

The End of the Cold War (and other clichés)

John Lukacs

The cold war is over." By 1972 this phrase has become a cliché, perhaps especially among knowledgeable people. In other times there would be nothing very wrong with this: for there are many clichés that are by no means untrue. (Where there is smoke there is fire.) Unfortunately, the movement of ideas has become so predictable, because of their total involvement with publicity, that clichés no longer merit even partial trust. (Where there is smoke there is smoke; and where there is fire there is fire.) For years I have borrowed Wilde's admirable aphorism about people who pursue the obvious with the enthusiasm of a shortsighted detective, until I found that, no matter how funny, it is no longer applicable: for the public cogitators and public prophets of our time have captured the obvious with all of the calculation that a farsighted young associate professor, in pursuit of a profitable academic career, can muster.

If, by the cold war, we mean the awesome confrontation of the United States and the Soviet Union, threatening each other with annihilation, pulling at times to the brink of an atomic world war—surely this is no longer the principal element in world politics in 1972, when Richard Nixon is about to visit Communist China and the Soviet Union in turn, trying in each country to make all kinds of mutually profitable arrangements.

But then, wasn't the cold war over four years ago, when the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia and the American government not only did or said nothing but told its people and the world that Czechoslovakia was not of its concern?

Or almost ten years ago, when the Russians pulled their handful of rockets and planes out of Cuba in

exchange for a mere American promise that the United States would not invade Cuba?

Or eleven years ago, when the Russians and the East Germans threw up a wall in the middle of Berlin in the face of the Americans, who chose to do nothing?

Or wasn't the cold war over thirteen years ago, when Khrushchev and Eisenhower were walking up and down the garden paths of Camp David and the Chinese were boiling mad, which Khrushchev greatly enjoyed?

Let us stop at this point, for this string of examples could be stretched out even further into the past, to the point where one could ask the question: Did the cold war exist at all? It all depends on the *sense* of what "cold war" means—not only now, to us, but all of the time.

If the cold war meant, and means, the competition of the United States and of the Soviet Union over at least one half of the world on many levels but not on all—in other words, a struggle not only for limited aims but with limited means—then the cold war surely did exist; it still exists; and it will continue to exist for a long time.

If, on the other hand, the cold war meant, and means, that the United States and the Soviet Union each would like to see the other destroyed—in other words, a struggle for enormous stakes, although fought with limited means, preferably short of war—then the cold war perhaps never existed at all.

There were a number of men who predicted during the nineteenth century that sooner or later the Russians and the Americans would form the two greatest empires of the world. They include Napoleon, Tocqueville, the Abbé de Pradt, and a string of German and Russian and French historical philosophers. Few of them (perhaps with the exception of P. E. Durnovo, an obscure and highly intelligent Russian bureaucrat who

JOHN LUKACS, a professor of history at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia, is the author of *A History of the Cold War*. He has published, most recently, *The Passing of the Modern Age*.

died in 1915) foresaw in conjunction with the above the coming of a terrible revolution in Russia which would set the Russian empire back twenty years (but not much more); none of them (perhaps with the exception of Tocqueville) foresaw most of the coming troubles of the American empire. Still, their predictions were quite accurate, almost until now. In any event, the evolution of world politics moved in that direction for a century at least.

Until the 1890's there were four World Powers: Britain, Russia, Germany, France. (Within Europe the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was a recognized Great Power, the only one without colonies, but with plenty of potential troubles of her own.) Until the 1890's the United States was the greatest power in the Western Hemisphere, but not beyond. But by 1900 the United States and Japan joined the World Powers, of which there were now six, with France the weakest among them but still a World Power of sorts. (Of all the ups and downs that befell the Great Powers after World War I perhaps the most decisive event was the dissolution of the Austrian Dual Monarchy: and it would not be unreasonable to call the Second World War in Europe the Second War of the Austrian Succession.) In 1939 there were still five Great Powers: going from west to east—the United States, Britain, Germany, Russia, Japan (the sixth, France, was a Great Power in name only). Then came the great debacle; and by 1945 there remained but the United States and the Soviet Union in the world arena (with Britain a remnant in name because of her surviving prestige). So to many people it seemed that, after the recent bloody semi-finals, the finals for the domination of the world were about to begin between the American and the Russian empires.

Twenty-five years later we see that this has not happened; that the powers of the American and of the Russian empires—whether temporarily or permanently—have grown weaker not stronger. In any event, they have let up this tug-of-war with each other more easily than many people had expected and many more had feared.

How did this happen? Let me try to sort out some of the reasons—from the most obvious but in reality least important of "factors" to those that may be most important though perhaps the least obvious.

First, the atomic bomb and its successor bombs. Their existence surely has made the Great Powers more careful. But the world political importance of the atomic bomb has been greatly exaggerated. Twenty-five years ago *all* of our political cogitators agreed that from now on there were but two alternatives: Total War or World Peace; atomic holocaust or the end of all wars. Nothing of the sort has happened, and we are back to the period of horrid little wars (characteristic perhaps of the Dark or Early Middle Ages). During the four years when she had the monopoly of the atom bomb, the United States

did little or nothing to alter the world situation in her favor. (In 1948 the United States still had a monopoly of atomic weapons; it had set itself on a course of the containment of the Soviet Union; yet the government decided *not* to break Stalin's blockade of Berlin by military means.) My point is a simple one: even without atomic bombs or rockets the relations of the United States and the Soviet Union would not have been much different.

My second point—in order, not importance—flows from the above Berlin illustration. The cold war never really hotted up in Europe because, after all is said, the United States and the Soviet Union have tacitly agreed on the division of Europe since 1945. Russia wound up with the control of one-third of Europe, including one-third of Germany; America with perhaps that of one-half of Europe, including two-thirds of Germany. The fact that Russian domination was (and is) something quite different from American domination has had much to do with the everyday lives of peoples; but it has had very little to do with the realities of the Great Powers. For a while Stalin suspected that the Americans were about to challenge his domination of Eastern Europe; while in Washington, people like Acheson (who would suddenly recognize the obvious evils of communism with all of the enthusiasm of a lawyer in pursuit of his image of a statesman) believed that the Soviets were set to turn us out of Western Europe. These mirages of mutual suspicion should have vanished entirely in face of the American inaction at the time of the East Berlin and East European risings in 1953-1956, even though an entire generation of bureaucrats on both sides of the Iron Curtain would continue to construct their careers on them.

So the division of Europe was acceptable—and, in the long run, perhaps even agreeable—to both of the Superpowers. Outside of Europe, then, the perimeters of the United States and of the Soviet Union hardly touched at all. What happened in Korea, Cuba, Vietnam were the results of local conditions, not of Russian planning—which is precisely why the Soviet Union remained carefully aloof, unwilling to go much beyond the furnishing of weapons to the pro-Communist side. This was the third reason why the cold war never really became a war (and also why, in one sense, it lingers on and will continue lingering on for quite a while).

Last but not least there was, and is, a fourth powerful force working against war between America and Russia: and this has been the sentiments of these two giant peoples toward each other. No matter how anti-Communist the American people may have been (and still are), they are not anti-Russian. No matter how Communist the Russian people may be, they are emphatically not anti-American. Russians tend to like and admire Americans more perhaps than any other people in the world. It is a great mistake to believe that this national inclination has had no bear-

ing on the calculations of the Soviet government. Together with the traditional absence of hostility and of armed conflict between the American and Russian empires, this mutual admiration of the two peoples may well have been (and still is) the principal element in this world climate when the cold war has come to resemble more and more a chilly kind of peace, with savage frozen patches across its landscape but with surprising (and often ugly) tufts of grass growing here and there, with ponds covered with rime but never really frozen because of unruly (and dangerous) warm springs underneath.

At this point I must make a minor digression involving speculation about a major matter. This major matter is the closing of an era for a grand opportunity, the greatest in the history of the modern world: but this opportunity concerned not Russo-American but Anglo-American relations.

No matter which would have been the principal Western Power at the end of World War II when Germany had been defeated, a kind of tug-of-war would have developed with Russia—again, no matter whether this Russia was ruled by a czar or by a dictator or by a president or by a committee. Had Churchill had his way, the starting position of the Western democracies in this tug-of-war would have been more favorable than that from which they actually did start. The division of Europe would have developed along a geographical line more satisfactory for the West and for Europe at large. Certain among the present Soviet satellite states (of course, far from all of them) would have found themselves on the western side of the present Iron Curtain. This is what Churchill wanted: but, after 1943, he was overruled increasingly by President Roosevelt and General Eisenhower and by what could be called the then American political and military élite.

But this was not all that Churchill wished for, and this is not only where he failed. His principal dream, which haunted him through a lifetime, was something more: an increasingly closer association between the British and the American empires that would have resulted in an Anglo-American condominium of enormous power, a new kind of world empire such as the world had never seen, with the effect of a long Pax Anglo-Americana that no power would have dared to challenge directly, not even the Soviet Union. It is not difficult to detect the evolution of this design through Churchill's public speeches and his state papers and his private correspondence. His American mother may have had something to do with the germination of the design; but there is no use in psychoanalyzing its origins when the evidence is there in his papers, in his rhetoric, in the work of Churchill the statesman as well as in that of Churchill the historian. The work on which he labored longest, and which he took up again and

again, after years of interruption, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, he devoted to the instructive propagation of the idea that the English-speaking peoples belonged, and should belong, together.

A History of the English-Speaking Peoples is, relatively speaking, Churchill's least impressive historical book—I write "relatively," since it is still a magnificent monument of historical conception and prose—just as his grand design of an increasing union among the English-speaking peoples of the world is where Churchill the statesman failed the most, not in the short but in the long run.

In retrospect, it is possible to designate the beginning and the end of the phase in world history when this dream of some kind of an Anglo-American union could have become a possibility. This phase lasted sixty years—1895 to 1955—the sixty years which correspond almost exactly to Churchill's political career. The British, when led by an inspiring statesman, would have gone along with it then. The American democracy would not. Save for a few Anglophiles and Atlantic Unionists no one would consider such an association seriously on this side of the Atlantic; not even Wilson or Roosevelt would have been amenable to it, though they were certainly not Anglophobes. This is a great pity, this missed chance of a Pax Anglo-Americana. Had it existed, it may have even slowed down the decline of the West. It may have meant a great deal of good for the entire world. But it was not to be.

Had there been such an association before World War II, the entire history of the world would have been vastly different. Had Churchill had his way, and had such an association evolved into something concrete by the end of World War II, the predominance of an Anglo-American confederation by 1945 would have been such that the Russians, short of a separate treaty with the Third Reich, would have had no option but to retreat before such a giant power, when and where this giant power would have chosen to make a stand. There might have been a little struggle here and there: but no real cold war at all.

Thus, both in the short and in the long run, the key to the origins of the cold war is often to be found not so much in the Western democracies' relations with Russia as in their relations with each other. (The Churchill-Roosevelt relationship, too, was far more complex, politically and psychologically, than Stalin's relationship with either of them.) The so-called revisionists almost always ignore this: but, judging from their performance, one should not really expect them to know any better.

After this massive dose of speculation about the past, this historian may be allowed to speculate a little about the future. And it is in this respect that what seems obvious ought not to mislead us. In its limited sense—as described at the beginning of this article—the cold war goes on. None of the

sociological chatter about the diminishing differences of the American and the Soviet technological state institutions would necessarily bring about a disappearance of the clashes of interests between the two empires—rather, the contrary. A Russo-American confrontation over the Middle East, over some portions of the Balkans or even of the Western Hemisphere is no more but no less possible than in the recent past, all of the ongoing disarmament talks notwithstanding.

Those, then, who speak of the presence of a new world balance of power, with no longer two but five Superpowers—America, Russia, China, Japan, Western Europe—are premature in their calculations. A united Western Europe does not exist, and probably will not exist for a long time. Japan is a world economic giant but a world political pygmy, a condition which may sooner or later displease the Japanese but which certainly does not displease either the United States or the Soviet Union or China: and, for the time being, this is what counts. China is a Great Power, just as she was in 1770 or in 1670. She has an enormous potential, which is what people have been saying about her ever since Voltaire or, indeed, since Marco Polo. She is also the world champion of Ping-Pong.

She is, as yet, no actual threat to the Russian empire—which is precisely why the Russians feel free to threaten her on occasion. I do not deny that sooner or later China may reach the status of a World Power such as no Asian state ever reached since the Mongol empire. The Russians know this. But what worries them is less the potential Chinese strength than the consciousness of their own potential weakness.

Very soon, within a few years, less than one-half of

the inhabitants of the Soviet Union will be Russians. Some of the other peoples within the Soviet Union will sooner or later demand more and more independence from their masters in Moscow. Absolutely contrary to Marx, in whose cramped calculations nationalism did not figure, the history of the twentieth century has been marked far less by the struggle of classes than by the struggles of nations. When the dissolution of the unified Russian empire appears imminent, our world will see dangers such as it may not have seen in a thousand years at least. If the then masters of Russia are brutal and energetic men, they will resort to literally everything, including the prospect of great foreign conquests, with the threat of a hydrogen war, in order to keep their Soviet Union together. If, on the other hand, the then masters of Russia will prove to be hesitant or incompetent, the dangers are not much less: for the dissolution of the Soviet empire will open up a Pandora's Box of gigantic dimensions, involving not only Chinese but German ambitions rekindled in an instant, a prospect of extreme and revolutionary changes along the western part of the Eurasian heartland, of the land continent of the world.

For fifty or more years the breakup of the German empire was something to which the Great Powers—the United States, Britain, Russia—were either not opposed or were indifferent. That is why the Second World War had to be fought into the core and maw of Berlin, to the bitter end. But the breakup of the Russian empire would be another story. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, all ideological antipathies notwithstanding, is not in the interest of the United States. The leaders of the Kremlin know this: and this is why the cold war will continue cold, not hot, for some time to come.