
Original Article

The uses and abuses of history: The end of the Cold War and Soviet collapse

Michael Cox

Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science,
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.
E-mail: m.e.cox@lse.ac.uk

Abstract In the by now extended debate about the end of the Cold War and its causes, very little attention has been paid to the role played by historical memory in helping shape the way policy-makers approached the collapse of the post-war order. As this article shows, many, if not most policy elites at the time, confronted the passing of the old world with a great degree of caution and trepidation; and one of the key reasons they did so, it is argued here, is because of their reading of the past. This reading, I go on to suggest, made many of them especially cautious and fearful when faced with great change. In the end of course these changes proved irresistible, and for liberals at least seemed to augur in more peaceful and prosperous times. However, as we shall see here, this unguarded optimism was not much in evidence as the old international system and the other superpower collapsed after 1989. Looking backwards rather than forwards, policy-makers approached the new dawn with much less enthusiasm and optimism than their public pronouncements seemed to indicate at the time or later.

International Politics advance online publication, 10 June 2011; doi:10.1057/ip.2011.24

Keywords: end of Cold War; memory; lessons of history; historical analogy

Introduction

For where we stand in regard to the past, what the relations are between past, present and future are not only matters of vital interest to all, they are quite indispensable. We cannot help situating ourselves in the continuum of our own life, of the family and group to which we belong. We cannot help comparing past and present ... We cannot help learning from it, for that is what experience means. We may learn the wrong things – and plainly we often do – but if we don't learn, or have had no chance of learning, or refuse to learn from whatever past is relevant for our purpose, we are in the extreme case, mentally abnormal¹.



When great wars come to an end and statesmen and stateswomen sit down to construct what they hope will be a lasting peace, they cannot but help do so in the shadow, or light, of what their predecessors have attempted to do before.² In this sense the very act of reconstruction is bound to be conditioned by something called 'history'. Certainly history played a role when the peace-makers sat down to contemplate the world in Paris in 1919. The present looked dangerous; the future even more so. Still, policy-makers found time to commission at least one major study on the last great peace conference to have been held in Europe to see if it had anything to teach. Published for the historical section of the British Foreign Office, it is difficult to gauge what impact C.K. Webster's study on the Congress of Vienna had upon deliberations in Paris over a century later (Webster, 1919). But the fact that politicians saw a need to look back would suggest that the past might have exercised more influence on their deliberations than certain writers on the events in 1919 have hitherto recognized. The desire to learn something from the past was also much in evidence after World War II. Indeed, on the American side in particular there was a shrewd understanding of what had gone wrong before (too much punishment of Germany and not enough international engagement by the United States) and a widespread recognition that things would have to be done differently now. Equally, when a new generation of policy-makers began to come to terms with the end of the Cold War, they did so once more with the past, quite literally, looking over their shoulders. In fact, as we shall see, when confronted in the first instance with the collapse of the European order in 1989, and then the implosion of the USSR 2 years later, policy-makers were compelled to draw from their own, often limited, historical memory bank. The lessons they drew were not entirely reassuring. Indeed, as I shall try and show, their reading of history tended to make them deeply cautious about the huge changes taking place around them. Historians they were not. But they had enough understanding of the past to recognize that the collapse of the old international system was just as likely to generate uncertainty and disorder as it was opportunity and security.

Of course, not all war endings are the same. In fact, in several respects, 1989 was a most odd conclusion to what had already been a lengthy, seemingly permanent conflict. Unlike the end of other 'wars' for instance, this one was almost completely unanticipated. It was also unclear whether the winning side, in this case the West, was unambiguously keen on victory.³ It also occurred with hardly a shot being fired in anger. Moreover, whereas other great 'ends' in the past were viewed at the time as being harbingers of important new changes to come, the end of the Cold War – at least according one of the most influential theorists of the time – marked the 'end of history' itself. Fukuyama has in many ways been a most misunderstood writer. However, his thesis about the previous 200 years being a competition between a collectivism that was no



more and a liberalism that would now shape the world in perpetuity did suggest that there was really nothing very much one could learn from the past. The past in this sense was another, extraordinarily strange, country, whose topography one might study with interest, but with no particular purpose in mind other than to remind oneself never to go there again (Fukuyama, 1992).

Whatever Fukuyama intended, the fact remains that the end of the Cold War has generated a most vibrant debate not only about the reasons for it happening and which theory explains it best, but why it is that the majority of experts had little idea that such a thing could or would ever happen in the first place.⁴ Less vibrant though has been the debate about the role history performed in defining attitudes, shaping outlooks and, possibly, determining policies too. By definition there can never be any easy, let alone statistically certain, way of measuring what role memory played in the key decisions that were taken before, during and after 1989. All that we can say from the known record is that the past, or more precisely different understandings of it involving a mixture of fair-minded analysis, myth and plain prejudice, constantly impinged on the ways in which key players engaged with the Cold War as it began to wind down. Nor should we be so surprised by this. As one recent study on the role of collective memory and national identity has noted, ordinary people and elites alike do not live in an historical vacuum. Rather they live their lives through their remembrances of things past. The great American writer, William Faulkner, understood this better than most. 'The past is not dead' he once quipped; 'in fact it not even past' (Finney, 2011).

The degree to which history has helped define the beliefs and even decisions of policy-makers has been the subject of many fine works (Fry, 1991). None though has been as influential perhaps as that authored by the late Ernest May back in 1973. In his path-breaking study on the use and misuse of historical analogy in defining policy preferences he posed what he felt was a key question about the Cold War: why was it that US policy-makers after 1947 always tended to worse case analysis when it came to thinking about the USSR? The answer he suggested was to be found in history. It was quite impossible, he suggested, to make sense of the ways in which American policy-makers viewed their Soviet adversary during the Cold War without reference back to what had happened to the West during the 1930s. As he went on to argue, the American understanding of the Soviet Union only makes sense if we understand the way in which policy-makers after 1947 'read' the past; in particular the way in which they 'read' the conduct of western diplomacy when confronted with Nazi Germany and Hitler. Several lessons might have been drawn from this period. But the two that gained greatest popularity during the late 1940s and 1950s were first that the strategy of diplomatic accommodation, otherwise known as appeasement, should never be repeated again; and second, that the West had to grasp the simple fact that whatever their ideological differences, all

totalitarian regimes (Nazi Germany and the USSR alike) exhibited the same aggressive behaviour abroad and could only be dealt with from a very clear position of strength. To do otherwise would not only invite further expansion by the enemy. It might even lead (as in fact it did in 1939) to that which one was seeking to avoid: namely war (May, 1973).

In many ways Ernest May's sensitive analysis of the importance played by history in the construction of policy preferences serves as something of an inspiration for what follows. Unlike May however I will not be looking at the way in which perceptions of the Soviet Union after 1947 were filtered through a particular interpretation of inter-war diplomatic history. Instead, I will be examining the many ways in which policy-makers plundered the past as they tried to come to terms with the implications of the collapse of communist power. Strangely, this issue has not been much discussed in the academic literature. This is certainly odd. After all, much has been written over the past few years about the way in which American neoconservatives deployed historical analogies drawn from the end of the Cold War itself to justify a particular set of policies following 9/11 (Macdonald, 2009). Others have compared the United States today with other great empires of the past to see whether or not the United States is bound to decline like them (Cox, 2003, pp. 1–29). And much has been written of course about the Great Depression and the degree to which our financial crisis today bears any resemblance to what occurred before, or indeed whether or not lessons learned from the 1930s prevented another great collapse following the financial meltdown of 2007 (Bernanke, 2004). But little seems to have been said so far on the shadow cast by history over the events we broadly term the end of the Cold War. This essay is but a small step towards filling that void.

Lessons from the Twentieth Century

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. Thus how Poles viewed the history of the twentieth century was bound to be quite different to that of Russians; by the same measure, the great winner of World War II – the USA – was likely to look back on that experience in a rather different way than say either Germany or Japan. All this is self-evident. Still there is no getting away from one simple fact around which there was some rough and ready agreement among most policy elites 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, at least in its core areas. Even policy-makers at the time recognized this; none more clearly than Dean Acheson himself. Acheson had no illusions about the USSR. Nonetheless, he readily acknowledges that some new form of order was beginning to take shape under Cold War conditions. This had never been planned; and the dangers inherent in the competition were real. Yet it was this same competition he confessed that had helped him mobilize 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 (Acheson, 1969). Other policy-makers 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 that facilitated western economic and political recovery in the post-war period (Dulles, 1957, pp. 25–43). Truman saw the same relationship between American success and Soviet actions. As he later confessed, he could have not have got done half of what he wanted to do after 1947 without Stalin's help! (Cox, 1984, pp. 136–194).

The idea that the Cold War had not only helped the West recover but had gone on to generate its own form of equilibrium soon found its way into the academic literature. Indeed, by the time of *détente* in the 1970s, the generally accepted view was that whatever else might have divided the two sides, both had come to accept that the relationship was likely to endure for many decades to come and would do so primarily because it guaranteed that their different security needs could be met as a result. This view continued well into the 1980s, the decade we normally associate with the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the influential Australian writer Paul Keal was even arguing as late as 1983 that there were important 'unspoken rules' of the Cold War, the most important being that the two superpowers had an interest in the other's continued survival (Keal, 1983). Three years on and John Gaddis was suggesting something even more significant: that the Cold War had in fact produced a 'long peace' – the by-product on the one hand of bipolarity, and on the other of nuclear weapons supported by a two camp system in a divided Europe. Not everybody agreed with this view of course. In fact, Gaddis was much criticized later for having failed to predict that the system he described as being stable was in fact 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 characterized by great power peace. This was not an argument for the Cold War as such. It did not deny that many people had suffered. It was merely a statement of the obvious. As he observed, whether or not one approved of the *means* by which this stability had come

about, or even with the ‘way’ in which it had happened, the reality was that the Cold War had evolved to produce its own kind of peace order (Gaddis, 1986, pp. 99–142).

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 IR during the Cold War too. We see this for instance in Morgenthau’s iconic *Politics Among Nations* in 1948. Morgenthau could never quite make up his mind about the Cold War. At one point he almost seemed to suggest that it was bound to lead to nuclear war; at others that some kind of diplomatic accommodation would be possible. However, the system as such had produced a new form of balance that policy-makers would do well to support (Cox, 2007, pp. 166–194). Others agreed, including the one IR writer with whom Morgenthau is most readily compared: Kenneth Waltz. Much divided the two writers. But one thing did not: the belief 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 less significant or influential. On the contrary, until the bipolar system formally collapsed in 1991 his main thesis – that there was a very clear connection between the number of significant powers in the system and the system’s overall stability – still appeared to hold sway (Waltz, 1964, pp. 881–909).

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, in fact some policy-makers 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. This was not everybody’s view; De Gaulle of course came to oppose what he termed the ‘Yalta settlement’ that left Europe under the control of the superpowers. But the forces and arguments supporting the status quo seemed to outweigh those opposed to it. If nothing else, this apparently unnatural situation ensured some degree of superpower control of the many dangerous nationalisms that had done so much damage to Europe before 1945. The post-war European order moreover also cemented the relationship between the United States and western Europe through the crucial vehicle of NATO. Any change could very easily threaten both. As one of the most influential studies on Europe in the world observed in 1979, 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 and the new relationship its western half had with the United States had proved



capable of delivering some semblance of order where before there had been none (DePorte, 1979).

Germany and the Germans

If memories of the past tended to make policy-makers cautious when it came to thinking about the end of the post-war order in 1989, so too did their reading of the history of one very special country in particular. Given what has happened to Germany since 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 Mitterrand made frequent reference (at least in private) about Germany's highly problematic past. In fact, 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 before the Wall finally came 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 once again France and Great Britain would 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 ...'⁵

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 many Germans – 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 those to do with the longer term future of NATO and the impact that 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, the presumed national character of its people, and its complicated external relations, even with its modern European neighbours. These beliefs, moreover,

were not just held by that proverbial, and by definition prejudiced, ‘man on the street’. Many distinguished European historians also held to the view that Germany’s division after 1945 was no bad thing, given its expansionist past before. A.J.P. Taylor was one such. There were no lessons to be learned from history he once opined – except when it came to Germany he added! Here he had few doubts. 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 (Granieri, 2001, pp. 28–50).

Taylor was very much an individualist of course and very much an Englishman too (though one of its least parochial historians). Thus it could be argued that his views were his alone. But that would be plainly misleading. If anything his attitude towards Germany was more or less 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 that 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 after the war, 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. Of course such attitudes were not set in concrete, and by the 1970s they had softened considerably. It is also true that France under President Mitterrand did in the end ‘go with the flow’ and refused – unlike Thatcher – to stand in the way of unification. However, as the most complete French assessment of French policy in 1989 shows, although Mitterrand may not have opposed unification – and had good reasons for not doing so, given the very special relationship that existed between Germany and France – he did not always display great enthusiasm about the prospect (Bozo, 2009). As he remarked to Prime Minister Thatcher 2 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’.⁶

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 United Kingdom should, at the end of the day, move with the tide of history. Mrs Thatcher, on the other hand, was having none of this. Not only did she think that reunification was not in Britain’s interest, a view shared by several of her advisers.⁷ She also appeared to be ‘instinctively’ distrustful of the Germans, a suspicion she displayed to the full apparently when the ‘Bundestag rose to sing *Deutschland uber alles* when the news of developments on the German Wall came in’ in November 1989.⁸ According to one report from her inner circle, she was utterly horrified by this



musical outburst. Nor did she become any 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 attractive. The 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. In fact, there were some around Thatcher 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 pointed out (though it is not clear which one), 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.⁹

In the end neither stereotypes about the Germans or particular readings of German history could stop German unification from taking place – no more than Mrs 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 1 year after the Berlin Wall had come down. The *coup d'etat* against her, however, did not lessen the negative impact that 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 that within Germany itself the UK (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.¹⁰

Après Empire la deluge

But in one regard at least Thatcher proved to be remarkably prescient: in predicting the impact that German unification and its subsequent entry into

NATO would have on Gorbachev's already weakened position back in the USSR. What she could not have predicted was the very real possibility that the Soviet empire itself might fall apart too. Nor at first did the Bush administration. However, as events unfolded, it became increasingly clear in Washington, and certainly by the spring of 1991, that there was every chance that the centre might not hold in the USSR.¹¹

The possibility that the Soviet Union might break up was one that caused significant consternation within the western intelligence community. On one side stood those who felt that there was nothing in the end that could be done to prevent the USSR from disintegrating. Moreover, there might be significant strategic and political benefits in it doing so. Certainly, it would leave the United States in a position of overwhelming dominance. But there was another, equally, if not more influential, viewpoint. This not only dismissed the idea that something as powerful and as durable as the USSR could in fact collapse (Arbel and Edelist, 2003). It also took the highly realist view that such a collapse was not necessarily in anybody's interest, including the interests of the United States. Indeed, the consequences of this particular empire falling apart could be catastrophic; 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 western many policy-makers by what was already happening 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 entirely reasonable conclusion that if this could happen to a small, non-nuclear state that 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 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'. It did not require a great deal of imagination to conceive of the much greater horrors that would follow in the USSR (Beschloss and Talbott, 1994, p. 414).

Such arguments found a ready audience among western policy-makers who already tended to the view that large power blocs were by and large a good thing and that anything that threatened such entities should be resisted rather than encouraged. Even in the case of the USSR most western elites seemed to be more in favour of seeing some form of the 'empire' holding together rather than seeing it fall apart. This posed an especially difficult problem for the United States of course. On the one hand, it was formally bound to proclaim



the liberal right of self-determination. On the other, policy-makers under Bush looked to be more concerned about the practical dangers of what might follow if the USSR were to break up than they were about supporting some theoretical right. Naturally enough this assumed a different kind of USSR. Still, when forced to choose, it looked very much 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' (Beschloss and Talbott, 1994, p. 346). The then ambassador to the USSR expressed a similar, though perhaps less tough-minded view. Jack Matlock was a most sensitive observer of the Soviet scene and a great admirer of Gorbachev. Like many other policy-makers at the time he looked forward to further evolutionary changes within a reformed USSR. Evolution was one thing however; what he termed 'premature independence' was something else altogether. This could very easily threaten that which the United States sought most: namely continued central control over the USSR's massive nuclear arsenal, political order and the implementation of gradual economic reform (Matlock, 1995).

These practical concerns were in the end what made the West extremely cautious when faced with the prospect of the rapid break up of the Soviet empire. Yet practical concerns were not the only factor shaping the outlook of policy-makers. 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 the consequences were always bound to be dangerous and destabilizing. Here lessons drawn from the fall of the Roman empire played a not unimportant part in informing western elite attitudes (James, 2006). 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, darkness and despair fell over a once united and civilized Europe – a Europe that according to the standard line sank into what was invariably referred to in the popular literature as the 'dark ages'.¹² 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 (Cox, 2000).

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: America looked forward to an outcome in which there would still be a functioning central government ruling over a reforming USSR.¹³

Post-Communist Russia: From the Marshall Plan to Weimar

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 that most significant of American foreign policy initiatives taken just after World War II: the 'Marshall Plan' (Cox, 1994, pp. 635–658). This discussion began in earnest when Gorbachev began to contemplate the possibility of economic reform. It then continued for some years thereafter, even after he had been forced from office. 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. Reform would be painful they pointed out. Therefore large-scale outside assistance would be required to smooth the path to a new future. 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 (Mann, 2010, pp. 337–338).

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 (Eichengreen and Uzan, 1992, pp. 13–76). It also spoke volumes about the power of the past and the ways in which the past could be mobilized 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 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 growth 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. It also 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 (Oberdorfer, 1998, p. 455).

Underlying the argument for a new Marshall Plan of course was a very real fear, based on a well-founded analysis, that the transition in the former USSR was going to be especially difficult. The fact that communist rule had lasted so long in the USSR meant that what had been relatively easy in other communist-style systems like Poland or Hungary would not be anything like so easy in the former Soviet Union with its many nationalities, its very large Russian minorities 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 demonized West may well have been outnumbered by those who looked back on the past with some nostalgia, and perhaps for a good reason. After all, ordinary Russians were once again being called upon to make some serious



sacrifices in the vague hope that life might get better – one day. It also appeared as if their once proud nation had been forced to give up everything since 1989 – including its hard won gains in Europe – 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 while at the same time enlarging NATO. The issue of NATO was to prove especially difficult for those in favour of western-style change. The record did appear to show that the United States had made a promise in 1990 that there would be no further attempts to push the organization eastwards. Yet a few years on, this is precisely what Washington was doing under Clinton, thus proving that the West was profoundly hostile to Russia and could never be trusted to treat Russia as an equal.

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 in fact. 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 that 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 were designed to benefit. To most people all this looked less like a transition and more like a collapse (Kotkin, 2001, pp. 185–191). To then add international insult to deep material injury, Yeltsin's foreign policy team led by Kozyrev appeared as if it was more intent in 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' (Talbott, 1990). 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 arrogance. He accepted that nothing like Versailles had been imposed on Russia. Nonetheless, there was a growing belief among 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 among 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 "Weimarization" of Russia' (Melville, 1994).

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 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 per cent of the votes to 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 (Freidin, 1996).

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 Putin, seemed to put pay to the Weimar analogy; though not completely. Indeed, among some western commentators the analogy continued to make a great deal of sense. Speaking on Russia's future in 1998 at Stanford University for example, former Defense Secretary William Perry 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 (Perry, 1998). The historian Niall Ferguson deployed the analogy for a different purpose: to warn the West not about something that might happen but about something that possibly already had because of Putin – the grave digger of Russian democracy. Ferguson had first used the Weimar analogy back in 1997. 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 noted. 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' he concluded (Ferguson, 2005).

Conclusion

The discussion of the often interesting (though occasionally exaggerated) ways in which 'lessons' drawn from German history in the 1920s were applied to post-communist Russia seven decades later brings this essay to an end. In its own modest way this essay has sought to contribute to the growing literature on the role of historical analogy by outlining in some detail what few have bothered to do before: namely examine the many complex ways in which different pasts were used by different actors and policy-makers through the end of the Cold War to the collapse of the USSR. Of course, it would be easy to argue (and I have heard the argument often enough before) that fascinating though all these analogies might be, at the end of the day their 'real' impact on what in fact happened was minimal. Thus Mrs Thatcher's views on Germany, the wider belief that the Cold War had delivered some kind of long peace, and talk of a new Marshall Plan for Russia and references to Weimar, made very little difference to what finally transpired. There is something to this. Indeed, as I have shown, no amount of agonizing reflections on German history between 1871 and 1945 was able to stop the unification of Germany in 1989, no



more than heroic talk of what the United States had done to facilitate European recovery in 1948 convinced US policy-makers after 1990 to extend large loans to Russia.

Yet we still have to explain why policy-makers (and others) caught up in the midst of probably the most exciting and testing moments of their very busy careers often felt impelled to look backwards and to think of the present through the prism, or prisms, of the past. As I have suggested, the reasons were several, ranging from the use of history as warning, history as means of legitimizing or delegitimizing certain courses of action, through to history as a means of making sense of a mass of new information for which policy-makers simply did not have a framework. Here one has to understand the context and the extraordinary challenges facing policy-makers at the time. A relatively settled world was collapsing; and making sense of this was a huge task, one made easier perhaps through the vehicle we call 'history' and historical analogy. As others have noted, at times of great upheaval policy-makers are more likely to deploy history than in periods of stability. History to this degree becomes a sort of reference point, an anchor almost to which policy-makers can attach themselves and from which fixed position they are perhaps better able to survey the waters swirling around them before deciding what to do next. As one of the leading writers on the role of analogical thinking has observed, policy-makers are far more likely to resort to analogy in situations characterized by the unfamiliar and the uncertain than they are when the world appears to be travelling along the same well-trodden path (Khong, 1992, pp. 6–7).

Of course, analogies can be either useful and helpful or misleading and potentially counterproductive. And as I have tried to show here, some analogies seemed to assist thinking during 1989 while others clearly did not. This was especially true in the case of Mrs Thatcher and the British when faced with the prospect of German unification. Here 'history' (or more precisely their particular reading of German history) not only pitted them against something that by the summer of 1989 looked nigh on inevitable. It actually proved highly counterproductive in terms of their own interests as well. Not for the first time in the history of the Cold War did 'history' prove to be more of trap than a resource. As Ernest May might have put it, there is nothing wrong with policy-makers trying to learn from the past, but they had better make sure that they learn the right lessons and not the wrong ones!

This in turn raises the intriguing question – what 'lessons', if any, will future generations learn from the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR: the rather obvious one that communism crumbled because the West proved superior to its rival? Or perhaps the more interesting lesson that points to the almost inescapable conclusion that policy-makers appeared to have far less control over what was going on around them than they now seem to be claiming in their memoirs! Indeed, if the end of the Cold War and the Soviet

collapse point to anything, it is not so much to how much policy-makers were masters in their own house, but rather the degree to which they were pulled here and pushed there by developments over which they seemed to have very little real control at all. Learning from the past may have helped them reflect in a more (or less) informed way on what was going on. But it was no guarantee that what they set out to do was in the end what actually happened.

About the Author

Michael Cox is Professor of International Relations and Co-Director of IDEAS at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Former chairman of the European Consortium for Political Research, he is also an Associate Research Fellow at Chatham House and the Royal United Services Institute, London. The author and editor of over 20 books his latest volumes include the best-selling *US Foreign Policy* (2nd edn., 2011) and two co-edited studies *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy* (2009) and *The Global 1989* (2010).

Notes

- 1 The quote is taken from the most eminent Marxist historian of the last 30 years, Eric Hobsbawm (2002, p. 32).
- 2 For the by now classic study on how peace is made at the end of great power conflicts, see Ikenberry (2000).
- 3 This of course was the point made at the time by various realists. John Mearsheimer famously predicted that the West would come to regret the passing of the Cold War order (Mearsheimer, 1990).
- 4 For different explanations as to why experts may have failed to 'predict' the collapse of Soviet power see my 1998 volume (Cox, 1998).
- 5 This extraordinary quote from Mitterrand can be found in the official *British Documents on British Policy Overseas Series III, Volume VIII: German Unifications 1989–1990*. Hereafter *Documents* (2009, pp. 164–165).
- 6 The 'bad Germans' remark was made by Mitterrand on the 20 January 1990 in a meeting in Paris with Thatcher (Blitz, 2009).
- 7 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*, p. 50).
- 8 *Documents*, p. 105.
- 9 *Documents*, pp. 502–508.
- 10 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 'the least important' (*Documents*, p. 190). On growing American dismay with Mrs Thatcher's negative attitude towards developments in Germany, see also *Documents*, pp. 31–33.
- 11 See the CIA assessment of April 1991 that argued that 'economic crisis, independence aspirations and anti-Communist forces are breaking down the Soviet empire and the system of governance' (Oberdorfer, 1998, p. 450).



- 12 Adam Smith (1776) 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'. Edward Gibbon in his book *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 empire.
- 13 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"' in *Washington Times*, 23 May 2004.

References

- Acheson, D. (1969) *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department*. New York: Norton.
- Arbel, D. and Edelist, R. (2003) *Western Intelligence and the Collapse of the Soviet Union, 1980–1990*. London: Frank Cass.
- Bernanke, B.S. (2004) *Essays on the Great Depression*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Beschloss, M. and Talbott, S. (1994) *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War*. London: Warner Books; Princeton University Press.
- Blitz, J. (2009) Mitterrand feared emergence of 'bad' Germans. *FT.Com*, Europe, 9 September.
- Bozo, F. (2009) *Mitterrand, the End of the Cold War and German Unification*. London: Berghahn Books.
- Cox, M. (1984) Western capitalism and the Cold War system. In: M. Shaw (ed.) *War, States and Society*. New York: St Martins Press.
- Cox, M. (1994) The necessary partnership? The Clinton presidency and post-Soviet Russia. *International Affairs* 70(4): 635–658.
- Cox, M. (ed.) (1998) *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse: Sovietology, the Death of Communism and the New Russia*. London: Pinter; Cassell.
- Cox, M. (ed.) (2000) 'Introduction' to E.H. Carr. *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
- Cox, M. (2003) The empire's back in town: Or America's imperial temptation – Again. *Millennium* 32(1): 1–29.
- Cox, M. (2007) Hans J. Morgenthau, realism and the rise and fall of the Cold War. In: M.C. Williams (ed.) *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- DePorte, A. (1979) *Europe between the Superpowers*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dulles, J.F. (1957) Challenge and response in United States foreign policy. *Foreign Affairs* 36(1): 25–43.
- Eichengreen, B. and Uzan, M. (1992) The Marshall plan: Economic effects and implications for Eastern Europe and the former USSR. *Economic Policy* 14: 13–76.
- Ferguson, N. (2005) Look back at Weimar and start to worry about Russia. *Telegraph Online*, 1 January.
- Finney, P. (2011) *Remembering the Road to World War II. International History, National Identity, Collective Memory*. London: Routledge.

- Freidin, G. (1996) Weimar Russia? *Los Angeles Times*, 17 January.
- Fry, M.G. (ed.) (1991) *History, the White House, and the Kremlin: Statesmen as Historians*. London: Pinter.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.
- Gaddis, J.L. (1986) The long peace: Elements of stability in the postwar international system. *International Security* 10(4): 92–142.
- Gibbon, E. (1776) *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. London: Strahan & Cadell.
- Granieri, R.J. (2001) A.J.P. Taylor and the ‘greater’ German problem. *The International History Review* 23(1): 28–50.
- Hobsbawm, E. (2002) *On History*. London: Abacus.
- Ikenberry, G.J. (2000) *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- James, H. (2006) *The Roman Predicament: How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Keal, P. (1983) *Unspoken Rules and Superpower Dominance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Khong, Y.F. (1992) *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kotkin, S. (2001) *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970–2000*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Macdonald, D.B. (2009) *Thinking History, Fighting Evil: Neoconservatives and the Perils of Analogy in American Politics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Mann, J. (2010) *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Matlock, J. (1995) *Autopsy of an Empire: The American Ambassador’s Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. New York: Random House.
- May, E. (1973) *‘Lessons of the Past’: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mearsheimer, J. (Summer 1990) Why we will soon miss the Cold War. *Atlantic Monthly Online*.
- Melville, A. (1994) Weimar and Russia: Is there an analogy. Paper delivered to the ‘Weimar and Russia Forum’, 13 April 1994, Institute of International Studies, U.C. Berkeley. <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/pubs/melville.html>.
- Oberdorfer, D. (1998) *From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–1991*, Updated edn. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Perry, W.J. (1998) Weimar Russia. *Hoover Digest*, 30 January, No. 1.
- Salmon, P., Hamilton, K. and Twigge, S. (eds.) (2009) *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series III. Volume VII. German Unification 1989–1990*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Smith, A. (1776) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Talbott, S. (1990) America abroad: The fear of Weimar Russia. *Time.Com*, 4 June.
- Waltz, K. (1964) The stability of a bipolar world. *Daedalus* 93(3): 881–909.
- Webster, C.K. (1919) *The Congress of Vienna 1814–1815*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.