



SPRING ADDRESS

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# The Cold War

has it a future?

Hugh Thomas



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

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## The author

LORD THOMAS OF SWYNNERTON has been Chairman of the Centre for Policy Studies since 1979. He was previously Professor of History at the University of Reading. His many works include *The Spanish Civil War*, rev. ed., Hamish Hamilton, 1977; *An Unfinished History of the World*, rev. ed., Hamish Hamilton, 1982; *The Cuban Revolution*, rev. ed., Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986; and *Armed Truce*, Hamish Hamilton, 1986. He was created a Life Peer in 1981.

# The Cold War

THE COLD WAR! MANY, PROBABLY MOST, OF THE TYPICAL POLITICAL expressions – the cant phrases, as we would say – of our epoch come from France, and especially from the French Revolution. 'Left' and 'Right', without which adjectives no political journalist could now survive, derives from the accidental placement at the meeting of the Estates General in 1789. 'Ideology' was a word coined by a certain Deslutt de Tracy to denote the origin of ideas, though in Condillac's very special sense of the word 'idea'. The 'third world', also an invaluable expression to describe a group of nations far away of which we know little, is a concoction of Professor Alfred Sauvy, the demographer, who believed that, just as there was, in the eighteenth century, 'a third estate' waiting its turn for life's opportunities, so in the twentieth, 'a third world' was outside in the anti-chamber (he was writing in 1952). What was the second world? That was left a little vague. Communism was a word not, as is often thought, invented by Rousseau but apparently by a Rousseau *du ruisseau* – Rousseau of the gutter – that eccentric nocturnal street-walker of pre-revolutionary Paris, Restif de la Bretonne, whose best known work is *Le Pornographe* which sketched a system for the rational control of prostitution. How appropriate that the label which controls the destinies of billions in our century should spring from the imagination of such a wild mythomane! Restif, it is appropriate to add, was later given a job in the ministry of police by Napoleon. All these French words remind us of the gallicisation of world politics since the XVIIIth Century – or rather since Marie Antoinette left Freiburg to marry the dauphin Louis in 1770<sup>1</sup>.

The Cold War is an expression first used, so far as I have been able to discover, by a German. Not a German of 1945 but by Edward Bernstein who in the 1890s wrote:

'this continual arming, compelling the others to keep up with Germany, is itself a kind of warfare. I do not know whether the expression has been used previously but one could say it is a 'Cold War'. There is no shooting but there is bleeding'<sup>2</sup>.

In the modern context, the first usage that I find of it – others may know of an earlier example – was not by Walter Lippman, nor Bernard Baruch, as the dictionaries of quotations say, but in *Tribune*, as early as 19 October 1945, by George Orwell: with Russia, he said, in a most intelligently prophetic article, entitled *You and the Atom Bomb*, we had to deal with a state ‘at once unconquerable and in a permanent state of Cold War with its neighbours’. How the phrase made its way to Orwell from Bernstein I do not know. Not direct, I think. Orwell was not a reader of German. I suspect Bertrand Russell may be a link.

Orwell’s article is worth reading since it predicts, sooner I believe than anyone else, the world in which we now live, in which ‘two or three monstrous super states, each possessed of a weapon by which millions of people can be wiped out, tacitly agree never to use the atomic bomb against each other’, thereby putting an end to large scale wars, at the cost of prolonging indefinitely ‘a peace that is no peace’: as Lenin put it.

Whatever the provenance of this phrase, the ‘Cold War’ has of course come to be the usual expression used about the first period of the long conflict between the West and the Soviet Union which began in 1945. There will be some who may believe that the conflict essentially began in 1917 – which is correct if one considers that it was then that Russian nationalism or imperialism received the deep-dyed impregnation with revolutionary Marxism which it needed in order to sustain ‘its historic drive for global pre-eminence’ – as Dr Brzezinski put it in his recent book *Game Plan*. The English critic, John Gross, writing recently in the *New York Times*, saw its origin in 1848, the year of the Communist manifesto.

Even so, the issues of the Cold War plainly did not dominate anyone’s thinking until 1945.

I have lately written a book about the first year of the Cold War 1945–1946, or (if you prefer) the first year of the post-war peace. In it, I conducted an elaborate investigation of the many theories put forward about those years including those of ‘revisionists’ in the United States who, in the shadow of their dislike of America’s world policy in the 1970s, attempted to put the blame on the West for the breakdown of the wartime alliance between the Soviet Union, Britain and the U.S. I found no such

evidence for that extreme interpretation. On the contrary I found that the West had been rather tolerant and welcoming to Russia. I had a good look at the allied policy on the Baltic States, East Europe generally, North Korea and Iran. I reached the conclusion that Stalin had decided to establish subservient regimes up to the limits of the Red Army's penetration – installing such revolutionary governments long before the U.S. proved its technological superiority and developed the atom bomb.

Of course I would agree that there is plenty of room for controversies about all these events. But one of the chief questions is not why Churchill and Roosevelt were so tough, but why they were so soft-hearted. Given Stalin's firm belief in Marxism-Leninism, his need for an enemy to sustain his position, his sense of what Leszek Kolakowski has called 'totalitarianism', the Cold War was surely in the 'logic of history' – as I recollect Bismarck said of German re-unification under Prussian direction.

Another question is: when did the Cold War end? Is it perhaps still with us? Or did it come to an end in the days of Khrushchev? Answers are surprisingly vague about such a very important matter. But such vagueness is only too typical of our time. No one even agrees on where Europe ends. Is the frontier on the Urals or on the River Bug? Mr Gorbachev has started talking about Russia-in-Europe ('our mutual house') an idea forgotten for many years. As to the Cold War . . . About the year 1960, Louis Hallé wrote a book entitled *The Cold War as History*. Members of the Kennedy administration spoke of the age of Dulles and Eisenhower as one of 'cold warriors'. More recently, the Russians and others spoke of President Reagan's efforts to revive American military power as being likely to take the world 'back to the Cold War'. I notice that Seweryn Bialer, in his new work *The Soviet Paradox*, also sought to distinguish between, on the one hand, the forty-year conflict between the West and the Soviet Union and, on the other, that acute period of the days of Stalin and Truman, calling only the latter 'the Cold War'. Contrariwise, Jeane Kirkpatrick says that she is 'quite happy' about the phrase 'Cold War' being employed to describe the entire, continuing conflict. Although as an Englishman I sometimes feel qualms at agreeing with a lady who dined at the Argentine Embassy in Washington on the evening after

Argentina occupied the Falklands, I support her in her definition. Surely it is hard to find much qualitative difference between the 1980s and the 1950s. A struggle of one sort and another has been going on throughout: agreed, with different emphases, theatres, and moments of acuteness. Even in the so-called era of 'détente' in the 1970s, Brezhnev assured us that there was to be 'no change in the laws of the class struggle, no reconciliation between Communists and capitalist exploitation' – only, indeed, 'the creation of more favourable conditions for peaceful Socialist and Communist construction'.

Now whether you accept the notion of a continuing Cold War, or would prefer some other expression, I can surely assume that we all recognise that a conflict of *some* kind is going on between the Soviet Union and the West. Can we speculate, can we guess, what will happen?

Mr Stefan Thomas of the Deutsch Englische Gesellschaft thought that it was not only possible, but useful and interesting, to do this. And that is why I have so titled my lecture. Yet I must insist that I am no Nostradamus. I do not pretend to be a prophet. So far as the future is concerned, historians are as amateurish as everyone else.

Let us look first at what is happening at the moment. We see the present Soviet and American governments, both apparently needing, for domestic reasons, some international success, approaching each other with hesitation and confused apologies, but all the same perhaps trying to achieve an agreement on disarmament.

Without becoming involved in the details, this agreement looks as if it may lead to a cut in the number of intermediate missiles, followed perhaps by other agreements on short-range missiles and, in 1988, on long-range missiles too.

Now suppose all this were to come to pass. Suppose the Americans were happy with the procedures about verification. Suppose that the Russians produced, for the first time, their own figures for their own forces (remember, as a rule, the Russians use American estimates of Russian forces and missiles in their discussions on disarmament). Suppose a new period of détente would then follow, even if not under that discredited name, in which Western businessmen would make agreements on high



technology and Western banks give credit in order to assist 'Mr Gorbachev's experiment'. Would all this, taken together, mean that the Cold War had at last come to an end?

Is it unduly pessimistic to answer 'no'? Ask the Poles. Ask the Czechs. Ask the Afghans. Like Dr Brzezinski I experience a chill at the thought of Mr Gorbachev being feted in Washington while Soviet troops are still occupying Afghanistan.

No – the Cold War is likely to continue until such distant time as the Soviet Union in both words and practice distances itself from Marxism and Leninism; until Russia, in the words of Chip Bohlen, that admirable American ambassador, becomes a country instead of a cause<sup>3</sup>.

Two comments are appropriate. First, even if some 'secularisation' of the Soviet Union came about, it could still be argued that a new, non-Soviet Russia might, once free from the heavy chains of Marxism, be an even greater threat than that which we have hitherto endured. For in these circumstances it might well be an old-fashioned great power, seeking to gain its historical ambitions under the direction not of commissars but of generals.

Possible – though improbable. Surely Russia could not be an expansionist power without an ideology? Even before 1914, Russia's expansionism, though it certainly existed, had the trappings of Panslavism. I can't imagine circumstances in which that ancient tradition would be revised. Without Communism the governments of Russia might find it hard even to maintain the unity of the State.

The second comment which some would make is that in mooted the secularisation of Russia, I am talking of something which has already happened. The Russian leaders, so this argument runs, are now pragmatists and do not believe in Marxism-Leninism; the last Secretary General to be a real Marxist was Khrushchev; the last serious ideologue was Suslov; Russia has, for a generation or more, been more concerned to establish global pre-eminence or even a Russian world empire – that disagreeable phrase comes from the memoirs of Ernst Fischer the Austrian Communist – than Communism on a world scale.

That is a momentous question. Let us examine it.

Ideologists may not be common in the top Soviet

leadership. Nor, as my late friend Hugh Seton-Watson once put it, were theologians conspicuous among the cardinals who ran Europe in the middle ages. I think it is still the case that ideology gives the system its legitimacy; and that, were it to vanish, the party could not survive.

Surely we have only to look at Mr Gorbachev's fascinating speeches to see this. He talks of democratisation but also of democratic centralism – a key phrase reminding the faithful that Holy Writ still prevails; he maintains that the struggle against religion will continue; he constantly insists on his Leninist credentials, and indeed sometimes appears to claim that his programme is a revival of the NEP begun by Lenin in the 1920s. For this, see his 'Remarks to the Writers'. On the occasion when he quoted in the speech to the Central Committee Goethe's famous last words '*Mehr Licht*', it sounded as if he thought that they had been written by Lenin. More *glasnost*!!

I do not want to leave the impression that I have a wholly negative view of Mr Gorbachev. His speeches have gone further in many ways than Khrushchev's did. Plainly, he is a very serious reformer. Plainly, he wants to make Russia more efficient, more modern, more intelligent, more informed even about its own recent past. But he wants – does he not? – to do all this from within the system. I cannot imagine that he wishes to create a plural society with independent judges, organised opposition parties, laws of habeas corpus. Nor do I believe that he has plans to abolish the KGB.

Mr Gorbachev may succeed. He may fail. But while he is making his efforts at reform within the system he will certainly look at his international policies in the light of their effect on domestic ones. He may even be more difficult to deal with than Brezhnev. Remember that Khrushchev was also a reformer. But he put missiles into Cuba and transformed Russia's place in the 'third world'. Dr Kissinger has reminded us that both Peter the Great and Catherine the Great were reformers too, but created much trouble for their neighbours. (Ask Poland or Turkey.) Both greatly expanded the Russian national territory.

I think that the odds must be that Gorbachev and his successors will not only continue to maintain the competition with the West but will need to.

Of course the situation just could get out of hand. Gorbachev's reforms may stir up a lot of expectations but fail to satisfy the millions of Russians who plainly (as we learn from exiles and the ordinary people whom we now can meet in Russia) are not very ideological but would like a peaceful life free of propaganda and continual supervision. On the other hand, he might to his peril more and more disturb the old guard. Institutions such as the KGB, the army and the party may find themselves in a fierce struggle with one another. Then the nations of Russia might well awake. Such problems may erupt any morning. Who can say? All we know is that it is unlikely that the West will have much impact upon, let alone control of, the course of events such as these. Still, let us at least nurture our concern, our curiosity, our affection for the Russian people, and our anxiety for the political prisoners (religious ones, too). Let us continue to point to their suffering. And above all let us maintain our defences. An empire meeting the crises of change can be a very dangerous animal, as Central Europe has cause to know.

It is possible, of course, to imagine that in some circumstances the Soviet Union might evolve institutions of a genuinely democratic kind; that then they might be forced by a Western-style public opinion grown greedy for welfare to cut their military budgets; and within no time might find themselves too busy dealing with the Latvian question ('Russia's Ireland' as Lord Beaverbrook called it, on little evidence, forty years ago) or the Ukrainian question to continue to be a threat to anyone.

But before I began to take anything like this very seriously, I, like Vladimir Bukovsky, would need to be certain that fundamental changes in doctrine had been recognised at a regularly convened party congress of the CPSU.

So what are the other prospects for the future of this conflict which we call the Cold War? Shall we perhaps see evolution in the West to make such conflict seem less important? Might the U.S., post-Reagan, choose an isolationist administration – of a technological kind, conceivably: fortress America hidden behind an all-purpose SDI?

I find this an equally improbable eventuality. Of course, the U.S. in its post-Irangate era will be somewhat chastened. The next U.S. administration will have different emphases: less

money for SDI, though surely not a complete end to it, given the Soviet interest; no money for the Contras and less for Savimbi; interest continuing to veer to the Pacific with whose nations the U.S. now has more commerce than with those of the Atlantic; perhaps a modest cut in the number of troops in Europe; a concession – who knows? – to the Kissinger policies of having a European SACEUR and an American Secretary General of NATO. But a revision *au fond* of U.S. global policies? I do not see it. The same pressures will be on future American leaders as on past ones.

But, you may say, if some such arms control agreement as I suggested earlier becomes possible between Reagan and Gorbachev, should I not be questioning the survival of NATO and the preservation of SDI?

Well, I have to remind you that, even given the cuts postulated by the most ambitious arms controllers, the levels of East and West arms would not have fallen very far below those of 1969 (if that); nor would the conventional forces have been touched. Indeed they might be in the process of expansion.

So, despite the drama of Gorbachev's reforms, despite the apparent decline of the Reagan presidency, I think that it is idle to suppose that we are in sight of the end of an era. No – to me the most likely future is still that which, ironically enough, has been sketched by the famous Soviet defector Anatoli Golitsin, in the last paragraph of his book *New Lies for Old*. He envisages two camps, each representing a way of life abhorrent to the other, in opposition until the end of time. Is this, he asks, so terrible a thing? Is it unthinkable that ideological and political competition should become permanent? Might not the two systems, in vying with each other, improve each other? Who shall say that unrelenting competition between two opposing systems of government, each secured by its own nuclear deterrent, would not prove fruitful?

A possibility, of course, is that one of the two camps will win, or outlast the other and be able to impose its own will on the remnant. Leaving aside the choice of victor, it may seem that such a *dénouement* would be in the 'logic of history'. 'Already in 1939 there were only five states capable of waging war on a large scale', George Orwell wrote in the essay I have previously quoted 'and

now there are only three – perhaps ultimately only two'. He included Britain among the three. Now one might have to include China, with a question mark. And will Japan be prepared for ever to renounce a global, strategic role? But there is no one else, I think. W H McNeil, one of America's finest historians, wrote in the last chapter of his *The Pursuit of Power*, the following critical and well-pondered words:

' . . . to halt the arms race, political change appears to be necessary. A global and sovereign power willing and able to enforce a monopoly of atomic weaponry could afford . . . to dismantle all but a token number of warheads. Nothing less radical.. seems in the least likely to suffice. Even in such a world, the clash of arms would not cease . . . But an empire of the earth could be expected to limit violence by preventing other groups from arming themselves so elaborately as to endanger the sovereign's superiority. War in such a world would, therefore, sink back to proportions familiar in the pre-industrial past, even if outbreaks of terrorism, guerrilla action and banditry would continue to give expression to human frustration . . .'

The alternative, suggested McNeil 'appears to be sudden and total annihilation of the human species'.

I have thought carefully about this passage but I believe it to be wrong. A tacit, general understanding between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, with certain specific agreements on armaments, seems a more likely eventuality than the victory of either of them. Nor do I believe that the U.S. has the will to win this conflict; nor do I think that the Soviet Union, for all its investment in weaponry, has the technological capacity. The continuance of the conflict, perhaps at a lower level of intensity one day, and perhaps with territorial or other problems of spheres of influence subject to agreements, is surely more probable.

Public opinion may find this idea disagreeable. The concept of struggle without end seems in some way barren – particularly in democracies where politicians put themselves forward as

wavers of wands. It is hard to have to admit that our lives may always be overshadowed by insuperable problems.

But much of human history has been so spent. In very many ways the twentieth century has had to confess its inadequacy and inferiority: crime, craftsmanship, tolerance for example. Architecture, possibly. (Look at the proposed new British Library.) We should be patient enough to recognise that the situation, though far from ideal, could easily be worse. The Atlantic community to which so much of Europe belongs is one of the great achievements of history.

Historians especially should be wary of suggesting that history has lessons to teach. Save perhaps two. One concerns unpredictability. It is, after all, nearly always the unpredicted which occurs. H.A.L. Fisher put this supremely well in that 'History of Europe' which every schoolboy really did study in the 1940s. The second is that put forward by Keynes at the end of his treatise on Money; in the end it is only ideas which count.

I cannot close without reflecting, however briefly, on the implications for education which such attempts at murky prophesies carry. Is it likely that those who are brought up to regard the study of history as so many exercises in the solving of problems, or the evaluation of sources, or the elimination of bias, will look kindly upon an activity so apparently sterile as the preservation of a terrible status quo? Will not a brighter future beckon irresistibly to them? To the legendary Macedonian, the slashing of the Gordian knot seemed to be a wonderful opportunity, not to be missed. It will take stamina and patience of an unusual kind to reconcile ourselves to permanent Cold War (especially if alluring truces are held out from time to time, as they are now). Those schooled to view the past with a cold eye will have valuable duties to perform. Perspective will be all. The landmarks of history, always agreeable for the civilised man to contemplate, will be more important than ever for the statesman to treat with decent respect.

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## References

- 1 Almost all the references in this paragraph derive from James Billington's *Fire in the Minds of Men* (New York 1980). This includes the joke about 'Ruisseau'.
- 2 I am indebted to Professor James Joll for this citation.
- 3 The phrase has been used in the current (1987) White Paper on Defence, without acknowledgement.