

17.403 / Van Evera, Carter, Gabbitas, Lischer, & Twomey / October 23, 2000

COLD WAR ORIGINS & U.S. INTERVENTION IN THE KOREAN WAR

I. HOW THE COLD WAR ERUPTED: EVENTS

A. Conflict over Poland, 1944.

- Stalin wanted a communist Poland under Soviet control. So: he set up the communist Lublin Committee as a rival to the non-communist Polish government in exile. This grated on Western powers who first joined WWII to free Poland.
- July 1944: the Soviets encouraged a Polish underground rising against the Nazis; then the Soviet Army halted on Warsaw's outskirts and let the Nazis slaughter the underground. Stalin refused even to let the U.S. and Britain air-drop supplies to them until it was too late. Not nice!

B. Yalta summit, February 1945. Stalin agreed to reorganize the Polish government on a broader democratic basis, and to hold "free and unfettered elections" in Poland. But FDR agreed to let Stalin decide how much to reorganize the government, and how elections would be run. By conceding control of details to Stalin, FDR in effect conceded on the substance. William Leahy, a top FDR aide, warned FDR that "this [agreement] is so elastic that the Russians can stretch it all the way from Yalta to Washington without ever technically breaking it." FDR replied: "I know it, Bill ... But it's the best I can do for Poland at this time." In short, Yalta was a vague agreement. (Then FDR oversold the agreement by implying that Stalin conceded more than in fact he had.)

C. Potsdam summit, July 1945. Stalin demanded territorial concessions in Turkey, Japan, and part of Libya (then an Italian North African colony). Truman refused. Some Americans read Stalin's demands to signal darkly aggressive Soviet intentions.

D. Tito demanded Trieste. Truman assumed that Tito acted at Stalin's behest (he probably didn't).

E. Stalin's ominous Feb. 9, 1946 speech. He called for a rapid Soviet military buildup, and spoke of the wartime alliance as a thing of the past. This alarmed western observers.

F. Iran, March 1946. Stalin's forces failed to leave northern Iran on the March 2 deadline, and didn't leave until Stalin was pressured.

G. Turkey 1946. Stalin sent Turkey an ultimatum demanding joint control of the Dardanelles. Instead Truman sent the battleship Missouri to the Mediterranean.

H. Greece 1947. The West thought Stalin was instigating the Communist revolution in Greece (he wasn't).

I. Berlin Crisis of 1948-1949--an outgrowth of the struggle for Germany.

J. Military aspects of Soviet-Western relations, 1945-1949:

1. The illusion of Soviet military superiority. American intelligence and the Western press depicted a vast Soviet conventional superiority in Europe, and downplayed the implications of the American atomic monopoly. Hence a Soviet threat that was largely political--the Soviets had some capacity to disrupt or subvert Western Europe--was also perceived as

military.

2. The Soviet atomic bomb exploded, September 1949. Now the West was really scared. What if Stalin isn't deterrable? Western cities will be vaporized by Soviet atom bombs in an inevitable World War III!

Western responses: the Truman Doctrine (1947); the Marshall Plan (1947); the Berlin airlift (1948-49); the formation of NATO (1949); and a vast American military buildup (1950-53)--triggering a Soviet counter-buildup. And away we go.

II. WHAT CAUSED THE COLD WAR? WHO CAUSED THE COLD WAR? FIVE EXPLANATIONS

- A. Communist totalitarian expansionism? "The totalitarian Soviets were the aggressor, the democratic West the defender. Soviet aggression sprang from the aggressiveness of Communist political systems. Communist governments are aggressive either (a) because they are inherently messianic--Communist ideology preaches the necessity for global conquest; or (b) because they are frail, hence aggressive for Orwellian reasons--they needed enemies to justify their domestic dictatorship."

Variant #1: Soviet expansion into in Eastern Europe threatened U.S. security, causing the Cold War.

Variant #2: The Soviets conquered the homelands of powerful U.S. ethnic groups--especially Polish-Americans--when they seized Eastern Europe. These ethnic groups then pushed Washington to respond.

Variant #3: U.S. softness early in the Cold War made things worse--the U.S. led the Soviets forward by appeasement. What if, instead, the U.S. had given Stalin an ultimatum in 1946: "get out of Eastern Europe or we'll throw you out!"? The Soviets would have left, removing the Cold War's cause!

- B. Communist totalitarian cruelty and barbarism? "The U.S. opposed the USSR less because the USSR was aggressive than because it was tyrannical--i.e., the Cold War was a Western human rights crusade." (But if true, why didn't the Cold War blossom fully in 1919? Or in the 1930s, as Stalin's crimes became known?)
- C. Capitalist expansionism? "The capitalist U.S. was the aggressor, the socialist Soviet Union was the defender. U.S. aggression sprang from capitalism's fear of a new depression, and need for markets." This is the now-largely-discredited left-revisionist view.
- D. The Unshaped Postwar European Order? "The lack of a clear Soviet-American wartime agreement on the postwar European order caused a collision of the two major allied powers in a zone of uncertainty. Had each side's sphere of influence been clearly delineated earlier, the Cold War might have been milder."
- E. International System: Bipolarity and the Security Dilemma? "The world's two strongest states never get along well because each is the main threat to the other. They will always compete for security. The Cold War was an inevitable result of the rise of the U.S. and USSR to the pinnacle of world power."

Variant #1: The two superpowers were in fact insecure, and contested for resources of real value--especially the industry and buffer room of Eastern Europe.

Variant #2: The superpowers were secure, due to the nuclear revolution; their vast size; and their distance from each other. But didn't know it; and they contended for assets (Eastern Europe) of no real value. Controlling Eastern Europe made USSR less, not more, secure, by scaring the rest of the world.

Variant #3 (spiral model variant): The two superpowers felt insecure, and contended for security, but both thought the other pursued unprovoked aggression for non-security reasons and overreacted accordingly.

A question to consider: if explanation "E", "International System," is valid, what can be inferred about the future of U.S.-Chinese relations?

III. THE KOREAN WAR, 1950-1953: BACKGROUND

- A. The U.S. and USSR agreed to partition Korea at the 38th parallel, 1945.
- B. The U.S. pulled its troops out of Korea, 1949. An American blunder?
- C. Communist victory in China ---> "who lost China?" debate in the USA.
- D. Dean Acheson's January 1950 speech delineating the "American defense perimeter in Asia." He omitted South Korea! (Another American blunder.)
- E. North Korea attacked the South, June 25, 1950. Truman decided to intervene. Reasons:
 1. To preserve American credibility. But was it engaged in Korea?
 2. Domestic politics--1950 was a bad year to lose another Asian country to Communism.
- F. Inchon landing, Sept. 15, 1950. U.S. forces routed the North Korean army. Truman then decided to cross 38th parallel and conquer North Korea, late September. (An American mega-blunder.)
- G. Oct. 3 1950 (& again on Oct. 10): China warned the U.S.: "don't cross 38th parallel or it's war with us!" Truman & Acheson didn't listen. UN troops crossed the 38th parallel on Oct. 7. Why?
 1. The warning came via an Indian diplomat, not trusted by Truman.
 2. China didn't explain the reasoning behind its warning, or convey its warning directly to Congressional Republicans.
 3. The Administration had already decided to cross the parallel; backtracking is painful.
 4. Truman feared attacks from Republican hawks if he stayed South.
 5. U.S. contempt for Chinese military capability.
 6. Some U.S. officials argued that "China would have entered the war in July, when it had a chance to win, if it meant to enter at all. It makes no sense for China to enter now, when its prospects are far worse." U.S. leaders dismissed the possibility that security fears would drive China to enter.
- H. U.S. forces encounter small Chinese forces in Korea, 26 Oct. 1950. MacArthur thought: "If this is all they can do, they'll be a pushover," and ordered an advance to the Yalu river (North Korea's northern border with China). (Another mega-blunder.)
- I. China struck on Nov. 26, 1950, routing U.S. forces and inflicting the worst defeat in U.S. Army history.
- J. A long and bloody war ensued, Dec. 1950-summer 1953, ending in a tie. (Note: this war included a long-hidden Soviet-American air war!)

IV. KOREA: EVALUATING U.S. DECISIONS

A. The U.S. pullout, 1949: a case of too-little U.S. intervention?

B. The U.S. intervention, 1950:

--Was the U.S. rationale for intervention valid?

--Effects of U.S. intervention on human rights? on U.S. credibility?

C. The U.S. run to the Yalu, 1950: quality of U.S. rationale? effects of U.S. policy?

D. The U.S. presence since 1953: effects? (Peace in Korea.)

Summary: a Goldilocks intervention? First too little, then too much, then just right.