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Learning from history? From Soviet collapse to the 'new' Cold War

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Many moments in what we now rather lamely call the 'end of the Cold War' have been examined in detail. However, within the extraordinarily rich literature that has arisen over the past 25 years, little attention has been paid thus far to one very important problem: the part played by 'history' in shaping the way different actors tried to make sense of what was going on around them in a time of rapid transition.

Introduction

> *'We cannot help comparing past and present . . . We cannot help learning from it, for that is what experience means . . . '*[1]

The retreat and collapse of Soviet power not only ranks as one of the most transformative shifts of the late twentieth century: it was also one of the most unexpected, a classical 'Black Swan' if you like, one which over the years has generated a most impressive secondary literature based in large part on the memoirs and recollections of those who happened to be 'present' at disintegration, as well as on the quite remarkable amount of primary sources that has emerged from the opening up of the archives in what was once a divided and much more secretive world. It is of course true that many of these archives are not quite so open as they once were; and indeed, that some have never been opened at all. But for those of us who grew up in earlier, more restricted times, the situation today looks like scholarly heaven.

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[1] Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 2002), 32.

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Many moments in what we now rather lamely call the 'end of the Cold War' have been examined in detail. The wider discussion though about what might more accurately be termed the failure of the greatest experiment in human history has revolved around a number of key questions: first, why did something that looked so inevitable after it had happened seem so unlikely before;[2] second, to what degree did individual policymakers – Gorbachev in particular – have any real understanding of, or control over, events as they unfolded;[3] thirdly, could the history of those turbulent years have followed a very different path to that which it in fact did; and finally which particular 'theory' or 'big idea' best helps us explains what happened?[4] In other words, was the fall of 'actually existing communism' the result of nuclear stalemate, imperial overstretch, long-term Soviet economic decline, US military pressure, pan-European détente, the active part played by the EEC in Eastern Europe, the corrosive power of nationalism, the Helsinki agreements, the defeat or success of the peace movement in the 1980s, a set of new ideas about international relations, or, as some believe, the failure of the USSR to do what successive Soviet leaders always claimed the country would have to do if it was to survive in a competitive world system: namely catch up and overtake the capitalist West?[5]

Within this extraordinarily rich literature little attention has been paid thus far to one very important problem: the part played by 'history' in shaping the way different actors tried to make sense of what was going on around them in a time of rapid transition. Of course, as others would admit, there can never be any easy, let alone statistically certain, way of measuring what role 'history' ever plays in shaping the decisions of key players.[6] Indeed, according to at least one view, it probably plays very little independent role at all other than in justifying or rationalising actions that would have been taken otherwise.[7] There are even those who would insist that because most policymakers are historically illiterate they are just as likely to misuse analogies

[2] For different explanations as to why experts may have failed to "predict" the collapse of Soviet power see Michael Cox, ed., *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse: Sovietology, The Death of Communism and the New Russia* (London: Pinter, Cassell, 1998).

[3] See Jacques Levesque's seminal study on the unexpected revolution of 1989. *The Enigma of 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[4] For a good overview see Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (London: The Bodley Head, 2009).

[5] For a selection of essays on the possible reasons for the end of the Cold War drawn from this journal see Michael Cox, ed., *The End of the Cold War – 25 Years On* (London: Routledge & Taylor, 2014). Online: bt.ly/ColdWar25.

[6] For further discussion on the role of the past and memory in shaping policy preferences at key historical moments see Michael G. Fry, ed., *History, the White House, and the Kremlin: Statesmen as Historians* (London: Pinter, 1991); Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Patrick Finney, *Remembering the Road to World War II. International History, National Identity, Collective Memory* (London: Routledge, 2011); David B. MacDonald, *Thinking History, Fighting Evil: Neoconservatives and the Perils of Analogy in American Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

[7] For a useful discussion on this issue see Thomas W. Smith, "History, Analogy and Policy Realism", in *History and International Relations*, ed. Thomas W. Smith (London: Routledge, 1999), 61–91.

rather than use them intelligently;[8] and even if they do know something about what happened before they are just as likely to take policy decisions based on all sorts of ‘considerations’ other than ‘the perceived lessons of past experience’.[9] There is clearly something to all this. Still, the evidence provided here points to what I would argue is a more interesting, and perhaps more nuanced set of conclusions about the often complex role or roles played by memory as the communist system began to fall apart in 1989 and continued its complex evolution thereafter. As I will suggest, different pasts at different times served as either road map, warning or inspiration during one of the great transitional moments in international history – a ‘moment’ we should recall which had not only been unforeseen but which as a result, helped generate a set of challenges for which policymakers were, by and large, completely unprepared. Still, none of this should come as much of a surprise to students of the Cold War. As one of its greatest scholars – Ernest May – and others have pointed out, the Cold War was quite literally ‘haunted by history’,[10] and in particular by the 1930s when the West had attempted to ‘appease’ Hitler at Munich.[11] Inspired by May this essay will seek to examine the degree to which policymakers were ‘haunted’ in quite the same way as they contemplated the fate of the former USSR, beginning in 1989 when one Cold War began to come to an end, through to more modern times when some are now claiming that another one is just about to begin.

Lessons from the twentieth century

‘The past is not dead . . . .in fact it is not even past’. William Faulkner

In seeking to understand the role played by ‘history’ in 1989 we first need to look at the ways in which policy elites who had grown to political maturity before the end of the Cold War viewed the larger European experience before it. No doubt there was more than one way of seeing the past depending on which country you happened to be living in and the degree to which the post-war order satisfied your security needs. All this is self-evident. Still there is no getting away from one simple fact around which there was some rough and ready agreement amongst most key actors in 1989: that whereas the international system between 1914 and 1945 had been about as explosive as it was possible for any international system to be, the system that had finally emerged after 1947 did at least provide for some degree of order in its core

[8] On the uses and abuses of “history” in general see Margaret Macmillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library Edition, 2008), esp. 167–168.

[9] On whether or not policymakers are “historically illiterate” see Jeff Record, “Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy: Munich Vietnam, and the American use of Force since 1945”, March 1998, Occasional Paper no. 4, Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/cst/occppr04.htm.

[10] I take this wonderfully evocative phrase from the excellent Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser, eds., *Haunted by History: History and International Relations* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998).

[11] Ernest May, “*Lessons of the Past*”: *The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

areas. Even policymakers at the time recognised this; none more clearly than Dean Acheson himself. A long-time admirer of the British Empire whose decline after the war he viewed with concern,[12] Acheson – the 'British accent' in American foreign policy as he has been called – had by 1946 lined up with the UK in urging a firm line against the Soviet Union.[13] Nevertheless, he readily acknowledged that following the final collapse of the global order 'inherited from the 19th century' a new one was constructed as a result of the competition between two 'opposed power centers'.[14] This had never been planned; and the dangers inherent in the competition were real. Yet it was this same competition he later confessed that had helped him mobilise Congress behind the president in the crucial years after 1947, that then went on to provide the United States with a clearly defined foreign policy mission, and perhaps most important of all, helped lay the foundation for a united West after nearly 30 years of intense inter-state rivalry. Other policymakers agreed, including John Foster Dulles. Soviet communism in his view was an abomination. However, the challenge it represented had provoked a forceful and clear response which facilitated western economic and political recovery in the post-war period.[15] Truman saw the same relationship between America's post-war mobilisation and Soviet actions. As he later confessed, he could have not have got done half of what he we wanted to do after 1947 without Stalin's help![16]

The idea that the Cold War had not only helped the West recover after WWII but had gone on to generate a degree of balance in the international system soon found its way into the wider academic literature. Indeed, with the onset of a thaw in the East-West relationship following the Cuban missile crisis, one widely expressed view was that whatever else might have divided the two superpowers, both had come to accept that the relationship was likely to endure for many decades to come – and would do so primarily because it met their different security needs. One writer as early as 1967 even went so far as to suggest that neither of the two superpowers would 'profit' from the 'elimination' of the other – a view that gathered support through the 1970s as détente unfolded, and continued well into the 1980s, the decade normally associated in much of the literature with the end of the Cold War.[17] In fact, three years into the Reagan administration, a well-known writer

[12] On Acheson's fears about post-WWII British decline see Robert J. MacMahon, *Dean Acheson and the Creation of an American World Order* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), 48, 58.

[13] John T. McNay, *Acheson and Empire: The British Accent in American Foreign Policy* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

[14] Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969), 726.

[15] John Foster Dulles, "Challenge and Response in United States Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs* 36, no. 1 (1957): 25–43.

[16] Michael Cox, "Western Capitalism and the Cold War System" in *War, States and Society*, ed. Martin Shaw (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984), 136–194.

[17] George Liska, *Imperial America: The International Politics of Primacy* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 1967), 48.

on world politics was pointing out that in spite of the president's tough words, there were still important 'unspoken rules' governing the conduct of the Cold War, the most important perhaps being that the United States and the USSR had an interest in the other's continued survival.[18] Three years on and John Gaddis was suggesting something even more significant: namely, that the Cold War had produced a 'long peace' the result on the one hand of bipolarity and on the other of the calming effect nuclear weapons had had upon great power behaviour. Not everybody agreed. In fact, Gaddis was much criticised later for having failed to predict that the system he described as being stable was about to collapse. But this only came after 1989. He was rarely attacked at the time for advancing what to many then seemed self-evident: that whereas the world before 1945 had been wracked by major great power wars, the world system thereafter had been characterised by great power peace. As Gaddis observed, whether or not one approved of the *means* by which this stability had come about, or even with the *way*, the reality was that the Cold War had evolved to produce its own kind of peace order.[19]

Nor was Gaddis alone in thinking in this way. In fact, the same conclusions about the pacifying consequences of a contest fought between ideologically inspired rivals were implicit in much of what passed for international relations during the Cold War. We see this for instance in the writings of Hans J. Morgenthau. Morgenthau always appeared to be intellectually torn by the Cold War. He certainly did not underestimate the dangers it posed to peace. Indeed, at one stage he seemed to be suggesting that the conflict might even lead to nuclear war.[20] But ever the realist he also believed that both superpowers were rational actors with a clear understanding of their own 'interests' and that therefore some form of diplomatic accommodation between them would be possible.[21] Others agreed, including the one international relations writer with whom Morgenthau is most readily compared: Kenneth Waltz. Waltz, though, approached the problem of order in a very different way. Morgenthau of course focused on the behaviour of states; Waltz on the other hand concentrated on structure, and in one of the most influential articles published during the whole of the Cold War suggested that a bipolar system was more likely to produce stability than any other. Waltz's version of realism was not accepted by all members of the international relations community, to be sure. Indeed, after the Cold War ended he came under sustained attack from critics for having failed to predict its end. But this did not render his original argument any the less significant or influential. On the contrary, until the bipolar system formally collapsed in 1991 his main thesis – that that there was a very clear connection between

[18] Paul Keal, *Unspoken Rules and Superpower Dominance* (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 1983).

[19] John L. Gaddis, "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System", *International Security* 10, no. 4 (1986): 99–142.

[20] See the relevant sections in Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[21] Michael Cox, "Hans J. Morgenthau, Realism and the Rise and Fall of the Cold War" in *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau*, ed. Michael C. Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 166–194.

the number of significant powers in the international system and the system's overall stability – still appeared to hold sway.[22]

Waltz was not alone in drawing some kind of comparison between the relatively orderly character of the Cold War system and the deeply war-like nature of the world that had existed between 1914 and 1945. Some writers with access to the policy world, indeed some policymakers themselves, were certain that the post-war system based on Europe's continued division was probably the only basis upon which some form of continental 'peace' could be guaranteed. Naturally, this was not everybody's view, including, most obviously, that of General de Gaulle who vehemently opposed what he termed the 'Yalta settlement' that left Europe under the control of the two superpowers. But the arguments made in favour of supporting the status quo rather than changing it clearly won out. If nothing else, this apparently 'unnatural' situation helped cement the relationship between the United States and western Europe. It also ensured some degree of superpower control of the many dangerous nationalisms that had done so much damage to Europe before 1945. Indeed, whenever this wider order was threatened as it most clearly was in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in Poland throughout the 1970s, the western powers tended to respond with extraordinary caution – in part no doubt because they were unable to challenge Soviet power in its own 'backyard', but also because this new 'arrangement' seemed to work to nearly everybody's advantage, except of course those unfortunate enough to find themselves living on the wrong side of the divide! As one of the most influential studies on Europe written by a senior US official in 1979 noted, a divided 'Europe between the superpowers' may have been a less powerful force in world politics. Nonetheless, compared to what had gone before, the new Europe had at least (and at last) generated a degree of order where before there had been very little or none.[23]

The degree to which such assumptions guided the way in which different policymakers approached the possibility of major change in the 1980s is of course an open question. After all, Thatcher did talk of consigning the whole socialist project into that proverbial dustbin of history; the Polish pope was clearly not prepared to accept Poland's continued subordination to the Soviets; and Reagan famously called upon Gorbachev to tear the Berlin Wall down. Yet as the very real, as opposed to the theoretical, possibility of a fundamental alteration in the status quo came ever closer, many at the highest level started to become extraordinarily nervous with what seemed to be happening – none more so than the Americans themselves. With Reagan no longer driving the process, the new Bush team clearly decided to put the brakes on, partly because they assumed that Gorbachev would soon be removed from office anyway, but also because of a very real fear that change caused by a Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe might undermine the rationale for NATO while posing a series of really difficult questions to which the US might not have an answer. Thus as the old world began to fall apart, the United States appeared to be making one last desperate

[22] Kenneth Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World", *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (1964): 881–909.
[23] Anton DePorte, *Europe Between the Superpowers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

bid to prop it up, displaying in the process what one writer has succinctly defined as a marked 'fondness for the status quo'.[24] To be fair, Bush soon came to realise that events outside his control were fast making his original administration's stand untenable But as Mary Sarotte has shown, and others have confirmed her findings, far from driving change, the United States under the cautious, realist Bush, at first displayed a genuine fear about where such change might lead.[25]

Germany and the Germans

> *'The history of the Germans is a history of extremes. It contains everything except moderation and in the course of a thousand years the Germans have experienced everything except normality'.*[26]

If fears of future uncertainties made many policymakers cautious when it came to thinking about the end of the post-war order in 1989, to a very large degree this was because of their reading of the history of one very special country in particular. Given what happened to Germany after 1989 these various fears must now seem faintly quaint. But this was not how things were perceived back then, even by those who in the end were prepared to accept the inevitable. Indeed, no less an ally of Germany, French President Francois Mitterand, made frequent reference (at least in private) about Germany's highly problematic past. Indeed, in discussions with Thatcher at one point, he readily confessed that he was 'very worried about Germany', and not just because of what Chancellor Kohl was doing diplomatically just after the Wall had come down (too much in his view) but also because of something he consciously referred to as 'history'. What he called 'the national adrenalin of the German people' was on the rise once again, and there seemed to be nothing that could stop them. He continued, ever more fearfully: 'In history Germany had never found its true frontiers'; 'they were a people in constant movement and flux', he continued. But what was to be done? It was by no means clear. Yet one thing was obvious. There was the very real danger that France and Great Britain would once more find themselves in the same situation as their 'predecessors in the 1930s': that is without a clear strategy to deal with the 'constant growing pressure of the Germans . . . '[27]

Fears concerning German unification were not just expressed by Mitterrand alone. At different points during 1989, nearly every single European leader of note made various comments about the positive benefits of Germany remaining divided and the very grave dangers that would befall Europe if the status quo were to be overturned. In fact, many if not most Europeans at the time – including the German Social

[24] Mary Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 27.

[25] Michael Cox and Steven Hurst, "His Finest Hour?' George Bush and the diplomacy of German unification", *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 13, no. 4 (2002): 123–150.

[26] A.J.P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945), 1.

[27] This extraordinary quote from Mitterrand can be found in the official Patrick Salmon, Keith Hamilton and Stephen Twigge, eds., *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series III. Volume VIII. German Unification 1989–1990* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 164–165. Hereafter *Documents*.

Democratic Party and the German novelist Günter Grass – viewed the prospect of unification with a mixture of fear and consternation. Of course, not all of the fears can be explained in terms of history. There were several very practical concerns too, including, most obviously, the impact which German unification might have upon Gorbachev's chances of survival back in the USSR. To this degree there were solid grounds for thinking seriously about the direction in which Germany was moving in the latter half of 1989. However, these more 'practical' considerations very quickly became entangled with deeply held views about Germany's problematic past before 1945 and the presumed national character of its people.

These beliefs moreover were not just held by that proverbial, and by definition prejudiced, 'man on the street'. Many distinguished European historians, including some in Germany itself, also seemed to believe that if one was to curb what Fritz Fischer in 1961 termed Germany's urge to world power then a radical solution would be necessary.[28] The famous British historian, A.J.P. Taylor certainly thought so. There were no general lessons to be learned from history he once opined – except when it came to thinking about Germany! On this issue he harboured no doubts at all. Germany's geographical position in Europe, its sheer size, and above all its political traditions, meant that it could never seriously abandon its long held desire of dominating the rest of Europe by one means or another. The only solution therefore was partition (not ideal he agreed) and continued outside control by the major powers.[29]

Though Taylor may have expressed his own ideas with great force (and some indelicacy) they were very much the European norm for the greater part of the post-war period – even after West Germany had become a member of NATO in 1955 and especially in those countries which had experienced German occupation during World War II. Even in France, where an enormous official effort was made to foster good feelings towards its new European partner, popular attitudes towards Germany were never especially warm. Indeed, when the idea of German rearmament was floated 10 years after the war, it provoked outrage in France. Nor was France especially pleased when Willy Brandt opened up a new dialogue with the Russians in the 1970s. Indeed, as Berlin moved closer to the East many in Paris began to mutter darkly about a new Rapallo – the deal struck by Germany and the USSR back in 1922 in order to overcome the isolation of both countries.[30] Of course history did not repeat itself. Germany did not abandon its French ally. And France did in the end 'go with the flow' and refused – unlike Thatcher – to stand in the way of unification in 1989. However, as the most complete French assessment of French policy in 1989 shows, while Mitterrand may not have opposed unification – and had good reasons for not doing

[28] Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des Kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918* (Dusseldorf: Droste Verlag Gmbh, 1961).

[29] Ronald J. Granieri, "A.J.P. Taylor and the 'Greater' German Problem", *The International History Review*, (March 2001): 28–50

[30] See Carol Fink and Bernd Schaefer, *Ostpolitik, 1969–1974, European and Global Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Cyril Buffet, "Rapallo: Sirens and Phantoms", *Haunted by History*, 235–258.

so given the very special relationship which existed between Germany and France – he did not always display great enthusiasm about the prospect.[31] As he remarked to Thatcher two months after the Berlin Wall had come down, 'the sudden prospects of reunification had delivered a sort of mental shock to the Germans [and] its effect had been to turn them once more into the "bad Germans" they used to be'.[32]

The UK position was perhaps even more sharply defined. Not all British officials opposed Germany's unification. On the contrary, many adopted the view during the course of 1989 that the UK should, at the end of the day, move with the tide of history. Mrs Thatcher, on the other hand, was having none of it. Not only did she think that reunification was not in Britain's interest, a view shared by several of her advisers.[33] She also appeared to be 'instinctively' distrustful of the Germans, a suspicion she displayed to the full apparently when the Bundestag rose to sing the German national anthem 'when the news of developments on the German Wall came in' in November 1989.[34] According to one report from her inner circle, she was utterly horrified by this musical outburst. Nor did she become any the less suspicious as time went by. Indeed, a few months after the Wall had come down, she invited a number of well-known historians to reflect on Germany's place in history. The meeting began with a discussion on what those around the table assumed were well-known German 'characteristics'. None of these were especially appealing. Germans, it seemed, were a most unattractive group of people: insensitive 'to the feelings of others' (most notably the Poles); aggressive; liable to bully (even in the European Community); full of 'angst'; and prone to 'self-pity'. At one point in the discussion, the issue of German history was very directly addressed. The conclusions were not entirely negative. Indeed, there were some at the gathering who accepted that Germany had changed a great deal since 1945. However, given its known past, there was always bound to remain serious doubts about the Germans. As one of the participants (though it is not clear which one) pointed out, if a 'cultured and cultivated nation had allowed itself to be brainwashed into barbarism once before, was there not a chance it might happen again? Not now perhaps. Not even in a few years' time. But at some time in the not-too-distant future perhaps. And if this were to happen – which was by no means ruled out given Germany's 'unhappy' past and the Germans' problematic character traits – Europe and the world might experience the same 'destructive consequences?' as they had done twice before.[35]

In the end neither stereotypes about the Germans nor particular readings of German history could stop German unification from taking place; no more than Mrs

[31] Frederick Bozo, *Mitterrand, The End of the Cold War and German Unification* (London: Berghahn Books, 2009).

[32] The "bad Germans" remark was made by Mitterrand on 20 January 1990 in a meeting in Paris with Thatcher. See James Blitz, "Mitterrand feared emergence of 'bad' Germans", *FT.Com*, 9 September 2009.

[33] On why a "reunited Germany could present various disadvantages to our interests" see "Draft Paper on German Reunification", drafted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 11 October 1989, *Documents*, 50.

[34] *Documents*, 105.

[35] *Documents*, 502–508.

Thatcher's not insignificant contribution in bringing the Cold War to an end could prevent her from being thrown out of office by her own colleagues one year after the Berlin Wall had come down. The coup d'état against her did not, however, lessen the negative impact which her diplomacy had had upon German public opinion. As was reported at the time, the perception in Germany was that Britain (unlike France) was opposed to unification because it still harboured suspicions of Germany; and did so almost entirely because of British memories of two world wars, the Second World War in particular. Consequently it should have come as no great surprise to anyone within Germany itself that the UK (again unlike France) had managed to lose quite a lot of friends, even amongst traditionally pro-British Germans. Nor did Thatcher's stand go down especially well in Washington where her intransigence was greeted with incomprehension. To this degree Thatcher's understanding of another country's history, far from advancing the British, or indeed her own cause in world politics, only ended up achieving the opposite.[36]

But even if Thatcher's fears were exaggerated, Germany's place in the new European security order was one that still had to be sorted out; and on this there was general agreement that it was absolutely vital that some form of 'insurance policy' be provided in order to guard against any future problems arising from this new German revolution:[37] and the only way this could be done was by anchoring Germany into pre-existing institutions: NATO in the first instance, but also (and for France in particular) European institutions as well.[38] Both institutions might serve the interests of different western players; but together they worked together to 'bind' a reunited Germany into a new European order. Gorbachev appeared to agree. Indeed, the only way that he could ever be persuaded to accept German unification was if it was firmly locked into

[36] As a very frustrated UK ambassador admitted in January 1990: "Despite our supportive line on the German wish to achieve unity through self-determination, the UK is perceived here" in West Germany "as the least positive of the three western allies"; and he added and "the least important". *Documents*, 190. On growing American dismay with Mrs Thatcher's negative attitude towards developments in Germany, see also *Documents*, 31–33.

[37] When the German Empire was formally proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles in January 1871 following the successive military defeats of Denmark, Austria and France, Disraeli pronounced that this was the second European revolution in under a century but "a greater political event than the French", quoted in Christopher Clark, *The Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 552.

[38] The controversy concerning what Germany did or did not agree to in order to get a French go ahead on reunification has rumbled on ever since Germany was formally reunited. Hubert Vedrine who was a close adviser to Mitterrand at the time is quite clear in his own mind. "Mitterrand", he recalls, "did not want reunification without advances towards greater European integration". This in turn meant Germany giving up the deutschmark and adopting the euro. As he notes: "The currency was the only topic open to debate". According to *Der Spiegel* documents from the German Foreign Office show that a "West European alliance threatened to form up against Bonn"; indeed, that even "Franco-German relations were on the verge of collapsing" unless a deal could be struck. "Mitterrand even warned the government in Bonn point-blank that it could soon be left stranded in Europe as high and dry 'as in 1913' if it did not accept French terms. Quoted from Michael Sauga, Stefan Simons and Klaus Wiegrefe 'You get unification, we get the euro', *Der Spiegel*, 1 October 2010.

NATO.[39] This, he felt, would not only reassure critics and sceptics back home (a forlorn hope); it would also ensure that Germany's various allies – the United States most obviously – could prevent the new Germany from ever contemplating pursuing an independent foreign policy of its own that Gorbachev feared would yet again 'upset the European balance'. One American adviser even referred to this novel arrangement as creating a 'western cocoon' around Germany.[40] Of course, it would then be up to the Germans themselves to determine their internal affairs. But given the uncertainties that were now being generated by what was happening inside Germany, its external position was not something it would be allowed to determine alone.[41] How to fix the problem would of course take many months of detailed negotiation between Germany and the four allied powers; and this concluded with an agreement that at least seemed to satisfy Germany and the United States even if it left some of their allies – not to mention many Russians – wondering whether a long-term solution had finally been found to what some still saw as that eternal 'German Question'.

Après l'empire, le déluge

> *'George Bush did almost everything diplomatically possible to keep the Soviet Union alive'*[42]

The withdrawal of Soviet power from Europe and German unification could not but have consequences back in the USSR.[43] Indeed, one of the many charges laid against Gorbachev by his critics then, and much later, was that he had in effect betrayed the Soviet people by simply abandoning everything the USSR had sacrificed so much for in its great war of liberation against the Nazi enemy between 1941 and 1945. Some were even so suspicious of the Americans and NATO that they even began to wonder aloud about Gorbachev's loyalty to the USSR itself. But as one of his key aides noted at the time, what was really undermining Gorbachev was less the loss of the USSR's

[39] Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 4.

[40] The term "western cocoon" was used privately by US adviser Robert Blackwill. He even talked of German membership of NATO effectively "surrounding" Kohl. Kohl, he felt, should be encouraged in thinking of himself as being of "equal rank" in historical terms as two other great German statesmen - Bismarck and Adenauer. Cited in Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Level: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (London: Warner Books, 1994), 188.

[41] "[T]he Germans could not rely uniquely on their right of self-determination and simply push for unification themselves. The Four Powers rights still overlay Germany's sovereignty". Quote from Kristina Spohr, "German Unification: Between Official History, Academic Scholarship, and Political Memoirs", *The Historical Journal*, 43, no. 3 (2000): 887.

[42] Quote from Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 206. Unsurprisingly, Plokhy draws the rather obvious conclusion from his research that the end of the USSR had very little, if anything, to do with American policies.

[43] See Mark Kramer's "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 3–42; 6, no. 4 (Fall 2004) pp. 3–64; and 7, no. 1 (Winter 2005) pp. 3–96. See also Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 303–335.

'cordon sanitaire' to the West – though this hardly helped his cause – and more the economic and political situation at home.[44] By late 1990 the position had become critical; and a few months on into the spring of 1991, it had become nearly impossible. As the situation continued to deteriorate, it gradually began to dawn on policymakers in the West that the Union itself might not hold together.[45]

The possibility that the USSR might in fact break up was one that caused significant consternation, not to mention intense debate, within the western intelligence community. Two positions began to take shape. One held that there was nothing in the end that could be done to prevent the USSR from falling apart, and that there might even be significant strategic benefits for the West and the US if it were to do so. But there was another equally, if not more influential, viewpoint. This maintained that not only would the USSR hold together, it also assumed that its disintegration was not necessarily in anybody's interest, including that of the United States.[46] Indeed, the consequences of this particular empire falling apart could be potentially catastrophic, for not only would it unleash all sorts of possible dangers ranging from nuclear proliferation to outbreaks of irredentist wars, it would also make economic reform that much more difficult.

These fears were heightened in the minds of many western policymakers by the tragedy then beginning to unfold in Yugoslavia. Here, the end of the Cold War announced itself not as liberation but as ethnic cleansing and bloody war. Many then drew the not unreasonable conclusion that if this could happen to a small, non-nuclear state which had been relatively tolerant and open for many years, what kind of Pandora's Box would be opened up if the USSR – which had rarely been open, never been especially tolerant and did possess nuclear weapons – went the same way? Gorbachev used precisely this argument with Bush, Scowcroft and Robert Gates at a private meeting held in Russia in July 1991. What was happening in former Yugoslavia he warned could very easily happen in the USSR, but with two very important differences. It would be on a much greater scale (across 11 time zones he pointed out); and it would take place on a territory 'dotted with nuclear weapons'.[47]

Such arguments found a ready audience amongst western and US policymakers who already tended to the view that large power blocs were by and large a good thing, and that anything which threatened such entities should be resisted rather than encouraged. This was certainly how one Russian official understood the American position at the

[44] Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), esp. 233–369.

[45] See the CIA assessment of April 1991 which argued that "economic crisis, independence aspirations and anti-Communist forces are breaking down the Soviet empire and the system of governance". Quoted in Don Oberdorfer, *From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–1991*, updated edition (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 450.

[46] David Arbel and Ran Edelist, *Western Intelligence and the Collapse of the Soviet Union, 1980–1990* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

[47] Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (London: Warner Books; Princeton University Press, 1994), 414.

time. Bessmertnykh was in little doubt. 'The Bush administration', he believed, 'was against the break-up of the Soviet Union in general and initially even against the separation of the Baltic republics from the USSR'.[48] This may have posed an especially difficult problem for an American administration given the US's attachment to the international norm of self-determination. But as Bessmertnykh shrewdly observed, the Bush people seemed to be more concerned about the practical dangers of what might follow if the USSR were to break up than about certain liberal principles. Indeed, when forced to choose, it very much looked as if they preferred the status quo than its secessionist alternative. As National Security adviser Brent Scowcroft put it, rather forcefully: 'Our policy has to be based on our own national interest, and we have an interest in the stability of the Soviet Union. The instability of the USSR would be a threat to us. To peck away at the legitimacy of the regime in power would not be to promote stability'.[49] The then American ambassador to the USSR expressed a similar, if not identical view. Jack Matlock was a most sensitive observer of the Soviet scene and a great admirer of both Reagan and Gorbachev.[50] Moreover, like many other policymakers at the time he looked forward to further evolutionary changes within a reformed USSR. Evolution was one thing but what he termed 'premature independence' was something else altogether. This could very easily threaten that which the United States sought most: namely stability, continued central control over the USSR's massive nuclear arsenal, and the implementation of gradual economic reform.[51]

Yet practical concerns were not the only factors shaping the outlook of policymakers. Indeed, underlying western thinking more broadly was yet another of those larger lessons drawn from history: one which taught that when great powers or empires collapsed, decline inevitably followed.[52] Here lessons drawn from the fall of the Roman Empire played a not unimportant part in informing western elite attitudes.[53] Indeed, ever since Adam Smith and Edward Gibbon had written on the subject in the late eighteenth century, it had more or less been taken for granted by any educated and enlightened person that following the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, misery and division followed as a once civilised Europe descended into the

[48] Cited in Andrei Grachev, *Gorbachev's Gamble: Soviet Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 202.

[49] Beschloss and Talbott, *At the Highest Levels*, 346.

[50] In his insider study Matlock contrasts the greatness of Reagan and Gorbachev with the less than great performances of their respective successors. Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004).

[51] See Jack Matlock, *Autopsy of an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995).

[52] According to one study, the fall of all great powers or empires in history has inevitably led to further decline marked by "long periods of economic and demographic weakness". In the case of Europe "it was not until the year 1000 that Europe recovered the population levels it had attained at the height of the Roman expansion in AD 200". See J.K.F. Thomson, *Decline in History: The European Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 190.

[53] Harold James, *The Roman Predicament: How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

'dark ages'.[54] A similar story was also told about the new states of Europe between the two wars. Wilson may have helped promote the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in this way weaken the enemy coalition during World War I. However, having done so, a series of problems were left behind in the shape of a string of politically unstable and economically very weak states that ultimately became prone to the predatory ambitions of their nearest big neighbours. It was of course no coincidence that by the end of the 1930s they had all been drawn (sometimes less, sometimes completely) into either a Soviet or a German sphere of influence. As E.H. Carr, a fierce realist critic of Wilson noted at the time, the problem with the liberal theory of self-determination was that it took no account of European history, the balance of power, international realities or economic rationality.[55]

It would of course be going too far to suggest that the Bush administration was determined in its policy towards the USSR by lessons drawn from the fate that befell other imperial formations in the past. Still, these lessons were there to be learned and what they suggested was that one needed to be extremely cautious when it came to tampering with structures of extended power. Liberty was all well and good if and when it led to progress; but more often than not what followed the collapse of empires was something far less benign. Bush certainly seemed to be well aware of all this; to such a degree that he even called upon Ukrainians to beware the siren call of separatism. Indeed, in his famous 'Chicken Kiev speech' delivered in Kiev in the middle of 1991, he went so far as to argue, much to the consternation of many Ukrainians, that 'freedom' was not necessarily the same thing as 'independence', and that the United States would 'not support those' who sought 'independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism'. The message could not have been clearer: the president of the United States (if not all his advisers) looked forward to an outcome in which there would still be a functioning central government ruling over a reforming USSR.[56]

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[54] Adam Smith wrote: "When the German and Scythian nations overran the western provinces of the Roman empire, the confusions which followed so great a revolution lasted for several centuries. The rapine and violence which the barbarians exercised against the ancient inhabitants interrupted the commerce between the towns and the country. The towns were deserted, and the country was left uncultivated, and the western provinces of Europe, which had enjoyed a considerable degree of opulence under the Roman empire, sunk into the lowest state of poverty and barbarism." *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Edward Gibbon in his *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (also published in 1776) was equally scathing about the "priest ridden superstitious dark times" that followed the barbarian destruction of the Roman empire.

[55] On Carr's views on self-determination and the nation state, see Andrew Linklater, "E.H.Carr: Nationalism and the Future of the Nation State" in *E.H.Carr: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Michael Cox *(* Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 234–257. See also Michael Cox, ed., *E.H. Carr, The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), esp. ix–lviii.

[56] Obviously, the speech delivered by Bush in Kiev in 1991 caused him great embarrassment, so much so, that several years later he felt compelled, not to defend it, but instead to argue that he had been "misunderstood by critics". See "Bush Snr. Clarifies 'Chicken Kiev speech'", *Washington Times*, 23 May 2004.

Post-Communist Russia: from the Marshall Plan to Weimar

> *'There was no outright annexation of territory or formal reparations like Germany faced after World War I. But Russia was told in no uncertain terms that it would play a modest role in the world. This policy was bound to engender a Weimar Syndrome'.*[57]

As we now know, the various attempts to prevent the collapse of the USSR proved futile. The failed coup in August 1991, followed in short order by Yeltsin's assumption of power and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States a few weeks later, marked the end of one phase of Russian history and the opening up of another. The big question now for the West and the United States was not so much how they could reverse something that had already taken place, but rather how to ensure a smooth transition towards democracy and the market in Russia itself. Significantly, this discussion was immediately cast in the form of frequent references to perhaps that most revered of American foreign policy initiatives taken just after World War II: the Marshall Plan.[58] This discussion began in earnest when Gorbachev began to contemplate the possibility of economic reform in 1990. It then continued through the following year and for a short while after Yeltsin had assumed office and began to press for far-reaching economic reforms. Certainly the linkage between outside aid on the one hand, and economic reform on the other, seemed self-evident to those making the case for a Marshall Plan. Indeed, without large scale assistance, they argued, any move towards the market would be so painful as to be politically impossible. Thus a massive aid package would be required.[59] This would obviously be in Russia's long-term interest. But as former US President Richard Nixon pointed out at the time, it would also be in America's 'enlightened self-interest' too.[60]

The attempt to deploy the Marshall Plan in Russia's reform debates was certainly a bold one and led to an interesting discussion in the economics profession as to its advisability.[61] It also spoke volumes about the power of the past and the ways in which the past could be mobilised in an effort to support a certain set of policy preferences. Unfortunately, those who tried to employ this particular analogy could not overcome the scepticism of the bankers, western economists and western governments. They

[57] Sergei Karaganov, quoted in Roger Cohen, "Russia's Weimar Syndrome", *The New York Times*, 1 May 2014.

[58] See my less reverential attempt to rethink the Marshall Plan, one that necessitated a rebuttal by five leading American historians! Michael Cox and Caroline Kennedy Pipe, "The Tragedy of American Diplomacy? Rethinking The Marshall Plan", *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 97–134.

[59] See Kirmal Kumar Chundra, "Marshall Plan, German Unification and the Economics of Transition", *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 22, (1 June 1996): 1307.

[60] James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 337–338.

[61] Barry Eichengreen and Marc Uzan, "The Marshall Plan: Economic Effects and Implications for Eastern Europe and the former USSR", *Economic Policy* 7, no. 14 (April 1992): 14–75. See also J. B. De Long and Barry. Eichengreen, "The Marshall Plan: History's Most Successful Structural Adjustment Program", in *Postwar Economic Reconstruction and Lessons for the East Today* in Rudiger Dornbusch et al eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 189–230.

listened politely but in the end were not convinced. As they pointed out, the situation in western Europe after the war was altogether different to that of Russia five decades later. If nothing else, the economies of the former had been market-oriented for decades and thus possessed the preconditions for successful capitalist rebirth in the shape of a functioning middle class, the rule of law and a financial system ready to be activated given the correct set of stimuli. Russia, on the other hand, possessed none of these assets, and for good reason: it had been a planned economy for over 70 years and still remained one. Moreover, it had no middle class; there were no property rights in Russia; and it had no banking system either. A new Marshall Plan for Russia may have stirred some wonderful historical memories about how the United States had saved Europe from the forces of darkness after World War II. It was also a useful image to deploy in terms of trying to persuade Americans that unless they came to the aid of Russia now (as they had come to the aid of the West Europeans in times past) then there was every chance that Russia would collapse completely with enormous consequences for America's long-term security. But in the end the Bush team was not convinced. Fundamental reform had to come first. Then, and perhaps not even then, Washington might act.[62]

Underlying the argument for a new Marshall Plan was of course a very real fear, based on a well-founded analysis, that the transition in the former USSR was going to be especially difficult.[63] The fact that communist rule had lasted so long in the USSR meant that what had been relatively easy in other communist systems like Poland or Hungary would be anything but in the former Soviet Union with its many nationalities, its very large Russian minority populations living outside Russia, and its huge military industrial complex now rendered irrelevant by the end of the Cold War. Nor were the supporters of economic reform particularly confident that they could even carry the majority of Russians with them. In fact, there was evidence to suggest that those who supported reform and a closer relationship with a once demonised West may well have been outnumbered by those who looked back on their more secure past with some nostalgia. Nor was such nostalgia entirely irrational. Everyday life was getting tougher for ordinary Russians. Crime was on the rise. And it very much looked as if their once proud nation had been forced to give up everything since 1989 and had got nothing back in return from a West who now looked intent in keeping Russia down by pushing through the harshest of economic measures. Nor did it help much when the US decided to enlarge NATO. What was agreed with Gorbachev concerning NATO is still a matter of intense debate;[64] and while some still think that some kind of

[62] Oberdorfer, *From the Cold War to a New Era*, 455.

[63] Michael Cox, "The necessary partnership? The Clinton presidency and post-Soviet Russia", *International Affairs*, 70, no. 4 (1994): 635–658.

[64] For three rather different takes on the same issue using different sources see Mark Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," *Washington Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (April 2009): 29–62; Mary Sarotte, "Perpetuating U.S. Preponderance: the 1990 Deals to 'Bribe the Soviets Out' and 'Move NATO In'", *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 110–137; and Kristina Spohr, "Precluded or Precedent-Setting? The 'NATO Enlargement Question' in the Triangular Bonn-Washington-Moscow Diplomacy of 1990–1991", *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 4–54.

'promise' was made in 1990 not to push NATO eastwards,[65] others are not quite so sure. Whatever the truth, the perception in Russia was that such an undertaking had been made and that the West – true to form – had gone back on its word and therefore could never be trusted to treat Russia fairly.[66]

The situation in Russia after 1992 was thus pregnant with all sorts of possibilities ranging from the most benign but least likely – a smooth transition to a market democracy – right through to a political reversal leading to a destruction of the nascent Russian democracy. This latter fear was not without some foundation. Indeed, one of the very first things Yeltsin did after having assumed office was to shell his own parliament in a desperate effort to remove those hostile to his reform project. To make matters even more problematic, he then pushed through a series of extraordinarily painful economic changes which not only impoverished millions while concentrating vast wealth in a few oligarchic hands, but also led (in 1998) to the destruction of the very middle class that the reforms had been designed to benefit. To most people all this looked less like a transition and more like a collapse.[67] To then add international insult to deep material injury, Yeltin's foreign policy team led by Kozyrev appeared as if it was more intent on working closely with what many saw as a predatory West than it did in standing up for Russia. Gorbachev had been bad enough in the eyes of many disoriented Russians; but Yeltsin was starting to look even worse.

It was at this point in time when the future of democracy looked so uncertain, and the economic situation so fragile, that quite a few analysts began to draw parallels with an earlier decade in another country's unfortunate history. Who used the Weimar analogy first and why is a matter of some dispute. But as early as the summer of 1990 Russian expert Strobe Talbott was already beginning to warn of a 'Weimar Russia'.[68] It was only after 1992, however, that the idea of a Russian Weimar began to be discussed in earnest; and by the middle of the decade as Russia lurched from one crisis to another, it had become almost the norm to draw parallels between what had caused the collapse of Weimar Germany in the 1920s and what was happening to a battered and bruised Russia 70 years later.

Of course there were serious differences between the two. Germany, after all, was receiving large scale US support in the 1920s; something that could not be said of Russia in the 1990s. Germany moreover had a deeper democratic tradition. Still, the parallel looked reasonable enough to those in Russia (and in the West) who feared for the country's future. One Russian analyst writing in 1994 even used the analogy to warn the United States about what many Russians now perceived as America's growing

[65] See Jack Matlock's most recent discussion of the issue. "NATO Expansion: Was there a Promise?", *JackMatlock.com*, 3 April 2014.

[66] The issue of Russian grievance against the West following the end of the Cold War is dealt with in a balanced and sensitive way by G. John Ikenberry and Dan Deudney, "The Unravelling of the Cold War Settlement", *Survival* 51, no. 6 (December 2009–January 2010): 39- 61

[67] Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 185–191.

[68] Strobe Talbott, "America Abroad: The Fear of Weimar Russia" *Time.Com*, 4 June 1990.

arrogance. He accepted that nothing like Versailles had been imposed on Russia. Nonetheless, there was a growing belief amongst many ordinary Russians that this once proud nation was being forced to pass through what he called 'a period of redemption' before it could be admitted to the international community. He also warned against what he termed 'signs of insensitivity and a lack of empathy' to Russia in certain American circles. He was especially scathing about Zbigniew Brzezinski (a veritable hate figure amongst many Russians). Brzezinski, he believed, not only aimed to treat Russia as a defeated adversary, he still saw it as an enemy state that needed to be counterbalanced by the other 14 splinter states of the former Soviet Union. This, he continued, was especially shortsighted. Not only would such a strategy hurt the West in the end, it would hurt Russia too. In fact, there was every chance, he concluded, that if the West followed Brzezinski's advice 'it would be a very direct, and maybe a very short road to the "Weimarisation" of Russia'.[69]

The debate continued. Indeed, as the country prepared for a new presidential election in 1996, the 'Russia as Weimar' thesis took on an even greater lease of life. With Yeltsin looking increasingly like a failed leader, and his opponents on both left and right making important electoral gains, the situation looked anything but bright. As one American observer noted at the time, 'the Weimar analogy' looked to be an increasingly 'enticing' one. He made clear why. Like Germany in the 1920s Russia had experienced (and was still experiencing) a 'national humiliation' as result of its lost 'superpower status'. It was moreover in the midst of an economic crisis; and it was undergoing wrenching political change. Under these conditions it was hardly surprising that 'extremists' looked to be doing well. In fact, by 1996, the communists had acquired 35% of the votes in the Second Duma. More worryingly still, they had been able to marry their opposition to the new predatory capitalism to a hybrid form of Russian nationalism, thus making them especially appealing to those who felt that Russia had lost everything as result of all the changes that had taken place since the middle of the 1980s.[70]

Yeltsin's subsequent electoral victory (largely made possible by the financial support of the new oligarchs) followed a little while later with his replacement by an almost unknown official called Putin, may have calmed some nerves in the West at first. However, it did not put pay to the Weimar analogy entirely. Indeed, amongst some western commentators the analogy continued to make a great deal of sense. Speaking a year before Putin's assumption of power in 1998, former US Defense Secretary William Perry for instance warned his audience not to forget history, and certainly not to forget the fact that Weimar was followed by fascism with all its disastrous consequences for the world. The same might not happen to Russia, he admitted. On the other hand, the future of democracy in Russia was by no means guaranteed.[71] The controversial

[69] Andrei Melville, "Weimar and Russia: is there an Analogy", paper delivered 13 April 1994 to the "Weimar and Russia Forum", Institute of International Studies, U.C. Berkeley. Online.

[70] Gregory Freidin, "Weimar Russia?", *Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 1996.

[71] William J. Perry, "Weimar Russia", *Hoover Digest* no. 1, 30 January 1998.

historian Niall Ferguson then went on to deploy the analogy for a rather different purpose: to warn the West not about something which might happen but about something that already had because of Putin. Ferguson had first used the Weimar analogy back in 1997 in a jointly authored piece published in a Russian journal.[72] He then returned to the theme a few years later in 2005. No great admirer of Putin, Ferguson now feared that the West was turning a blind eye to Putin's increasingly authoritarian style of politics, all in the name of some higher realist goal called 'stability'. Look back at Weimar, he argued, and you are bound to worry about Russia today. He went on to elaborate at length:

> Born in 1919 in the wake of Germany's humiliating defeat in the First World War, the Weimar Republic suffered hyperinflation, an illusory boom, a slump and then, starting in 1930, a slide into authoritarian rule, culminating in 1933 with Hitler's appointment as chancellor. Total life: slightly less than 14 years. Born in 1991 in the wake of the Soviet Union's humiliating defeat in the Cold War, today's Russian Federation has suffered a slump, hyperinflation and is currently enjoying a boom on the back of high oil prices. Its slide into authoritarian rule has been gradual since Putin came to power in 1999. Is it going to culminate - 14 years on - in a full-scale dictatorship in 2005? That is beginning to look more and more likely.[73]

Conclusion: Back to the Future or A New Cold War?

> '*Russia is not the Soviet Union*'[74]

Ferguson's prediction that Russia's 'Weimar' would segue – or already had – into what he termed a 'full-scale dictatorship' turned out to be only half right. Putin's political instincts were of course deeply authoritarian; and within a reasonably short space of time of assuming power he had already done great damage to what had earlier passed for democratic politics in Russia through the arrests and harassment of key people, turning the Russian Parliament into a rubber stamp, and imposing his own very personal authority on Russia's regions. In the process, this rather grey 'man without a face' with his background in the KGB (and experience in the dangerous bear pit that was St Petersburg politics during the 1990s) also managed to dismantle most of the country's independent media, tame the power of the oligarchs and silence any form of opposition.[75] Yet Russia still retained the trappings of a democracy. And not everybody was cowed into silence or bribed into acquiescence. This was hardly Nazism Russian

[72] Niall Ferguson and Brigitte Granville, "Weimar Germany and Contemporary Russia: High Inflation and Political Crisis in Comparative Perspective", *Voprosii Ekonomiki*, 1997.

[73] Niall Ferguson, "Look Back at Weimar and Start to Worry about Russia", *The Telgraph Online*, 1 January 2005.

[74] Quote from Jay Carney, White House Press Secretary in Fred Lucas, "White House: US and Russia are not in new Cold War", *The Blaze*, 14 April 2014.

[75] Masha Gessen, *The Man Without A Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).

style.[76] Furthermore, it very much looked as if Putin's own brand of politics had the support of many ordinary Russians who, having experienced the privations of the immediate post-Soviet years, appeared to prefer political order over individual rights, economic stability over chaos, and a strong (and no doubt manly) hand at the tiller of the state rather than a weak one.

Still, the question remained: if the 1990s was metaphorically 'Weimar', what kind of system was being forged in its wake? Was it, as some believed a new form of 'criminal capitalism' run by the security services in association with a Mafia-like fraternity who together had only one thing in mind: namely, to accumulate as much capital and money in their own hands as possible?[77] Or was it, as others have argued, a peculiar amalgam combining both practices familiar to students of the Soviet Union – centralised rule, a powerful cult of the leader and the old Soviet national anthem – together with features of the pre-revolutionary period with its emphasis on tradition, its celebration of the Orthodox Church, and an almost mystical belief that mother Russian was an entirely different kind of country with quite different values to those found in the decadent, democratic West with its penchant for liberalism in which nearly anything (except patriotism) could be tolerated? Either way, an era in Russian history which began life with the simple transfer of political power from Yeltsin to Putin with the immediate purpose of protecting the Yeltsin 'family' from later investigation into their murky affairs had gradually evolved, through time, into a system with its own logic and rules.[78]

Of course, Putin's ability to manage this system owed little or nothing to his grasp of history or his attempts to draw inspiration from both Russia's communist and imperial pasts. Soaring oil prices, his ruthlessness in disciplining the 'oligarchs', his close ties to the security services – plus an improvement in the living standards of most ordinary Russians – were rather more significant factors in explaining his continued hold on power than his use of the past to justify his own particular type of rule. But the fact that he felt that such a narrative needed to be constructed was not without significance. Indeed, without one, the regime clearly felt it would lack a legitimising story. Certainly Putin himself was highly active on the historical front in an attempt to bolster his rule, in part by insisting that Russia was a very special kind of civilisational power which was neither 'European' or western in its essentials, and in part by making great play of the fact that the West, in his view, had always been, and presumably would forever remain, hostile to Russia. How hostile he made clear in a speech following the reintegration of Crimea into the Russian Federation in the early spring of 2014. In this he went so far as to claim that ever since the eighteenth and

[76] See Alexander J. Motyl and Walter C. Clemens Jnr., "From Weimar to Nazi Russia", *Global Asia Forum*. 2 April 2014, http://www.globalasia.org/Forum/Detail/40/from-weimar-to-nazi-russia.html. This article is especially rich in dangerous historical analogies: it compares Putin's Russia to Hitler's Germany, and by implication Putin with Hitler.

[77] Thane Gustafson, *Capitalism Russian-Style* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[78] Fiona Hill, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Press, 2013).

nineteenth centuries, the West had always sought to contain Russia and drive it into what he characterised as a 'corner'. But Russia, he pledged, would be 'cornered' no longer.[79] Nor would it be taking any more advice from the West, as it had done so unwisely before and after 1991. The result then had turned out be totally disastrous for the country. In fact, according to Putin, it was not just the break-up of the USSR that had been a 'catastrophe' (a term he first used in 2005), so too were the westernising policies pursued by Yeltsin thereafter: policies, he insisted, which had demoralised the nation, made it an object of other people's pity, and, most critically of all, rendered it powerless before its enemies.

Putin's various references to history led him inevitably to address the famous Stalin question. Putin could hardly deny that Stalin was a communist who had done many appalling things in the name of communism. On the other hand, Stalin had transformed Russia and turned it into a very great power that other nations had either come to admire or fear. Many ordinary Russians seemed to agree; and by 2003 more than half of them were claiming that they strongly approved of Stalin. Nor was this shift so surprising. After all, one of the tasks Putin seems to have set himself was to rewrite Soviet history, transforming it from the fairly critical discourse it had gradually become in the 1990s to a version of the past that played down the repression and costs of Stalinism while stressing Stalin's positive role in making Russia a powerful state. This view also found its way into the new official textbooks. Here, it was accepted that there were some 'problematic pages' in the country's past. Nonetheless, these should not be used to besmirch the whole Soviet period. Other countries had had their dark periods too; and in spite of everything, Stalin had improved the lives of the population. Moreover, unlike Gorbachev and Yeltsin, who made one concession after another to the West, Stalin had at least stood up to Russia's foreign enemies, first during the Great Patriotic War – a defining event that Putin never forgets to celebrate with his fellow citizens – and then later during the Cold War against the regime-changing antics of the United States.[80]

If the past, or a particular take on the past, has played and goes on playing a key role in Putin's attempt to revive Russian fortunes and stop what he clearly regards as its geostrategic slide between 1989 and 1999, the question arises as to what all this means, or will mean in the future, for Russian relations with the West? Here again certain analysts in the West have been quick to view the present through the prism of the past; and the most obvious point of historical reference for some has become the same Cold War that everybody once declared to be dead and buried by 1991. To be sure, not everybody has gone along with this line. Indeed, when a best-selling book was

[79] Putin's precise words announcing the annexation of Crimea were: "We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, conducted in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position ", Vladimir Putin: The rebuilding of "Soviet" Russia, BBC, 8 March 2014. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-26769481.

[80] On Putin and the past see David Satter, *It Was a Long Time Ago, and it Never Happened Anyway* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

published in 2008 claiming that we were now in the midst of a 'new' Cold War, it was strongly criticised.[81] Yet references to the Cold War continued to exercise a quite extraordinary influence, especially as the crisis in Ukraine unfolded.[82] Admittedly, those who used the term were well aware that Russia had changed a great deal since the late 1980s. But this, they felt, was no reason not to employ the comparison. Putin's imperial behaviour towards Russia's nearest neighbours, the rise of a new and more aggressive form of Russian nationalism, and the return of an anti-western rhetoric redolent of the Cold War (*sans* the communism), meant that no other term described the relationship so accurately or so well. Perhaps this 'new' Cold War was not exactly like the 'old' one. But a Cold War it was most definitely becoming, or, had, according to some analysts, already become.[83]

At one level, trying to make sense of the present relationship through an analogy with the past is, as we have suggested throughout this essay, a perfectly legitimate exercise. However, it is one thing drawing rough and ready comparisons with the Cold War: it is quite another to imply that we are now in the midst of something that clearly passed from the scene over a quarter of a century before. This not only underestimates the significance of what happened back then: it also ignores the fact that as a result of what happened the world ceased being bipolar and Russia stopped being a superpower. The idea also takes little note of how far Russia then continued to decline over the next decade as its GDP shrank by 'an eye-popping 50 per cent',[84] spending on the Russian military fell from 20% of GDP to 5%, and the country suffered a near demographic collapse. In 1990 one could still think of the former USSR – even in its last dying days – as a major international player. Ten years later it looked to some like the new Russia had quite literally become one of the more advanced of the Third World countries with its possession of nuclear weapons being perhaps its only claim to a seat at the high table of world politics.

It is of course true that Russia then experienced some kind of 'bounce back'. Indeed, contrary to what many critics in the West might like to think, Russia's position improved markedly under Putin with Russian GDP nearly doubling in just under 10 years, unemployment and poverty falling, and pensions rising. Even the average age of Russian men rose from the appallingly low figure of 58 when Putin came into office to around 64 by 2014. But appearances can be deceptive. Putin may have helped stop the rot; however he has not been able to turn back the clock of history. Russia, to use a term, remained a remarkably 'incomplete' power, whose fortunes still depended massively on the sale (and high price) of oil and gas. Moreover, as an economy it did not even begin to bear comparison with another country that clearly was rising:

[81] Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War; How the Kremlin menaces both Russia and the West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

[82] Robert Legvold, "The New Cold War", *Moscow Times*. 4 April 2014.

[83] Stephen Cohen, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives; From Stalinism to the New Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[84] Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 135.

namely China. If anything, Russia's economic position in relation to its booming neighbour actually deteriorated after 2000; so much so that by 2014 its own economy was only one quarter the size of China's ($2 trillion compared to China's $8 trillion). Russia's weight in the wider world economy was also puny, accounting for only 3% of global GDP by 2012 compared to the West's 50%. Russia's membership of the so-called BRIC family may have led some to believe that Putin had restored the country to the 'sort of geopolitical status it had enjoyed before the collapse of the Soviet Union'. Some may have even felt that it should once more be viewed as being an 'actual or potential superpower'.[85] But as one senior analyst noted, Russia remained 'at best' a middle ranking nation with an economy no bigger than Italy's, with a level of productivity that was risible, and a population that still looked set to decline well into the twenty-first century. Nor to continue did it have much of an international presence either. Thus it had no serious allies worthy of the name. It possessed little or no soft power. None of its universities figured in the world's top 100. No other state sought to be like it. Its nearest neighbours feared it. And its own increasingly xenophobic culture made it deeply unattractive to many foreigners.

Finally, though a great deal has been made in the West about Russia's new found military strength, as a military power it remained in a decidedly inferior position in comparison to the West. In fact, in terms of spending, it did not even begin to match that of the NATO alliance. Indeed, by 2012, the United States was spending nearly eight times more on its military than Russia, while NATO taken as a whole was spending close to $1 trillion compared to Russia's decidedly inferior sum of $90 billion.[86] This evidence of gross inferiority did not however stop some writers in the West portraying Russia as if it were a rising power. Thus one headline writer described Putin's Russia in 2014 as a new 'Orwellian superpower'; another magazine cover displayed the inevitable Russian bear casting a very long shadow over the whole of Europe; while yet a third speculated that 'Putin' had a 'secret plan' and this, it was speculated, was nothing less than reshaping the destiny of the whole world.[87]

Russia was not entirely powerless of course. It did have some assets, though nearly all of these came out of the ground; and it retained its permanent seat on the Security Council. But it clearly did not have the capacity – as it had during the Cold War proper – to challenge the West in any significant way.

Nor was it in the Russian interest to do so. In fact, given that it depended on the West for its main markets, for the provision of key financial services, and for critical sources of foreign investment, it was impossible for it do so. Putin might have tried to sound tough. But his aggressive anti-western rhetoric (largely designed for public

[85] Tim Congdon, "Russia May Dominate World Maps, but it is an Economic Pygmy Compared with the Developed Nations as a Bloc", *Standpoint* 61 (April 2014): 23.

[86] Figures from Sam Jones, "Northern Exposure", *Financial Times*, 9 April 2014.

[87] See for example the front cover of *The Spectator*' on 22 February 2014 which proclaimed "Today Sochi, tomorrow the world". The picture there also displayed a cartoon of Putin in a quietly menacing pose sitting in a leather arm chair stroking a globe of the world.

consumption at home) could not hide one simple fact: that he was dealing from a position of weakness, something which Putin himself may have understood even if some pessimists in the West did not,[88] many of whom talked as if it was the West that was in deep trouble and not Russia.[89] But as a number of shrewder commentators observed, though Russia looked as if it was running rings around the West diplomatically, overall its position was highly exposed.[90] As Anders Aslund pointed out, although it appeared as if Putin was pushing the West around, Russia's position overall was highly vulnerable, made all the more vulnerable by the simple fact that the country was now part of a world market which could impose a heavy penalty on Russia if it did not play by the rules of the game.[91] Indeed, long before the crisis in Ukraine erupted, capital was already beginning to flow out of Russia in ever greater amounts; and as the crisis intensified, the flow accelerated.[92] Meanwhile, foreign investment started to dry up, Russia's credit rating nearly collapsed, and western economic institutions began to talk darkly about Russia's bleak economic prospects.[93]

To talk of a new Cold War therefore is quite misguided, ignoring both the enormous changes that have taken place in Russia's position within the international system since the late 1980s, not to mention the fact that for all its talk of being different to the West, Russia has, to all intents and purposes, become part of a capitalist world economy from which there can be no conceivable escape. Naturally, this does not make the relationship an especially easy one; some might even argue that precisely because the lines between the two sides are not the fixed ones they were during the Cold War proper, the relationship has become more dangerous. That said, we still need to call things by their right name. After all, as Ernest May reminded us all many years ago, poor analogies and the misuse of history can have problematic consequences. Yet there

[88] Fyodor Lukyanov, a former Kremlin adviser, summed up Putin's dilemma and Putin's assertiveness thus: "Putin realised that if he wanted to regain Russia's former status in the world he had to act quickly". "The country" was he believed "at the peak of its capacities and in the years to come those capacities will start to decrease even without sanctions because the [current economic and political] model is exhausted. It should be done now not in three or four years". Quoted in Ben Hoyle and Lettice Crawley Peck, "Nostalgia trip – Putin taps Soviet mood to tighten rule", *The Times* [London], 2 May 2014.

[89] John Hulsman, "It's time to read the writing on the wall: Why the West no longer exists", *Cityam.com/forum*. London, 22 April 2014, 20.

[90] A former Reagan official, Kenneth Adelman, insisted that Russia by 2014 was not only weaker than the West, but "far weaker" than the old Soviet Union with an army only one-fourth the size, a smaller nuclear arsenal, and an economy shrinking and "going down". Quoted in Christopher Snyder, "Is American tension with Russia renewing the Cold War?", 8 May 2014, *FoxNews.com*. http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/05/08/is-american-tension-with-russia-renewing-cold-war/.

[91] Anders Aslund quoted in Dominic Lawson, "Let Me Put it in Black and White: Putin is no Grandmaster", *Sunday Times*, [London], 20 April 2014.

[92] By spring 2014 even the Russian authorities admitted that there had been $50bn in capital flight during the first four months of the year – almost as much as the whole of 2013. The European Central Bank put the figure much higher, at something close to $200bn. See Ben Hoyle, "Sanctions start to bite as $200bn. bleeds from Russia", *The Times*, [London], 14 May 2014.

[93] David M. Herszenhorn, "Russia Economy Worsens Even Before Sanctions Hit", *New York Times*, 16 April, 2014.

may still be some room for hope. For even if certain writers have been seduced into thinking about the current period in terms of the Cold War, important policymakers seem to be exercising a little bit more historical care. In fact, when asked whether the United States had reached a tipping point moment in its dealings with Russia and should now be preparing for its containment, Obama replied that he would not be doing that any time soon. 'I don't really ... need George Kennan right now' he told *The New Yorker* magazine. No doubt his many critics would see this as just another example of Obama's confused foreign policy thinking. One might more readily interpret his words as a reflection of the fact that not all policymakers are forever condemned to misunderstand the past.[94] In itself, this will not make it any easier for the US or the West to deal with Russia; no more than questioning the idea that we are heading towards a 'new' Cold War should be cause for complacency. That much should be obvious. Difficult, possibly dangerous, days lie ahead. But the job of policymakers will not be made any the easier if they call things by the wrong name; and perhaps by calling it correctly, there is at least a chance they will arrive at an intelligent response to the new Russian challenge.

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[94] Quoted in Geoff Dyer, "Washington Taps Cold War Strategy to Deal with Putin", *Financial Times*, 24 April 2014.

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