

This article was downloaded by: [University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)]

On: 29 July 2014, At: 14:57

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Diplomacy & Statecraft

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdps20>

New light on the Cold War?

Marc Trachtenberg^a

^a University of Pennsylvania

Published online: 19 Oct 2007.

To cite this article: Marc Trachtenberg (2001) New light on the Cold War?, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 12:4, 10-17, DOI: [10.1080/09592290108406223](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290108406223)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592290108406223>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities

whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

New Light on the Cold War?

MARC TRACHTENBERG

The Cold War has traditionally been interpreted in moral terms, but it turns out that statesmen were less ideological and far more sensitive to the logic of power than we had been led to believe. It thus makes sense to interpret that conflict in a new way – or really in much the same way as international politics has traditionally been interpreted: as a political conflict, in which power factors loomed large, and about which moral judgements are problematic. This basic claim is supported by some key examples relating to the Potsdam Conference, the Berlin Crisis and the Kennedy period.

There was a time, not so long ago, when debates about the Cold War were very easy to characterize. These discussions focused on the question of blame. ‘Orthodox’ historians pointed the finger at Russia and said that Soviet expansionism was responsible for the Cold War, while their ‘revisionist’ critics said America was to blame for taking too tough a line, especially in the immediate postwar period.

My thesis here today is that this whole way of looking at the problem has been changing quite dramatically in recent years – that the whole complex of problems having to do with the interpretation of the Cold War is in fact coming to be seen in an entirely new and different light. That conflict is coming to be understood, I think, as a normal historical process – that is, as a *political* process, with its own dynamic, unfolding over time, and about which moral judgements are often quite problematic.

Who is to say, for example, that the Russians were wrong to be concerned with a buildup of German power in the postwar period? Who is to say, on the other hand, that the Western countries were wrong to want to treat Germany as more of a partner, more of an equal, or that they were wrong to feel that it was necessary to have a counterweight to Soviet power in Europe? And yet if both sides had policies of this sort, you could have had serious East–West conflict: the two sides could have clashed even if the motivation of each side was essentially defensive in nature. In other words, you could have conflict, not because each side, or indeed either side, was driven by some great ideological vision: the heart of the conflict could be much more mundane, much more prosaic. It could be rooted in concrete

political problems, in geopolitical interest, in concerns about power – not in ‘algebra’, to use a famous distinction Stalin once made, but in the simple ‘arithmetic’ of great power politics.

That, at any rate, is how my own thinking about the Cold War has changed over the course of the past 20 years. I do not think I am the only historian whose views have changed in this way, but I do want to focus here on the things that have had the greatest impact on my own thinking – the three things that, more than anything else, have led me to see the Cold War in this way.

The first has to do with the diplomacy of the German question in the immediate postwar period, and in particular during and right after the Potsdam Conference of July 1945. The most important issue at Potsdam was, of course, the question of how to treat Germany, and the key to American policy on this issue at this point was the Byrnes Plan for German reparations. Secretary of State Byrnes was the real maker of American policy at this time, and the basic idea behind his reparation plan was that the two sides – the Soviet Union and the Western powers – would each take from its part of Germany whatever it saw fit. This implied, as Byrnes very clearly understood, that Germany’s foreign trade would also not be run on a unitary basis. For if the Soviets were free to take whatever they wanted from Eastern Germany, they, and not the Western powers, Byrnes felt, should have to deal with the consequences; they and they alone would have to take care of whatever trade deficit their zone was going to run. But by the same token, the Western powers would be responsible for foreign trade for *Western* Germany as a whole. The control of foreign trade, however, was the key to the overall economic treatment of Germany: if foreign trade was not managed on an all-German basis, but rather in accordance with Byrnes’ concept, the two parts of Germany would have to relate to each other economically as though they were separate countries engaged in international trade. The American plan, in fact (in the words of one well-informed British observer), was ‘based on the belief that it will not be possible to administer Germany as a single economic whole with a common programme of exports and imports, a single Central Bank and the normal interchange of goods between one part of the country and another’.¹

Byrnes, in other words, had no problem accepting the division of Germany, and President Truman also had little problem accepting a Soviet-dominated central Europe: thanks to Hitler, the president said

at Potsdam: 'we shall have a Slav Europe for a long time to come. I don't think it is so bad.'² As for Stalin, even before Potsdam, he had no trouble accepting the idea that each side would dominate the areas its armies occupied at the end of the war, and he took it for granted that there were going to be two Germanies.³ At Potsdam, he ended up accepting the Byrnes concept wholeheartedly, and the Soviets made it quite clear in late 1945 that no matter what texts had been signed, they, like Byrnes, did not take the idea of a unitary Germany run on a real quadripartite basis very seriously.⁴

Now, this of course is rather different from the old view of an American government incapable of thinking in spheres of influence terms, bound – for domestic political, ideological, economic or whatever reasons – to pursue a policy based on Wilsonian principles, and incapable of striking a rather straightforward deal with Stalin. It is also somewhat inconsistent with some standard views of Stalin – with the view on the left that he was seriously interested in leaving Germany intact and in running Germany on a four-power basis, but also with the view on the right that Stalin not only wanted to take over all of Germany, but also seriously thought he could actually achieve that goal. Instead, the basic point that to my mind emerges quite clearly from the Potsdam documents and related sources is that each side was able to accept the other's most basic interests, that each side was willing to accommodate to the other side's power, and that neither side was so straitjacketed by its own ideology that it was incapable of accepting a divided Germany, and indeed a divided Europe, as the basis of a more or less tolerable postwar order.

This conclusion is important, I think, not just in its own terms, but because of the way it directs and focuses historical inquiry. It leads almost inevitably to a new series of problems: for if everything I just said is true, then the two sides should have been able to live together without much difficulty; but it was clear by early 1946 that very serious problems *were* taking shape; so what had gone wrong? And the answer here is that *American* policy shifted. At Potsdam, Byrnes had been willing to take the division of Germany philosophically, and had no difficulty, in particular, in agreeing that Germany's foreign trade should not be run on a unitary basis. But in 1946, the American government had got up on its high horse, blaming the Russians in no uncertain terms for refusing to run Germany as a unit, and especially for refusing to agree to an effective four-power regime for the control of German exports and imports. And why had American policy

shifted in this way? Probably because of what the Soviets were doing with Turkey and Iran: the sense was taking shape that amicable arrangements were not good enough, that only countervailing power could contain Soviet pressure, and that countervailing power could be generated only by mobilizing opinion at home.

The upshot, then, is an interpretation that differs in important ways from traditional views on both the right and the left about the origins of the Cold War. The emphasis here is on power, not on principle; on political calculation, not on high-minded ideals; on the defensive motivations of both sides, at least in central Europe, and not on the expansionist ambitions of either side. The view, in other words, is of the Cold War not as a great clash of civilizations but as a more prosaic sort of conflict, one that can be traced by exploring the problems at a rather mundane level.

The second thing I want to talk about has to do with the great Berlin Crisis of 1958–62, which I think of as the central episode of the Cold War. ‘Central episode’: that very way of putting it reflects a sense of connectedness, a sense that there is a *story* here, not just a bunch of crises strung out over time. And to look at the Berlin Crisis in those terms is to focus on basic questions about what caused the crisis, why it ran its course the way it did, and what its consequences were – in short, what role it played in the larger story. And what *was* the crisis about? Why did the Soviets in November 1958 provoke a crisis over Berlin? To force the Western powers out of the city? To try to take over West Berlin itself? We of course still do not have really good evidence from Russian archival sources on Soviet motivations, but one can get at this question in a variety of indirect ways, and the conclusion I reached after trying to think this issue through on the basis of the material that was available was that Soviet policy was again essentially defensive in nature – that the Soviets were concerned about Germany, and especially about the prospect of a German nuclear capability.

Now in itself there was nothing very new about that claim. Adam Ulam, for example, and Jack Schick as well, had long ago argued along similar lines. But there were two things that were new. First, there was all the new evidence that has come out in the last few years about West Germany’s, and especially about then-Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s, nuclear aspirations at that time. And, second, there was a massive amount of evidence that had come out about American nuclear policy in the 1950s, and especially about President

Eisenhower's nuclear sharing policy. It turned out that the Europeans, including the Germans, for very understandable and essentially defensive reasons, wanted nuclear forces under their own control, and that Eisenhower – again for quite intelligible, and indeed, on a certain level, admirable reasons – believed that the Europeans (not just the British and the French but also the Germans) should have nuclear forces of their own, and in fact that America should help them acquire forces of that sort.

Well, this was again quite different from what we had been led to believe, and it was certainly relevant to an understanding of Soviet policy on the German question in this period. For years, when I would tell people what the evidence seemed to show, they – and by that I mean historians on both sides of the Atlantic – were incredulous. The Germans could never aspire to a nuclear capability, people would argue: it would drive the Soviets up the wall, it was bound to lead to a major crisis. And quite apart from such considerations, there was the additional very basic assumption that the Americans were from the start worried about nuclear 'proliferation' and consistently sought to block the development of independent nuclear capabilities by the European, or at least by the continental European, NATO allies.

So people could not believe it, but you cannot argue with the evidence, and the very premise that led people to reject my basic contention about what was going on – namely, that the Soviets would react violently if it became clear that Germany was in the process of going nuclear – implied that (given what we could now see *was* going on in the West) the Soviet decision to provoke a crisis over Berlin was probably to be seen in the context of their very real fears about what a strong and independent Germany would mean.

So here you had a conflict rooted in the clash of essentially defensive policies – that is, status quo-oriented policies on both sides. You could understand – indeed you could sympathize with – the policies of all the powers involved in the story; you could see what the real nuts-and-bolts issues were, and focus in on them when you were trying to analyze how the crisis developed. You did not need to posit a great ideological clash to explain what was going on; you did not need to assume that each, or indeed that either, side was engaged in a kind of crusade and was seriously trying to extend its control over all of Europe. Again, issues of power were fundamental, and again it made sense to analyze the story at a rather mundane level.

Now let me talk a bit about the third main example – a set of issues relating to the Kennedy period – and what the evidence revealed here was also quite striking. Everyone who lived through this period remembers Kennedy’s inaugural address, and especially the passage about how America would ‘pay any price’ and ‘bear any burden’ to assure the survival of liberty. But this, it turns out, was not the real Kennedy at all. On the core issues of international politics, Kennedy wanted to deal with the USSR on a businesslike basis. America and Russia, he felt, were both very great powers; each should respect the other as a great power, and should respect the other’s core strategic interests. He made this quite clear to the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, when the two men met at Vienna in June 1961. America, he said, did not ‘wish to act in a way that would deprive the Soviet Union of its ties in Eastern Europe’ – that is, the Americans would in effect accept that area as a Soviet sphere of influence. The US government would also make sure that German power remained limited. The United States, Kennedy told the Soviet leader, was ‘opposed to a buildup in West Germany that would constitute a threat to the Soviet Union’ – and, given military realities, that could only mean the development of an independent German nuclear capability. But in return the USSR would have to respect American interests in Europe, and in particular would have to be willing to live with the status quo in Berlin. The city itself might not be of fundamental importance. But if America were to capitulate on Berlin, if it were to allow the Soviets to trample on its rights and to treat its most solemn commitments as though they were of no account, then its whole political position in Europe would collapse. The effect on the global balance of power would be profound. Khrushchev, the president said, would not accept a ‘similar loss and we cannot accept it either’.⁵

Kennedy’s goal was to stabilize the status quo: he was in effect offering the Russians a deal. The Western powers would respect the status quo in Europe, and the Americans would in addition make sure that the Germans would not become strong enough to threaten it. In exchange, the USSR would also respect the status quo, in particular around Berlin. Kennedy, in other words, was willing to give the USSR everything she could reasonably ask for – and he pursued this policy even though it put America’s relations with its most important European allies very much at risk. But the Soviets did not respond positively, and the great puzzle of this period has to do with Soviet

policy – that is, with the Soviets’ failure to close the deal. I myself do not have the solution to that puzzle, but I do know that because of Soviet intransigence on this matter, relations between the two sides deteriorated sharply in the summer of 1962. Kennedy, in fact, came to the conclusion that if a showdown was inevitable, there was little point in putting it off: in 1962, America still had an important edge in strategic terms, but in a year or so American nuclear superiority would have become a thing of the past. This was very explicitly Kennedy’s attitude on the eve of the Cuban missile crisis; and this was one reason why the Cuban crisis needs to be understood as the climax of the Berlin crisis – another major point related to the interconnectedness of things, and to the fact that there is a real *story* here.

So what is the bottom line here? The basic point to emerge from the new evidence, I think, is that statesmen – especially American statesmen – were much more sensitive to the logic of power than we had been led to believe, and indeed this is what enables us to construct the story of the Cold War in an essentially new way. In a *new* way? Maybe it would be better to say ‘in an *old* way’, in the sense that the basic conceptual framework we are beginning to use to understand the Cold War is the same framework we have used traditionally to understand, say, the origins of the First World War, or international politics in the Bismarckian period. We are beginning, in other words, to historicize, to normalize, the Cold War – to move away from meta-historical interpretations of various sorts and to see it as an historical phenomenon that ran its course like so many others – that unfolded in accordance with an historical logic in which power considerations played a central role.

And this way of thinking about the Cold War is to my mind of fundamental importance – not just historical importance, but political importance as well. It means that, instead of a great rupture separating us from the past, there is in fact deep continuity. It means that the basic conceptual framework we have used traditionally to understand international politics is not the relic of some bygone era, but rather is of continuing applicability. It means that the study of the past, even the very recent past, is still relevant to an understanding of the problems of the present, and of the future as well.

NOTES

1. Waley memorandum, 2 Aug. 1945, *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, series I, vol.1, p.1258.
2. James Forrestal diary entry, 28 July 1945, Forrestal Diary, Mudd Library, Princeton University.
3. Stalin meeting with German communist leaders, 4 June 1945, in R. Badstuebner and W. Loth (eds.), *Wilhelm Pieck: Aufzeichnungen zur Deutschlandpolitik* (Berlin, 1994), p.50; Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York, 1962), p.114.
4. For the evidence and a discussion, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, 1999), pp.29-32.
5. KennedyKhrushchev meetings, 4 June 1961, FRUS 1961-63, 14:8798. The sentence about eastern Europe (p.95) was deleted from the version of the document declassified in 1990.