a resort to a number of views. This explains why Odd Arne Westad thinks that the Cold War can not be explained by any theory of personality, rather, it can be explained better by the plurality of theories or perspectives (Westad, 1995: 483-487). Since historian Pieter Geyl argues that history is progress or argument without end (1958), it is better for us to continue this debate on the origin of the Old War for better comprehension, meaning and reflection.

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