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Introduction

It is the Dead who govern. Look you man how they work their will upon us ... why man, our lives follow grooves that the dead have run out with their thumbnails. Melville Davisson Post, *Uncle Abner, Master of Mysteries* (1918)

This book is an attempt to accomplish two things. First, I want to reflect on the origins, evolution and initial character of the early years of the Cold War and to provide a clear account for students and the general reader of how the struggle between Russia and the United States erupted after the end of World War II. A second task (see Chapter 7) is to examine how these Cold War years, the events, the personalities and the crises might inform our understanding of international relations more generally.

Many scholars, from different academic areas, have offered insights into the origins of the Cold War. Some are referred to and discussed in the following chapters. There are quite literally thousands of books and articles exploring the very many different dimensions of international politics between 1945 and 1962. We have books and articles which address not just the political dimensions of the relationship between Russia and the United States but the economic, the military, the nuclear, the cultural and the personal ramifications of the struggle. Detailed monographs exist in abundance on the character, impact and legacy of the leading figures in Cold War history. We are all familiar with some if not all of the accounts of the great dictator Joseph Stalin, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and of course President Franklin Roosevelt (e.g. Freidal, 1952; Montefiore, 2003). There is scarcely an event or a crisis that has not evoked its own scholarly debate or even a so-called school. Here, we might think of the fierce clashes between historians over the issue of who or what was responsible for the actual breakdown in diplomatic terms between Russia and the United States in 1945.

When we think of Cold War history and especially accounts of its origins we look to the work of 'traditionalists' (that is the early commentators on the conflict), such as George F. Kennan who saw clearly that the outbreak of the Cold War was primarily the responsibility of Stalin and the drive for Soviet expansionism. Writing in the 1940s and 1950s and literally responsible as an official within the State Department for the making of American foreign policy, Kennan believed that the United States had no choice but to emerge from isolationism and protect the Western world in both Europe and Asia from the threat of Communism (Kennan, 1947).

This so-called traditionalist school dominated our understandings of the origins of the Cold War right up until the 1960s. And many of its ideas still have purchase today. We cannot and should not ignore the breathtaking scale of Stalinist ambition in creating a Soviet empire after 1945 – the occupation of Central and Eastern Europe and the desire to compete with the United States. Equally we cannot and should not be blinded to the very great brutality that Stalin's regime and that of his successor Nikita Khrushchev visited upon the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe. In that sense George Kennan was correct that here did indeed lie a threat to liberty and certain versions of justice and human rights.

Yet perhaps the central flaw in the traditionalist version of Cold War history was, and is, to place too much emphasis upon the figure of Stalin. In this version of events, American politics was merely reactive and defensive to the dynamism of its Communist foe and especially the charismatic figure of Stalin.

This version of the origins of the Cold War was challenged in the 1960s by the so-called revisionists. Associated primarily with the American historian William Appleman Williams and his Wisconsin school, they offered an alternative explanation of the origins of the Cold War. Williams claimed that the fault for the breakdown should be placed firmly at the door of President Harry S. Truman and the demands of American capitalism. The United States sought a Cold War in order to promote a new international economic order, secure markets in Asia and Europe and maintain prosperity at home (Williams, 1962). American economic and nuclear strength combined quite literally to leave the USSR out of these new post-war arrangements. Soviet strategies are treated more sympathetically and part of the story is that after the death of Roosevelt in the spring of 1945 and given the anti-Communist nature of his successor, Harry Truman, there was actually little that the Soviet leader could do to promote cooperation.

Although immensely controversial as an interpretation, not least because of the negative critique of American politics as essentially selfish, this explanation became quite fashionable and remained important, along with other so-called leftist versions in understandings of the Cold War for well over a decade. Of course all debates about history must be seen in the context of their own political landscape and it was no coincidence that as American armies were increasingly embroiled in Vietnam, these revisionist scholars saw in the origins of the Cold War, a tragic and failing path of American foreign policy after 1945 that led seamlessly to the quagmire in Indo-China.

In the 1970s yet another version of Cold War history began to emerge – this time characterized as neo-revisionism and led by John Lewis Gaddis. While remaining confident that Stalin and his authoritarian system was guilty for the outbreak of confrontation, Gaddis pointed to the labyrinthine nature of the origins of the conflict and the many mis-steps, misunderstandings and misperceptions on all sides in the months after the end of World War II. Some ground was conceded and some mistakes by American leaders admitted to by the neo-revisionists in their dealings with the Soviet Union. Indeed a rather more fragile and less confident America is depicted by Gaddis as successive presidents struggled to come to terms with the changing shape of global politics and the burdens of acting in a superpower role.

As Gaddis pointed out the United States was not a confident power in 1945 and actually had to reshape many of its domestic priorities and institutions to cope with the demands of competition with the Soviet Union. There was a price to pay – which was not just financial – for eternal vigilance, the alliance with the West European states and a global policing role. In this version of events, the United States was a somewhat reluctant superpower (Gaddis, 1972).

In the foreground to all these versions of recent history lay the very real shadow of a nuclear confrontation, a nuclear accident (which did actually occur in 1986 at the Chernobyl reactor in Ukraine) and the misery and poverty of those in the developing world who were embroiled in the many conflicts that formed the overall shape of the Cold War world. In 1945 the US atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki changed irrevocably the nature of potential threats and beckoned in a new age of national security or, rather, national insecurity.

Debates over the outbreak and origins of the Cold War were further fuelled after 1989 by the release of documents from not just the United States but from Russia and the states of Eastern Europe. These documents were seized upon with alacrity in the hope that they would allow us to finally 'know' in the words of John Lewis Gaddis the truth about the origins of the conflict that dominated world politics after 1945 (Gaddis, 1997). The so-called 'new' history of the Cold War has though turned out to be not very new at all: articles have merely justified the American Cold War stance and heaped what appears to be endless blame on the dictator Stalin for his actions and behaviour. This type of critique is a sign of our own times and our own preoccupation with the threats posed by dictators, especially those dictators in possession of weapons of mass destruction.

So what more can this book add to the debates and our understanding of those years of turmoil and anxiety, and what might we as students of history draw from this past? The book opens (Chapter 1) by considering the themes and trajectories which formed the backdrop to the Cold War, paying particular attention to the ideological dimensions of the conflict as well as the geopolitical aspects of military security. In the contemporary world we are all aware that military security may coincide with economic and resource security, not least over the issue of commodities such as oil, as we see in the wars in Iraq. But I also want to underline the power of ideas in international history and their role in the origins of the Cold War.

Ideas mattered in the Cold War in different ways. First, the emergence of the idea of Communism in Russia after 1917 provided a startling and striking alternative to capitalism. The utopianism of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin seemed to have some success in eradicating corrupt monarchy and providing a new form of social equality. The call to arms made by the rebellious Bolsheviks unnerved Western European elites and provided American leaders with much food for thought. As we will go on to see, American politicians were perplexed by the appeal of Communism and sought from very early days to prevent the promotion of a Soviet-style Communism both at home and abroad. Woodrow Wilson, the Democratic President at the time of the Russian Revolution, made little secret of his dislike of authoritarian forms of government. Here we will explore what I term the 'dictator question' in American politics and the preoccupation of successive US administrations to eradicate dictatorships, well those that do not serve the priorities of Washington.

Communism quickly came to represent a powerful alternative mode of politics to that of democracy and – as we will see throughout this book – ideological threats, or the perception of ideological threats, really mattered when competition broke out between the USSR and the United States. Western leaders treated the emergence of Communism after the Russian Revolution of 1917 much as they have treated the threat from radical Islam since the events of what is now known as '9/11'. 'Communism' was the great Other of the twentieth century as much as it now appears that Islam or certain variants of it will be for this new century. Furthermore, the ideological challenge of Communism was perceived by Western leaders such as Wilson to exist as much within 'our' own societies as it did outside them.

Ideas also mattered on another level. Ideologies such as Communism or Liberalism provided people with ways of navigating the rocky plains of human experience and political elites with justifications for organizing their societies. Some Russians inexplicably perhaps to us - cried in their gulags when the news came that their brutal dictator, Stalin, had died. Soviet leaders had developed a national political culture based on a romanticism of the past and a fear of capitalism. Stalinism had provided a form of comfort during the years of war as a focus for the building of a Soviet nationalism. American (and European) political elites also found Soviet ideology useful in constructing their own anti-Communist narratives and policies. To manage the Communist threat was vital for Western leaders, but anti-Communist ideology and Cold War structures provided cohesion, and some might argue a useful sense of purpose, for state building especially after World War II. Again ideas/ideologies provided ways of organizing and, in the Soviet case, disciplining society.

6 The Origins of the Cold War

Here I will not disagree with those scholars of the traditionalist school who have pointed to the central role of Stalin in the making of the Cold War. Though I do not believe for a moment that a single man can make history, human agents, that is people, certainly matter in politics and the dictator and his successors were central to the construction of Cold War politics. As we will see below, debates still rage about the supposed incompetence of President Roosevelt in the Allied World War II conferences which set out to organize the post-war settlements.

General thematic concerns and a survey of the important ideas and issues in Cold War historiography give way to the more specific focus of the next four chapters. Chapter 2 looks at the origins of the Cold War and the ideological and geopolitical conditions of the 1920s and the 1930s. I will show how interdependent these two aspects of the period were. In particular the context of Revolution in Russia and how its enemies interpreted the changes in the country was central to the violently fluctuating geopolitical and economic instabilities of the 1930s. Fascism flourished in these conditions; but so too did Communism. Russia was, after the Revolution, excluded from the League of Nations and left on the periphery of international affairs, free only to conspire with a defeated, revisionist and increasingly authoritarian Germany.

However, it is also worth noting that Communist ideals and the Communist system attracted many liberals in the West as presenting a different and superior pattern of politics. Authors and poets made their way to the Kremlin to speak to the dictator about his political visions and ideals.

In contrast the United States, after its engagement in World War I, chose to reject President Woodrow Wilson's vision of a new world order, eschewed diplomatic relations with the USSR and retreated into a form of isolationism away from the affairs of 'Old Europe'. Preoccupied by the Wall Street Collapse of 1929, democracy did not seem to be in robust shape. It was the challenge of authoritarianism in the shape of Germany and Japan (not, it is worth noting, the USSR) which required America's re-engagement in international politics. The assault on American property and people at Pearl Harbor in 1941 propelled a massive shift in US behaviour and the country's entry into the war. The events of 1941 are now often compared to the tragedy of 9/11 and there is a symmetry between

the reactions of the White House in 1941 and 2001, not least in the perception that global politics had changed for ever.

Chapter 3 focuses on the impact of World War II and the issues and players that shaped the Cold War. In particular I will look at the interweaving of the ideological and geopolitical in the context of a growing sense of distrust and fear felt by the wartime Allies even as Germany, Italy and Japan were defeated. Here the American experience of surprise attack at Pearl Harbor is examined. The tactical alliance (the Grand Alliance) with the great dictator, Stalin, is seen to be a key theme as the United States sought to reshape a new world order. Here too I stress the point that wartime experiences were instrumental in shaping great power politics after the war had ended. Stalin expected, indeed demanded, that after the massive sacrifice of men and resources during the war years the USSR would be rewarded in numerous ways. It was after all on the Eastern Front that Hitler had been defeated. The figures for Soviet losses are quite simply staggering. The country lost something like one-eighth of its population during the struggle with Fascism (Roberts, 2006). Some 25 million people perished. twothirds of them civilians. Little wonder that Stalin believed that territorial gains as well as massive reparations were due to the Kremlin after victory.

Here too we examine the negotiations which took place over four years of war and will focus on the great power summits between Roosevelt, Stalin, Truman and Churchill held in Teheran, at Yalta and at Potsdam. It is worth noting that Western diplomats who came into contact with the Soviet leader were impressed by his personal charm, his wit and his diplomatic sophistication. This was despite knowing full well the nature of his often bloody regime. Anthony Eden, the British diplomat and later prime minister, who met the dictator, noted that he found it hard to reconcile Stalin the man with blood dripping from his hands with the urbane character he actually encountered. We will examine the charge made against Roosevelt that he failed to read the dictator correctly and was duped by him into permitting the Soviet occupation of gallant Poland. Roosevelt it appears to some was incapable of dealing in an adequate manner with the dictator and is still criticized in many guarters for his inability to negotiate a post-war settlement which would have installed democracy throughout Central and Eastern Europe. His successor Harry S. Truman has in terms of historical reputation fared rather better. His supposed toughness, backed by a new nuclear arsenal, is claimed by some to have had a more positive impact on Soviet behaviour (e.g. Graubard, 2004). In Chapter 4 I will argue differently: that a new world order along American lines was not preordained and that the United States after 1945 lacked confidence, if not conviction, in the early years of confrontation with Stalin and the USSR. Why this should be after so many years of study remains a central puzzle. Why did the United States, the greatest military power – a true superpower – take so long to outrun a tortured and illegitimate state such as the Soviet Union? For was the United States, after 1945, not the more desirable power in the eves of much of the world? Surely, it is no coincidence that when faced with a choice between Communist power on the European continent or an American commitment to the expansion of liberal values Western statesmen were quick to align with Washington? Or is it the case, perhaps, as I hope to illustrate, that liberal states, such as the US, that commit themselves to wars, world wars, cold wars, even wars on terror, can often find themselves compromising their own standards and values and hence undermining a domestic confidence in their chosen role?

Part at least of the American story in the early years of the Cold War is the reluctance to actually change the Republic into the type of 'garrison' state deemed necessary to wage long-term 'war' in the international system. For some critics of Cold War politics it would have been preferable surely to stay away from the rotten politics of Old Europe in the isolationism of the North American continent without compromising domestic norms through membership of international institutions and alliances. In other words a post-war consensus for the conduct of the Cold War was not evident within the United States.

Chapters 5 and 6 continue these themes and demonstrate that democracies are sometimes uncertain in their actions especially when confronted by what appear to be very powerful and committed enemies. Democracies do not usually seek war or confrontation. However, after 1945, the United States saw its own economic prosperity and sanctuary hinging on the control of certain regions and certain allies. In that sense part at least of the revisionist version associated with the importance of a new international economic order appears accurate.

We also 'now know' that the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc was economically and politically fragile and that under Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, it limped from one brutal crisis (for example Hungary in 1956) to another. Yet it is worth stressing that this was not how the USSR appeared to observers at the time. Soviet politics certainly looked brutal; but it was, for policy-makers in Washington, a dictatorship of vast geostrategic reach and strength, and with its nuclear weapons a dangerous opponent of the liberal version of politics and was determined, or so it seemed, to have access to Japan and the resources of the Middle East.

Dictators are always economical with the truth. We 'now know' the full extent of Khrushchev's deceptions during the 1950s; but it is not, and was not, easy to discover the reality of closed societies. We need only think about how little we actually 'know' even now about the 'hermit kingdom' of North Korea. Perhaps those present at the birth of the Cold War were too taken with the rhetoric of Communism to perceive the reality of Soviet society, especially as the Cold War developed. There were changes in the Soviet bloc under Nikita Khrushchev and he was not a dictator in the mould of Stalin. Yet this seemed to make no difference to American policymakers who by the early to mid 1950s were wedded to a style of Cold War politics and a form of statism in the international system. This explains, at least in part, why, even when rebellions occurred east of the Iron Curtain in 1953 and 1956, the United States was not prepared to intervene on behalf of those rebels hungry for democracy.

In some ways this was understandable. There was fear of an unknown reaction from an ideologically driven and now a nuclear foe. As John F. Kennedy remarked of the 1961 construction of the Berlin Wall, 'a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war' (Beschloss, 1991: 278).

All of these events and processes come to a head with the October 1962 confrontation between the United States and the USSR that the world knows as the Cuban Missile Crisis. In a very real sense, one might say of this event as Winston Churchill had famously remarked about the final Battle of El Alamein and its impact upon World War II, that the Cuban Missile Crisis did not mark the end of the Cold War, it did not even mark the beginning of the end of the Cold War, but it did perhaps mark the end of the beginning of the Cold War. Accordingly the crisis in Cuba is the last major event with which we deal in this book. After this confrontation, the Cold War as a 'structural' aspect of international politics was, as we shall see, largely set. The missile crisis was the type of crisis which had threatened to unfold ever since 1945 – direct confrontation between Washington and Moscow that promised to escalate to a full nuclear exchange.

The resolution of this crisis along peaceable lines was testament to a degree of diplomatic skill on both sides, by Khrushchev and Kennedy, as well as perhaps an overriding level of fear over the possible exchange of nuclear weaponry. It also marked the manner in which future major 'Cold War Crises' – the Middle East Crisis of 1973, the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the row over NATO nuclear deployments in the mid 1980s – would be confronted.

Overall, this book argues that a proper recognition of the past could teach us much. We might, for example, recognize that we are mistaken in assuming that there is an entirely new character to the threats/anxieties and fears which currently face the West and seem to dog our everyday lives. Understanding the origins of the Cold War will not in my view help us fight the 'war on terror'. Nor will it help us to structure responses to the future ideological and geopolitical struggles of the twenty-first century. Yet a study of those early years of the Cold War might help us understand some of the errors or missed opportunities made by previous generations. For example, not seeing more clearly the fragility of the Soviet state or understanding the attempts to transform the Soviet system in the 1950s away from the bleakest level of tyranny. The study might help us to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our own type of society when it is under threat.

As such, the following questions, I think, continue to resonate down the years from Stalin to now and so we might find it worthwhile to ponder them as we look at the Cold War. Are dictatorships/authoritarian states capable of change from within? Are all foes really as robust as they seem? Do we/should we engage with authoritarian states or should we isolate them? What duties might we have to help those who rebel against authoritarian structures? Should we continue to take the American commitment and the sacrifices of its own people in preserving peace for granted? Do we appreciate exactly how our liberties are compromised in any ideological confrontation? Is security really worth the costs in liberty that some think it requires? The final chapter will think through some of these questions in greater detail.

I do not suppose that this book has all the answers – though it hazards some suggestions as we proceed. But if the book contributes to a better appreciation of how central these questions are to understanding the current trends in the politics of the international system – and how central to understanding them the history of the Cold War is – than I, at least, will be more than satisfied. Ultimately, the task of understanding the Cold War, and learning from it, is a task for all of 'us'; in liberal states and in others. This book will I hope appeal to a general reader seeking to make sense of why and how the Cold War occurred when, as I argue, no one really wanted it to. This in turn might help us to think about how the contemporary confrontation that seems to be growing almost daily might be understood better, and how we might avoid the mistakes of the last century at the beginning of the present one.

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