The Cold War in Europe

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Though now forgotten, the Cold War was an unpleasant surprise. When World War II ended in 1945, there was a widespread expectation in the United States and elsewhere that there would be a long period of peace. The successful wartime alliance between the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union had seemed to show that, despite large differences in social systems, under skillful leadership nations could cooperate for shared goals.

The crucial arena was Europe, where the three Allied armies had converged in the heart of Germany. With the Red Army occupying much of Eastern Europe and the combined American and British forces in the West, the prospects for peace depended on the ability of the three powers to compromise their differences in this theater.

What was known of the Yalta agreements seemed a positive augury. In addition to a Declaration on Liberated Europe with its promise of self-determination for all nations, there was agreement on unified control for postwar Germany. American, British, French, and Soviet troops would each be given their own zone of occupation, with the understanding that common policies would be set by a quadripartite Allied Control Council.

The arrangements for Berlin exemplified the high expectations. The German capital had been conquered by the Red Army at an estimated cost of 100,000 casualties and lay entirely inside the Soviet zone. Nevertheless, it had been agreed that each of the four powers would occupy a sector of the city and through a quadripartite Kommandatura make collective decisions. In July 1945, a most promising development was the regrouping of Allied armies, as the Soviets withdrew from the western sectors of Berlin and the Americans and British pulled out of Saxony and Thuringia in the eastern zone. By early summer, the machinery had been put in place for a new era of European harmony.

Yet four years later, the early hopes had been completely shattered. By 1949, Europe was clearly divided into Eastern and Western blocs, Germany had split into two separate and hostile states, and, in the aftermath of a ten-month blockade, the line across Berlin marked the fracture of the continent. Rival military alliances were being assembled and shortly thereafter nuclear weapons become the instrument of choice for defending each side.

In this evolution lies the origin of the Cold War. During the ensuing decades, the contest was expanded into a global competition and the nuclear arms race became a
menace unto itself. As crises proliferated, it became increasingly difficult to determine which of these conflicts was fundamental. However, among historians there has been broad agreement that the source of the US–Soviet conflict was in Europe, and a growing recognition that the core issue was the future of Germany.

As the wartime alliance fell apart, American policymakers articulated a clear explanation of the reasons. In their account, it was the Soviet refusal to respect the self-determination of nations and their unbridled expansionism that had created the need for a policy of “containment.” Though desiring peace, the Western countries had no choice but to strengthen themselves economically, politically, and militarily in order to prevent a communist juggernaut from sweeping across Europe.

This point of view was subsequently elaborated in works of history, some of which were written by individuals who had themselves participated in American decision-making. In books by Herbert Feis (1957), Louis Halle (1967), Joseph Jones (1955), and others, US policymakers were portrayed as willing to cooperate with Stalin and prepared to effect reasonable compromises toward that goal. These writers stressed Soviet misdeeds in Eastern Europe, especially its crimes in Poland. In 1944 Stalin had cynically denied assistance to the Polish Underground, which had risen up against the Nazi occupiers. By facilitating the slaughter of people who might be too independent, refusing to work with the official Polish government-in-exile, and eventually imposing the communist-based Lublin regime, he displayed a clear determination to control the country’s destiny.

For the first generation of Cold War historians, Poland set the pattern. Wherever the Red Army went, across Eastern Europe and even into eastern Germany, an “Iron Curtain” fell. Stalin insisted that the political, social, and economic structures of other nations conform to the Soviet model. Any notion of democratic rights was immediately snuffed out.

Nor did this exhaust Stalin’s acts of aggression. Not content with new holdings in Eastern Europe, he was also moving to control northern Iran and to force concessions from the Turks in the Dardanelles. Most frightening, however, was his apparent threat to Western Europe. Lacking troops on the ground, he appeared to be cleverly using the West European communist parties to take advantage of the economic dislocations produced by the war. As of 1947, US policymakers were faced with the possibility that in Italy, France, and Greece, and perhaps other places, the communists might come to power through free elections or revolutionary upheaval.

Fearing that the Soviets might soon control all of Europe, the Truman administration acted defensively to forestall this. In March 1947 the president enunciated the Truman Doctrine, warning Congress that “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” Under this rubric, Washington provided substantial military and economic assistance to the government of Greece to quash a left-wing rebellion.

Two months later, Secretary of State George Marshall gave a historic speech at Harvard in which he proclaimed America’s willingness to underwrite a large-scale
economic recovery program for Europe. As presented by orthodox historians, the Marshall Plan represented a high point of American diplomacy. Under friendly US pressure, West European officials were brought together to craft a realistic, integrated plan for revival, finally abandoning the nationalistic economic policies that had proved so ruinous in the past. In one bold stroke, the American government ameliorated the misery of millions, placed the economies of Western Europe on a healthy foundation, and protected US security by thwarting the communists.

Integral to the Marshall Plan were the western zones of Germany. This area had always played a vital role in the economic life of Europe – as a source of coal, steel, and chemicals for other industrial nations, and as a market for their goods. One of the great merits of the European Recovery Plan (ERP) was that it provided a framework for western Germany to be rebuilt without the associated dangers of military revival. Yet western Germany could not participate in the program as three separate zones. By the spring of 1948, there was an agreement to fuse them into a new West German state.

Unfortunately, the creation of ERP and the inclusion of western Germany enraged Stalin. As described by orthodox historians, the Soviet leader was faced with the imminent demise of his expansionist plans. In a daring attempt to halt this trend, he instructed the West European communist parties to engage in illegal acts of sabotage, provoked a coup in the still democratic government of Czechoslovakia, and in June 1948, launched a blockade of Berlin.

In the traditional account, the Berlin blockade emerged as the central drama of the early Cold War. Having sealed off eastern Germany, the Soviet government was attempting to wrest control of the city by preventing the flow of food and other supplies into the western sectors. As a response, the United States and Britain initiated an extraordinary airlift in which their planes flew over the Soviet Zone, bringing necessary goods to the beleaguered Berliners. This dangerous confrontation in the former German capital exemplified the ruthlessness and rapacity of the Soviets, as well as the courage and magnanimity of their western opponents.

After ten months Stalin was compelled to acknowledge defeat, and by May of 1949 he had lifted the blockade. Yet the trauma of his aggression had left the United States and its West European allies convinced that military strength was a necessary accompaniment to economic revival. It was therefore no coincidence that the termination of the blockade occurred simultaneously with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Under its provisions, the United States and eleven European signatories agreed that “an attack against one or more of them . . . shall be considered an attack against all,” and that there would be mutual consultation and assistance in such a contingency.

The creation of NATO and the establishment of a West German government were rapidly succeeded by the formation of a Soviet-led Warsaw Pact and a new communist-dominated East German state. With these developments, the basic structure of Cold War Europe was set, with no significant changes for many decades. To orthodox writers, the dynamics of the Cold War were simple. In flagrant disregard of the principle of self-determination, Stalin had attempted to control Europe. Unable to dislodge the Russians from the east, the United States and its allies had taken the necessary economic and military steps to “contain” them.
II

This perspective on the Cold War remained the conventional wisdom until the late 1960s. Its persistence was partially due to the intellectual climate created by McCarthyism. The atmosphere of conformity that pervaded politics, journalism, the entertainment industry, and the academy was nowhere more stifling than on the subject of Cold War culpability. The content of the history books both promoted and reflected the black and white interpretation of the conflict that was being articulated in these other sectors.

It was not until the Vietnam War disrupted the national consensus about America’s role in the world that the historiography of the early Cold War became more diverse and controversial. There had been some early mavericks. In two thoughtful but neglected volumes, historian D. W. Fleming (1961) had challenged the traditional accounts of many specific Cold War episodes, demonstrating that the United States as well as the Soviets had contributed to post-1945 tensions.

At the University of Wisconsin, William Appleman Williams was training a new generation of American historians to see the Cold War as “only the most recent phase of a more general conflict between the established system of western capitalism and its internal and external opponents” (Williams, 1962, p. 10). For Williams, expansionism had been a central feature of American foreign policy throughout the twentieth century, more rooted in its domestic political economy and ideology than in external danger.

Within a few short years, these isolated contributions were assimilated into a rapidly growing “revisionist literature” that found its way into the academic mainstream. Reflecting the controversial perceptions of the Vietnam era, revisionist writers emphasized the cautiousness of Soviet foreign policy, the indigenous roots of foreign left-wing movements, and the American habit of imposing its ideological predilections on other nations (Alperovitz, 1965; LaFeber, 1968; Gardner, 1970; Paterson, 1973).

As applied to the European theater, revisionists questioned whether Stalin had ever seriously threatened Western Europe, and many pointed out that even in Eastern Europe, the Soviets were slow to bolshevize the countries they initially occupied. Meanwhile US officials had used their nuclear advantage and economic strength to create a bloc of like-minded states, while denying the Russians the right to do the same.

Yet while revisionists held in common a critical stance toward American policy, they did not always agree on how to explain it. At one end of the spectrum were those who focused on economic concerns, claiming that US efforts to shape the political economy of Europe reflected a perceived domestic need for foreign markets and outlets for investment. On the other end were those who believed that US officials were motivated by an exaggerated, albeit genuine, fear of Soviet aggression. For the latter, as for more orthodox analysts, it was “national security” concerns that underpinned American decisionmaking.

Among those historians who emphasized the economic imperatives of US policy, the two-volume work of Gabriel and Joyce Kolko (1972) provided the most single-minded and comprehensive account. In their treatment of Europe, they focused on the devastation that had resulted from depression and war, and highlighted the
associated collapse of traditional elites. As a consequence, the defeat of the Axis set the stage for bitter internal struggles within all the nations of Europe, struggles in which left-wing movements held an advantaged position.

The Kolkos demonstrated that while communist parties played a prominent role, they were by no means the most radical element. Quite frequently, it was the social democratic and sometimes the agrarian parties that were pressing for more drastic change. Also noteworthy were the many grassroots formations – the anti-fascist committees, works councils, and new labor unions – that had sprung up spontaneously to challenge the existing order.

These developments were deeply troubling to the Americans, who had exited the war determined to reform international capitalism by sweeping away the nationalist barriers to the free flow of capital, labor, and goods. As described by the Kolkos, it quickly became the unanticipated but urgent task of America’s European policy to check the advance of the left.

Meanwhile, the Soviet role was an essentially conservative one. Having suffered 20 million casualties fighting the Nazis and with much of their agriculture and industry demolished, the Russians were preoccupied with issues of rehabilitation and security. In Eastern Europe they sought a buffer zone that could insulate them from future attack, but they hoped to achieve this by installing friendly coalition governments, in which the communists would carefully limit assaults on private property. The Kolkos provided a detailed narrative showing that, contrary to the American image of an “iron curtain,” during the early postwar years there were hybrid political regimes in most Eastern countries.

In Western Europe, where communist parties were popular and initially seemed poised to take over in several countries, Moscow discipline held them back. The French communist leader Maurice Thorez and Italian party chief Palmiro Togliatti were specifically instructed to surrender arms garnered in the Resistance struggles and to participate in parliamentary elections. In Greece, a civil war was raging against the British-supported monarchy, but although communists were participating actively in the People’s Liberation Army (ELAS), Stalin refused it any assistance.

Given this timid record, the Kolkos rejected the notion that the Cold War was fundamentally a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. They contended that “no one can understand Soviet–American relations save as one of a number of vital aspects of the larger advancement and application of American power in the post-war world, a greater undertaking that time and again was never caused by Russian policy and very often in no way involved Moscow” (Kolko and Kolko, 1972, p. 31).

The signal contribution of the Kolkos was to transform the study of the European Cold War from a geopolitical chess game to a rich social history. In their rendering, the continent was something more than an empty chessboard upon which American and Soviet actors made their moves. Rather, it was a collection of individual nations, torn apart by deep divisions over what their future should be. How these were resolved had direct consequences for the quality of life of millions of people.

Following the insights of William Appleman Williams, the Kolkos had introduced a degree of economic determinism that the Wisconsin professor had skirted. This made their analysis of US foreign policy at once clearer, but also more problematic. For if US policy was driven by the need to prevent economic radicalism in Europe, and if Stalin was prepared to consign Western Europe to the Americans and to limit
social experiments in the East, it was difficult to understand why an accommodation could not be reached. In theory, intelligent policymakers on both sides should have been able to harmonize the Soviet need for security and reconstruction with the American need for stability.

For those revisionists who took more seriously US policymakers’ concerns about “national security,” one possible explanation for American behavior was misperception. Perhaps there was a self-fulfilling prophecy at play in which American leaders held misplaced fears about Soviet intentions in Western Europe, and made provocative decisions that generated a more aggressive counterresponse?

A seminal work, which espoused this point of view, was Daniel Yergin’s _Shattered Peace_ (1977). In a lucid narrative of the early Cold War, Yergin traced the evolving ideas of American leaders. He showed that at the end of World War II, Roosevelt’s advisers were divided into two camps. One group, which included FDR himself, believed that Stalin had abandoned a Marxist revolutionary mission and was mainly preoccupied with protection from attack. Therefore, by acting in a friendly and sympathetic fashion, the United States could reduce distrust and pave the way for a collaborative relationship.

According to Yergin, these softliners were opposed by a more hawkish group based in the State Department. The latter stressed the revolutionary, totalitarian character of Soviet society and maintained that the imperatives of despotism required unlimited expansion. American concessions to Stalin were viewed as potentially catastrophic since they would be perceived as signs of weakness. Any hope of controlling Russian behavior depended on Western military and economic strength.

In the immediate postwar period, the two American factions competed for the allegiance of President Harry Truman and Secretary of State Byrnes. By late 1946, the hardliners had prevailed and put the United States on a confrontational course. This was a great misfortune because, “In the international arena, Stalin’s policies were not those of a single-minded world revolutionist. The truth is that the Soviet Union’s policy was often clumsy and brutal, sometimes confused, but usually cautious and pragmatic” (Yergin, 1977, p. 12). However, by acting in this fashion, the United States created needless polarization.

Yergin illustrated the self-defeating dynamic by taking a critical look at US policy in occupied Germany. The Soviet goals there were to extract large-scale reparations and to insure that Germany would not be resurrected as a major world power. However, the Americans incorrectly read Soviet reparations demands as threatening to the economic stability of Germany and Western Europe, and misconstrued the Soviet desire for security as an interest in dominating the country. As a consequence, US officials moved toward the partition of the country – incorporating the three western zones into the Marshall Plan, and by the spring of 1948 creating the machinery to establish a new West German state.

Yergin shows how these American-inspired decisions stimulated a negative reaction from the Soviets. Stalin introduced the Cominform, which tied together the European communist parties behind a more militant politics. West European parties, which had originally been encouraged by the Soviets to participate in parliamentary arrangements, were spurred on to acts of sabotage. Meanwhile, the East European parties cast aside their nationalistic practices and embraced the Soviet top-down model of socialization.
Gravest of all was the Soviet decision to blockade Berlin. The purpose of that intervention was to reopen the possibility of reunifying Germany. However, for the United States and its West European allies, the closing of the access routes into the former German capital was viewed as an aggressive act, betokening Soviet designs on the city. By launching an airlift, the Western powers were able to supply the inhabitants without resort to war. Yet the net effect of the crisis was to freeze the division of Europe and accelerate the trend toward militarization of the two blocs.

As a description of the evolving American approach to the USSR, Yergin’s book was especially illuminating. However, he did not adequately answer his own central question: “why . . . an interpretive structure that posited unlimited Soviet ambitions became so generally adopted if, at least arguably, Stalin was pursuing a conservative, limited, even traditional foreign policy?” (Yergin, 1977, p. 138). He did identify several major factors: the ideological preconceptions of the State Department, the crudeness of Russian diplomacy, the dyspeptic personalities of some key US officials, the desire of the individual armed services to enhance their own bureaucracies, and the hostile Soviet response to American provocations.

Yet even when these considerations are aggregated, it is difficult to see why over a period of years such highly educated and astute policymakers failed to notice Soviet restraint or to explore the possibility that the security of the United States might be better served by sensible compromises with the Russians than by a nuclear competition, which entailed a risk of catastrophic war. In this respect, the weakness in Yergin’s argument resembled the flaw in the Kolkos’ case and of revisionism in general. Having painstakingly described Soviet weakness, caution, and conservatism as manifested through a series of European crises, it was hard to understand why American leaders did not push harder for European unity as the optimal way to satisfy both economic and national security objectives. This was not a question faced by more orthodox writers, for whom Soviet expansionism was an overriding threat.

III

During the late 1980s and early 1990s two challenging new books, America’s Half-Century (1989) by Thomas McCormick and A Preponderance of Power (1992) by Melvyn Leffler, cast fresh light on the question of how a conservative Soviet Union had become transformed into a revolutionary menace. Significantly, both works were conceived during the Reagan era, when the Cold War was again heating up and the gravity of US–Soviet conflict seemed undeniable.

A former student of William Appleman Williams, McCormick approached the study of American foreign policy from an economic perspective. However, in a significant departure he drew upon the “world systems” theory of sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, placing at the center of his analysis the concept of “hegemony,” i.e., the ability of a single capitalist nation to exercise “such predominant influence in economic power, military might, and political-ideological leadership, that no other power, or combination of powers can prevail against it” (McCormick, 1989, p. 5).

McCormick argued that by achieving hegemony, the capitalist nation-state was able to resolve the tension between the “internationalist imperatives” of capitalism and the “nationalist biases” of the state. For five centuries, the “key to accumulating capital . . . and maximizing profits” was long-distance trade (McCormick, 1989,
While the nation-state sometimes cooperated, there were also many occasions when it interfered with the free flow of capital, goods, and labor in order to preserve the prosperity of the population as a whole or the physical safety of the society. The virtue of being a hegemonic power was that the state could promote unobstructed commerce while simultaneously maintaining prosperity and security for its people.

At the end of World War II, the United States emerged as the new hegemon with an overriding mission to create an integrated capitalist world economy. This generated conflict not only with left-wing movements, but with weaker capitalist states that feared the impact of unrestrained market forces. Against this backdrop, the Cold War – defined as a US–Soviet clash – appeared as a significant but by no means decisive phenomenon.

Like most revisionists, McCormick did not regard the Soviet Union as an inherently revolutionary society. The Marxist trappings notwithstanding, he maintained that Stalinist Russia represented a type of state capitalism in which an autocratic government had assumed responsibility for capital accumulation and industrial development. At the end of World War II, the United States wished to draw the USSR into the world system and the Soviet leadership was inclined to join. In his view, what ultimately ruined the bargain was America’s acquisition of a nuclear monopoly, which made US officials “giddy” with power and less willing to accommodate legitimate Soviet interests.

If there was a “causa belli of the Cold War,” McCormick contends that the breakdown of the Allied Control Council in occupied Germany was surely it (McCormick, 1989, p. 67). As late as Potsdam, the Americans and Soviets were still discussing arrangements under which Russia would achieve significant reparations through a restriction of Germany’s industrial capacity. For US officials this posed a potential problem because they viewed the economic revival of Germany as essential for the recovery of Europe. But many were actively seeking a middle ground, until the successful use of the atomic bomb removed their incentive to compromise.

Flouting Soviet wishes, the US Military Government suspended all reparations deliveries in mid-1946 and joined with Britain in creating a bizonal economic structure that would be independent of the Allied Control Council. Effectively banished from western Germany and faced with an American government that seemed determined to maintain its nuclear advantage, the Soviets abandoned any effort to join the American-led world economy.

From 1947 onward the USSR stood outside this system, an ever-present magnet for the many discontented countries and political movements. Through propaganda, economic aid, and the accumulation of military might, the Soviets “ultimately proved the greatest obstacle to American hegemony and its blue-print for a new world order” (McCormick, 1989, p. 53). Herein lay the foundations of the Cold War, which had emerged despite the Russians’ indifference to Marxist imperatives.

Having explained the rift, McCormick also noted a certain falsity in the American posture. In striving to “contain” the Soviet challenge, US policymakers were not so distressed as they claimed since they readily apprehended the uses of the Soviet threat, as both a justification for profitable military spending and a means of disciplining recalcitrant allies.

Although McCormick’s notion of hegemony specifically encompasses the idea of a national (state) interest that is not simply coterminous with that of the capitalists,
he cannot bring himself to embrace the notion of “national security” as it has been conventionally articulated. The Soviets may be a real enemy in the sense that they perennially obstruct the workings of the world economy, but he ignores their threat to the physical safety of Western Europe and the United States. That omission makes it difficult to understand the centrality of NATO in American foreign policy or the unrelenting pursuit of nuclear superiority.

By contrast to McCormick, Melvyn Leffler’s formidable book, A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War (1992) put military considerations at the center of his analysis. Winner of the Bancroft, Ferrell, and Hoover prizes, the study was remarkable in its thoughtful synthesis of the existing literature and in the use of archival materials. During almost two decades of intensive research, the author steeped himself in the writings of US policymakers and formed a sharp impression of their thinking. As suggested by his book title, he believed them to be preoccupied with issues of power and national security.

From the harsh experiences of the twentieth century, American leaders had concluded that when a hostile state or combination of states was able to achieve control over the resources, skilled labor, industrial infrastructure, and military bases of Eurasia, US interests were seriously imperiled. It was certainly true that for Washington, “a viable international economy was the surest way to defend the health of core industrial nations and to protect friendly governments” (Leffler, 1992, p. 10). However, in Leffler’s account the economic project appears as the handmaiden of geopolitics. By promoting an integrated capitalist system, the Americans were attempting to insure a “favorable correlation of power.”

As World War II drew to a close, it was clear that the USSR was the only nation in a position to eventually gain control of the Eurasian land mass. But it was by no means certain that it would make this attempt, particularly in view of the immense damage wrought by the German army invaders. Despite the many indications of Stalin’s caution and efforts at cooperation, Leffler repeatedly points out that US officials were quick to reach the most pessimistic conclusions and to apply a double standard to his actions.

By contrast to Yergin, he does not emphasize their misperceptions. Indeed, his most important and arresting argument is that US policymakers were never focused on Russian purposes. The critical factor for them was the social turmoil and economic stagnation on the Eurasian continent, which nurtured the growth of diverse left-wing movements that everywhere included powerful communist parties. The Americans feared that the Russians would “capitalize on developments they did not cause but could redound to their long-term advantage” (Leffler, 1992, p. 6). From this standpoint it made no difference whether Moscow was really encouraging the left to seize power. Nor did it improve matters if the left enjoyed popular support and won elections. Once in office, radicals “would pursue policies that directly or indirectly served the purposes of the Soviet government” (Leffler, 1992, p. 7).

Determined to maintain “a preponderance of power,” American leaders did what they could to shore up Western Europe by pouring in economic aid, forcing out leftists from government coalitions, and, most provocative of all, promoting the partition of Germany so that the western zones could be incorporated into the Marshall Plan. This was “high-risk” diplomacy which was bound to stimulate a harsh Soviet reaction, thereby confirming policymakers’ negative expectations.
Leffler differed sharply from revisionists in his conviction that, however costly and dangerous, the US decisions to stop accommodating the Russians, to divide Germany, and to create an exclusive Western European bloc were “prudent.” Regardless of Soviet intentions, “the threats emanating from the postwar socioeconomic dislocation and power vacuums were too great to allow for a policy of reassurance” (Leffler, 1992, p. 516).

The potential coalescence of European radical movements with the power of the Soviet state was surely a great danger. Yet like US policymakers themselves, Leffler took for granted what needed to be explained: namely, why radical groupings would accept Russian control and why the security-minded Soviets should incite foreign insurgency given their initial reluctance? Those choices cannot be understood without reference to US behavior, which from the beginning was geared to the creation of an integrated capitalist system in postwar Europe, not as the handmaiden to security but as its matrix.

By using their power on the continent to preserve private ownership, to constrain the activities of working-class organizations, and to limit government interference with the market, the Americans provoked not only indigenous leftists but also the USSR, which, at least for Germany, desired far-reaching structural change.

While Leffler had tentatively endorsed American policy choices in Europe, he was quite critical of the offshoots – the “huge” (and to him superfluous) US buildup of nuclear weapons and the expanded commitments in the third world. Moreover, his retelling of the postwar history left little doubt that in its quest for security the United States had been seeking economic, political, and military ascendancy in Europe. This was far different than the interpretation of the orthodox historians, for whom Soviet aggression had always been the main factor.

It was also quite different from the American public’s understanding of the Cold War. Indeed, beginning in the late 1960s, there was a widening gulf between the work of academic historians and the larger society. One striking expression of this was the success of David McCullough’s Pulitzer prize-winning biography of Harry Truman (1992), which painted a heroic picture of the plain-spoken man from Missouri, who rose unexpectedly to the pinnacle of world power and saved Western Europe from the Soviet hordes. By contrast, in his 1999 presidential address to the Society of Historians of Foreign Relations (SHAFR), Arnold Offner summarized two decades of scholarship with the observation that “Truman’s parochialism . . . caused him to disregard contrary views, to engage in simplistic analogizing, and to show little ability to comprehend the basis for other nation’s policies . . . his foreign policy leadership intensified Soviet–American conflict, hastened the division of Europe, and brought tragic intervention in Asian civil wars” (Offner, 1999, p. 129).

Revisionism had by no means swept the field of diplomatic history. And there was certainly never a consensus that it was the United States that had brought about the Cold War, or that it was internally generated economic causes that had triggered it. Indeed, as long as Soviet records were closed to scholars, many fundamental questions about the dynamic interaction of the two powers could not be satisfactorily answered. Nevertheless, several of the themes that appeared in Leffler’s complex account had achieved wide acceptance: most crucially, the notion that it was the United States that possessed the “preponderance of power” in the postwar era and that Soviet expansion was less than imagined.
Among historians the most prominent dissenter from this view was John Lewis Gaddis, a prolific writer of books and essays, who had long faulted revisionists for minimizing the Soviet role. He was therefore quick to draw upon the rich documentary materials that began tumbling out of the Russian and East European archives in the wake of the Soviet collapse. As the consultant to CNN’s *The Cold War* history series, and the author of a major book, *We Now Know* (1997), Gaddis helped to popularize an emerging post-revisionist perspective (Kuniholm, 1980; Harbutt, 1986; Lundestad, 1986).

In a series of tightly argued essays, Gaddis probes the question of alternatives. Could the Cold War have been avoided? And if not, could it have been waged in some other fashion? His conclusion is negative on both counts. He considers the decisive actor to be Joseph Stalin, one of the most ambitious and paranoid figures in the twentieth century, whose insatiable need for security put his country on a path of “revolution and war” (Gaddis, 1997, p. 25). Given the “vacuum of power” in Europe and the divergence in American and Soviet ideology, some measure of conflict was unavoidable. But it was Stalin’s unbridled need for control and his contempt for the interests of others that created an unbridgeable gap. Gaddis acknowledges that Soviet behavior in Eastern Europe was variable, that in Poland there was an early suppression of domestic dissent, whereas in Hungary the vestiges of political pluralism lingered until 1948, when the communists finally took charge. However, in his judgment this was simply a matter of tactics, of Stalin cannily biding his time until he could discern what the traffic would bear.

In a nod toward contemporary scholarship, Gaddis concedes that the Cold War was a reciprocal process, that the United States did seek “preponderant power,” and that it pursued a definite agenda of political democracy and capitalist integration. But the American preference was to be inclusive, to find a formula for Soviet participation in a new international order. When that effort failed, the United States constructed its own “empire” in Western Europe. This was a distinctive “invited empire” in which West European nations voluntarily accepted the leadership and occasional interventions of the United States out of a well-grounded fear of Soviet aggression.

The decisive clash took place in occupied Germany. Prior to the publication of *We Now Know*, historians of diverse persuasions had emphasized the centrality of the German question, and many suggested that it was the United States that had spearheaded the drive for partition over Soviet objections (Baker, 1978; Smith, 1980; Eisenberg, 1996). Gaddis shares their perception that “Stalin never wanted a separate German state,” but contends that his real goal was “a reunified Germany within Moscow’s field of influence” (Gaddis, 1997, p. 127).

Stalin’s fatal mistake was to delay unification until the eastern zone could be a magnet for the West. As with citizens elsewhere in the Soviet imperium, those in East Germany came to loathe their Russian occupiers and with even greater reason. Upon entering the country in 1945, the undisciplined members of the Red Army may have raped as many as 2 million German women. And during the ensuing two years, the Soviet military ravaged the country’s industrial structure, shipped off tens of thousands of people to prison and forced labor, all the while imposing their unpopular political and economic ideas on the general population.
By contrast, the Americans in Germany “with a breezy audacity that seems remark-
able . . . fell back upon domestic instincts and set about transplanting democracy into
the part of Germany they controlled” (Gaddis, 1997, pp. 44–5). In conjunction with
the prospect of Marshall Plan aid, this created an upsurge of enthusiasm for the
American way. US officials never had a formal plan to create a separate West German
state. It was the British who initiated the move and pressure from the Germans that
propelled it forward. As for the latter, the choice was clear: they could “follow
the Stalinist path toward national unity;” or they “could seek alignment with the
United States and its allies, knowing that the effect might be to postpone unifica-
tion for years to come” (Gaddis, 1997, p. 120). The division of Germany was a pro-
found disappointment to the Soviet leader, but his own behavior had brought it
about.

Because _We Now Know_ seemed to be based on the new Soviet sources, the book
gained special credibility. Yet as Gaddis forthrightly acknowledges in his intro-
duction, he primarily utilized the records translated and printed by the Cold War
International History Project and the monographs of other scholars who have done
archival work. Indeed, his essays on the division of Europe are particularly thin on
direct documentation and reliant on historians, who disagree with one another and
who do not necessarily share Gaddis’s conclusions (Staritz, 1992; Naimark, 1995;

The new scholarship certainly provides ample evidence of the cruelty, arrogance,
and cynicism of Soviet foreign policy, points that orthodox and post-revisionist writers
have stressed. But it also gives support to claims that Stalin expected the alliance with
the United States to continue, that he did not have clear plans for Eastern Europe,
and that he was open to compromise on the future of Germany.

With regard to the latter, Gaddis sidesteps the many manifestations of Soviet con-
servatism, among them Stalin’s bridling of the German communists, his quashing
of the radical anti-fascist committees, his constraints on trade union activity, and his
insistence on the need for a “bourgeois-democratic” stage of German development.
Stalin and his confederates may well have entertained long-term hopes that a unified
Germany might some day fall into their sphere of influence, but their actual decision-
making was shaped by the need to conciliate the West.

As for the alleged decision to delay reunification, the historian Norman Naimark,
who has looked most closely at Soviet behavior in the eastern zone, renders a more
complex judgment. In his portrayal, during the early years of the occupation, Moscow
was animated by competing goals: a need for substantial reparations from all zones
of Germany, a desire to tighten control in the east, and a wish for a unified, neutral
state that would remain demilitarized. As late as January–February 1947, the Soviets
were still looking for a deal with the West and were priming their East German

It is not just the eastern sources that pose a challenge to Gaddis and to post-
revisionist analysis. There are, for example, the thousands of pages of American
postwar planning papers that reveal an intention to maintain far-flung military bases
and to reshape the political and economic institutions of other nations. Although
Gaddis sidesteps the point, it is also worth recognizing that for US policymakers their
neighboring region was not after all in Europe, but in Central and Latin America,
where there is no paucity of data about US intervention and high-handedness.
But even within the European context, the suggestion that the United States constructed “a new kind of empire – a democratic empire” is a form of special pleading. It is a fair point that US interventions in the politics of West European countries were welcomed by many inhabitants and that, by contrast to the Soviets, they were not accompanied by violence. However, American military aid to the repressive Greek government, the bribery of the Italian parties, and the infiltration and disruption of the West European labor movement must surely count as undemocratic acts.

With regard to the German question, for almost two decades historians have “known” from the papers of Military Governor Dwight Eisenhower and his Deputy Lucius Clay that they found the early Soviet behavior in occupied Germany to be constructive. Upon his visit to the United States in November 1945, Clay told State Department officials that he “took sharp issue with the point of view that it was the USSR that was failing to carry out the Berlin Protocol” and stressed that the “entire record of the Control Council showed that the USSR was willing to cooperate . . . in operating Germany as a single political and economic unit” (Smith, 1974, p. 113).

One year later, Clay was still suggesting to Secretary of State James Byrnes that if the United States responded to Soviet reparations needs, this might result in German unification and “the right to contest for its philosophy . . . to the borders of Poland and Czechoslovakia” (Smith, 1974, p. 284). Especially meaningful to Clay and his associates in Military Government were the October 1946 elections in the Soviet zone and Berlin, in which the Soviet-backed Socialist Unity Party had done poorly. Gaddis alludes to these elections as a sign of Stalin’s absurd beliefs about German political attitudes. But for the American officials at the scene, the significance of these races was that in the interest of Allied unity, the Soviets were still permitting them.

This consideration caused the leaders of US Military Government to press hard for an agreement at the 1947 Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Moscow. To their intense frustration, they were thwarted by Washington officials, who had already determined that the western zones of Germany must be integrated into an economic recovery program for Western Europe. Gaddis reverses the sequence, affirming that the new Secretary of State George Marshall was so disheartened by his experience in Moscow that he returned to the United States with a new idea for a recovery plan. But as State Department records make clear, the work on this was already underway.

Over the succeeding months, the United States and its western allies maintained the fiction of continuing negotiations. But for US and British policymakers the issue was settled: Germany would be partitioned. Their tactical problem was how to conceal their responsibility for that choice. From the November 1947 London Conference of Foreign Ministers, US Ambassador Walter Bedell Smith cabled Eisenhower: “The difficulty under which we labor is that in spite of our announced position, we really do not want nor intend to accept German unification in any terms that the Russians might agree to, even though they seem to meet most of our requirements” (Eisenberg, 1996, p. 318).

Having decided to create a separate West German state, the Americans and British anticipated certain costs, including increased repression in Eastern Europe, a crackdown on the noncommunist political parties in East Germany, and Soviet pressure on Berlin. That expectation was the major stimulus for early moves toward a western military alliance.
Gaddis conveys the impression that a divided Germany was the spontaneous creation of eager Europeans, including the West Germans. However, outside of Britain there was great reluctance to take this step, especially in France. It was only the promise of Marshall Plan aid and the implied threat of its suspension that achieved the consent of the Western nations. Among West Germans, their desire for greater self-government and financial assistance did not reflect a preference for partition. Fearful of their opinion, the Americans and British ruled out a referendum on the issue and ignored the many cautionary pleas of the minister-presidents from the western zones.

Aware of this dissension, Stalin launched the Berlin blockade hoping to derail the plans for a West German government. This was his most serious mistake, which led to the famed airlift and a consolidation of West European opinion behind the American agenda. Yet it is significant that neither the American nor the West European publics were ever apprised of the strong Soviet interest in reunifying the country.

None of this shows that the Americans “caused” the Cold War or that they were less humane than the Russians. But what it does suggest is that in their zeal to control events in Western Europe, American policymakers prematurely abandoned eastern Germany and perhaps even Eastern Europe to Stalin.

With the settlement of the Berlin blockade, the line across Europe was clearly drawn. In short order, NATO was founded and a new West German government was born. The Soviets responded by establishing the German Democratic Republic (DDR) in the east and intensifying their political subjugation of Eastern Europe.

With the onset of the Korean War, American policymakers were increasingly disposed toward German rearmament. As a prelude to that step, the United States, Britain, and France signed contractual agreements with the Bonn government, granting it sovereignty although holding certain powers in reserve. This opened the door for West Germany’s acceptance into NATO in 1955, prompting the Soviets to grant sovereignty to the DDR and to incorporate it into the newly formed Warsaw Pact. As both sides built up their armies and enlarged their nuclear arsenals, there was a growing probability that any military effort to breach the East–West line would lead to a global conflagration.

Over the course of the decade, the Soviets made various efforts to alter the German situation. In 1952 Stalin sent a note proposing reunification and offering free elections, with the proviso that the occupying armies would be withdrawn and that Germany would be prohibited from participating in any military alliance. This proposal was briefly taken up by his successors, Georgi Malenkov and Lavrenti Beria. However, policymakers in both Washington and Bonn doubted the sincerity of these offers and for their own part, they did not wish to jeopardize West Germany’s tie to the West.

In 1958 Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev pugnaciously challenged the arrangements for Berlin, pointing out that the existence of the two Germanies removed the legal basis for Western occupation rights. Unlike his predecessors, Khrushchev seemed reconciled to the division of Germany, and was demanding Western recognition...
of the Ulbricht government and a changed status for West Berlin. With thousands of East Germans escaping every month, Khrushchev announced his intention to sign a separate peace treaty, giving the DDR control of the Berlin access routes.

President Eisenhower was unable to resolve the matter and left the festering crisis to his successor. Fearful of appearing weak and pressured by West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, Kennedy fanned his own “war scare,” stepping up draft calls, mobilizing the reserves, and speeding up plans for civil defense. Khrushchev’s shocking response was to erect a wall across Berlin, thereby halting the exodus of East Germans and sealing the division of the city. With this decisive act, the second Berlin crisis began to wind down, although not until 1963 did Khrushchev apprise the East German Party Congress that a separate peace treaty was no longer a priority.

In understanding the events of this period, historians are generally agreed that they flowed from the more fundamental policy decisions of the early postwar years. Yet the interpretive debates have remained. Was the European stalemate the product of an aggressive Soviet Union held in check by the military might of an American-led NATO? Or were there real opportunities for reconciliation, which US policymakers forfeited through some combination of misperception, bureaucratic inertia, and economic interest?

With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, American triumphalism has steered the debate in a self-congratulatory direction. In taking the story of the European Cold War from its origins in 1945 through the achievement of the nuclear test ban in 1963, the most widely acclaimed new book is Marc Trachtenberg’s *A Constructed Peace*, which seeks to explain “how peace came to the world of the great powers” (Trachtenberg, 1999a, p. viii).

According to this account, the outlines of the peace were already evident at Potsdam where Stalin and Truman tacitly agreed to a de facto division of Germany. The Soviets would manage their own zone of occupation and the three Western powers would control the rest. Had this arrangement been followed, Germany and the rest of Europe would have been divided but in an amicable way. What spoiled the deal, argues Trachtenberg, were the Stalinist forays into Iran and Turkey, which aroused fear in Washington that he was bent on world conquest. Reneging on Potsdam, in 1946 the Americans made claims on eastern Germany, demanding a common reparations program and the “first use” of German exports to pay for necessary imports.

Having aggravated the Soviets with no tangible result, the Americans and British chose to rebuild the western zones as part of an integrated West European system. At first glance, the emergence of the two Germanies in 1949 might appear similar to the original bargain. However, Trachtenberg’s point is that this was an embittered and unstable division, in which each side feared the other’s encroachments and began amassing military power.

Although the United States briefly enjoyed a nuclear monopoly, its effectiveness was dubious. Should the Soviets launch an attack, their troops would quickly overrun Western Europe, necessitating American nuclear strikes on friendly territory. The antidote was to build up NATO forces and to include West German troops so that a non-nuclear defense would become plausible.

This animated deep Soviet fears of their old enemy, so intense that they derived reassurance from the continued presence of the United States military in Western
Europe. Trachtenberg suggests that so long as the Americans dominated NATO and maintained control of nuclear weapons, the Kremlin leadership felt confident that the East–West line would be respected.

In 1955 this fragile equilibrium was jeopardized by the efforts of Eisenhower and Dulles “to get out of Europe” and to make the allies responsible for their own defense (Trachtenberg, 1999a, p. 145). For Western Europe to become a kind of Third Force, it needed independent access to nuclear weapons, something that was acceptable to Eisenhower. But that raised the possibility of a West German hand on the nuclear trigger, whether as part of a centralized decisionmaking structure or an independent national force.

Trachtenberg suggests that it was Eisenhower’s tilt toward military disengagement that stimulated Khrushchev’s Berlin ultimatum. To the Russians, “a non-nuclear Federal republic, dependent on the western powers for protection, was no problem” (Trachtenberg, 1999a, p. 246). However, “a nuclearized Germany able to play an independent role in international politics, was another matter entirely.” To prevent that outcome, Berlin was the only lever that Khrushchev possessed.

What averted international disaster was not the erection of the Berlin Wall, as is commonly thought, but a broader set of understandings that were forged during the Kennedy years. In contrast to Eisenhower, Kennedy recognized the need for the United States to remain in Europe and he was unequivocally opposed to West Germany’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. Although not negotiated directly, there was an implicit trade: Khrushchev would stop challenging Western rights in Berlin, while Kennedy would guarantee the non-nuclear status of the Bonn government. Thus the true conclusion of the second Berlin crisis was the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963, which effectively prevented the West Germans from developing their own arsenal.

So emerged the “constructed peace” which, according to Trachtenberg, lasted until the dissolution of the Soviet bloc. In the interim, the security interests of the United States, the Soviet Union, and West Germany were all well protected. From 1963 on, the Cold War became a different kind of conflict – “more subdued, more modulated, more artificial, and, above all less terrifying” (Trachtenberg, 1999a, pp. 398–401). The years of incremental decisions had brought stability to Europe, yielding “a system in which free nations could live in peace.”

Marc Trachtenberg’s book is a profoundly complacent work, as its title suggests. Though it concedes that the world passed through some frightening moments en route to equilibrium, the eventual outcome was benign. So benign, in fact, that its major elements have survived the ending of the Cold War and exist today: the presence of American troops in Europe, a non-nuclear Germany, and a reunified country still held in check by membership in NATO.

Trachtenberg has elsewhere prodded historians to put their “political beliefs aside and frame questions in such a way that the answers turned on what the evidence showed” (Trachtenberg, 1999b, p. 9). Toward that end, he has supplemented the footnotes from A Constructed Peace with a personal website, containing more elaborate documentation for his views. Yet despite the many citations, what is striking about this book is its disregard of the existing literature and the bending of unwelcome evidence.

Thus Trachtenberg’s claim that at Potsdam, the Americans and Soviets had a tacit understanding to divide Germany rests almost entirely on James Byrnes’s demand
for zonal reparations. And while there is some basis for claiming that the Secretary of State personally preferred partition, this is not what the Potsdam Protocol stipulated, it was not what Truman instructed, and it was not the initial policy of US Military Government. Even more far-fetched and undocumented is the notion that Stalin was satisfied with a scheme that excluded Soviet influence in Western Germany.

The records of US Military Government clearly demonstrate that until early 1947, it was attempting to achieve central German agencies and common policies. The failure of that effort stemmed directly from differences between the occupying powers over such matters as reparations and foreign trade, control of the Ruhr, German political rights, de-Nazification, labor policy, and, most crucially, the organization and reconstruction of German industry. Trachtenberg’s own ideology, with its exclusive focus on military power and national security, prevents him from appreciating the deep economic worries of American officials – their distress over the continuing stagnation in the western zones and their fear that this would undermine a capitalist restoration in Western Europe.

Nor does the author grasp the affront to the Soviets inherent in the western decision to divide Germany. While Stalin was obviously reluctant to surrender the eastern zone, he was even more fearful of a partitioned nation in which the most industrially rich and populated area would go to the West. Trachtenberg dismisses almost out of hand subsequent Russian efforts to bring about a neutral, demilitarized state. And he underrates the larger consequences of a split in Europe that was so disadvantageous to the Soviet side.

Here the Eurocentric focus is a particular problem, because it obscures the extent to which Soviet setbacks in Europe had profound global results. Among other things, these losses fueled a powerful desire to right the imbalance elsewhere, most immediately in Asia where a successful Chinese Revolution created the possibility for large-scale gains.

As a general proposition, the fact that there were no new wars in Europe does not demonstrate a stable peace. Like John Gaddis, Trachtenberg has a sanguine attitude toward the accumulation of nuclear weapons, believing that since they were not used, they did not pose a serious danger. Since the nuclear competition continues, one wonders if their assessment would change should there be some future nuclear conflagration. It is noteworthy, in any case, that the American-driven arms race relied in the final analysis on the caution and good sense of the Soviet leadership. This was perhaps a reasonable calculation, but not an especially safe or “prudent” way to organize international relations.

Trachtenberg’s enthusiasm for the 1963 settlement is based on his conviction that, for the Russians, the prevention of West German nuclear weapons was the decisive factor. Yet there is a paucity of evidence on this point, not even a formal agreement with the United States that might symbolize their satisfaction. Equally plausible is the hypothesis that by 1963 both sides had learned from the Cuban Missile Crisis how quickly world conflagration could come.

The obvious moral was to avoid heating up events near each other’s borders, while moving the competition to locations in which direct confrontation could be more easily averted. Was this a positive development? As judged against the prospect of nuclear annihilation, the answer is surely yes. But should that be the only standard for evaluating international behavior? Here again Trachtenberg’s ideology, so closely reflective of US policymakers’, creates its own blinders.
Absent from *A Constructed Peace* are any values apart from that of great power stability. That superpower conflict would migrate to other places, causing millions of deaths in countries like Korea and Vietnam, that the self-determination of people around the world might be hostage to US–Soviet rivalry, that the rights of individuals even in Europe itself would be suspended for decades, none of this features in the narration.

Trachtenberg grants that certain subjects “are more or less ignored” (1999a, p. ix), including such events as the East German uprising of 1953 and the Hungarian revolt of 1956. But his book is not intended to be “an encyclopedia,” instead he is trying to “get at the heart of the story.” Yet in passing judgment on the European settlement, it is remarkable that four decades of repression in the East carry so little weight.

The most orthodox historians would say that it should, that this is precisely the reason why United States policy was not only pragmatic but just. Yet this returns full circle to the central historiographic issue of the Cold War: was there a positive alternative to the militarized division of Europe?

There is no disputing Stalin’s malevolence, but there is reason to ponder whether postwar Europe would have been so cruelly and lastingly split had American policymakers been more open to compromise, particularly in Germany. The choices they made were not irrational, nor did they flow from exclusively economic imperatives. US officials did worry about “national security” and most saw cooperation with the Soviets as a way to achieve it. However, once they concluded that the allied project in Germany imperiled free-market economies in Western Europe, their prescription for safety was overwhelming military power and continental schism.

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