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The Evolution of British Cold War Policy, 1945–1964

The tangible spirit of optimism which accompanied Wilson's accession to power rested in part on the promise of improvement in East-West relations. Unlike Attlee, Churchill or Macmillan, Wilson faced a situation in which Cold War tensions had eased, and the risk of a major international crisis, let alone a global war, had diminished considerably. None the less the state of rivalry between the superpowers and their respective rivals had not vanished completely. In order to appreciate the impact of East-West politics on the Labour government which took office in October 1964, it is necessary to survey how the Cold War shaped the conduct of British external policy under Wilson's predecessors. The first two decades of the Cold War were characterised by intense East-West competition, punctuated by the crises over Berlin (1948–9, 1958–61), Korea (1950–3), Indochina (1954), Taiwan (1955, 1958) and Cuba (1962). These crises shaped Western adversarial perceptions of the Soviet bloc and China, and had a similar effect on how the Soviet and Chinese leaderships assessed the intentions of the 'imperialist' powers which confronted them. However, the confrontations over Berlin, the Cuba and East Asian 'flashpoints' were West-West as well as East-West in nature, and often involved disputes between the UK and its allies over how to respond to policy decisions initiated by Stalin, Khrushchev, Mao and other Communist leaders. This was particularly evident as far as relations between the USA and Britain were concerned.

The preservation of the Anglo-American 'special relationship' was an essential British interest, as Western Europe's security ultimately rested on US military and economic power. However, during the first two decades of the Cold War decision-makers in Washington and London often disagreed over their respective assessments of the Soviet threat, and of political developments within the Communist bloc. It is therefore important to examine American perceptions of East-West relations, and also those of France and the Federal Republic of Germany, the UK's two main allies in Western Europe. At certain stages in this period the four main Western powers were at odds over how to manage their relations with Communist powers. The principal controversy, which was a particular feature of Anglo-American relations, concerned the possibility of moderating East-West tensions through negotiation.

It is also necessary to examine the process of British policy-making not only during the crisis periods of the early Cold War, but also during the

periodic lulls in East-West hostilities, when officials in the Foreign Office, Ministry of Defence and other government departments debated whether it was possible to alleviate, or even resolve, the intractable ideological, diplomatic and strategic conflicts between the West and the Communist 'bloc'.¹ These apparently arcane exchanges of correspondence and opinions within Whitehall may appear to conform to the cliché of 'diplomatic history' being 'the record of what one clerk said to another clerk',² but the conclusions reached by British officials about the nature of the Soviet system and on internal developments within the Communist world are essential to this particular study. Deliberations over how to manage tense relations with the USSR, China and the East European states – and on how to counterbalance the risks of confrontation and global war with the need to preserve British and Western security interests against the perceived threat of Communist expansion – helped to influence Britain's approach to the Cold War throughout Wilson's first term in office, and beyond.

From World War to Cold War, 1945–51

Prior to the Second World War the USSR had played a peripheral role in world politics, but by 1945 the Soviets dominated Eastern and Central Europe. Britain, though nominally one of the victorious allied powers, emerged from the war economically exhausted and militarily over-stretched. Before 1941 relations between the UK and USSR had been blighted by mutual suspicion and ideological hostility – the Soviet government remembered British military intervention on behalf of the anti-Communist 'Whites' during the Russian civil war (1918–21), while British policy-makers recalled the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939. The 'Grand Alliance' was characterised by frequent quarrels pitting the Soviets against with their American and British allies, with the conduct of the war against Nazi Germany and the nature of the post-war settlement as the principal sources of contention.³ During the final stages of the war, the Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff clashed over their respective assessments of future Soviet policy; this interdepartmental debate over the respective merits of what would eventually be termed 'containment' or 'coexistence' was to be repeated in different contexts within and between

¹ From 1965 onwards the Foreign Office used the phrase 'Soviet bloc' (or 'Eastern bloc') to refer to the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies. The latter (in addition to Yugoslavia and Albania) were referred to simply as 'East European countries': ND note, 11 June 1965, N1981/1, and E. Youde (ND) note, 16 June 1965, N1981/2, TNA, FO 371/182529. I have used these three phrases in a similar sense, and I also use the descriptions 'Communist bloc', 'Communist powers' or 'Communist world' when discussing East-West relations before the Sino-Soviet split.

² This quotation has been attributed to the historian G. M. Young (1882–1959).

³ G. Roberts, *The Soviet Union in world politics*, Abingdon 1999, 2–3; Crockatt, *Fifty years war*, 51–4.

Western governments in subsequent decades. The COS were unabashed proponents of containment, pessimistically envisaging the need for Britain to align with other ‘Western’ powers to withstand Soviet expansionism. In contrast, Foreign Office officials, particularly those of the Northern Department (overseeing relations with the USSR and other East European states), concluded that the Kremlin would focus upon internal reconstruction and the containment of Germany, and that these objectives provided the basis for post-war Anglo-Soviet co-operation. Winston Churchill believed that he had established a strong personal relationship with Stalin, although on occasions he was worried by future Soviet intentions. During the spring of 1945 the prime minister envisaged the possibility of war between the USSR and the Western allies.⁴ In the British general election that summer the Labour party proclaimed that ‘Left understands Left’, and after Clement Attlee’s government took office in July, ministers assumed that Britain’s new social-democratic government could establish friendly relations with the USSR. However, by early 1946 Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, publicly complained about Soviet hostility towards the UK.⁵ In the months which followed the defeat of Nazi Germany – and despite expectations within the Foreign Office as well as the Labour Party – Anglo-Soviet relations deteriorated sharply.

This decline reflected the collapse of the wartime alliance, resulting from fundamental disagreement over Germany’s future and Anglo-American concerns over Stalin’s foreign policy objectives. In its analyses of Soviet policy the JIC frankly admitted that while assessing the USSR’s military capabilities was comparatively easy, it had scant information on Soviet intentions because of the secretive nature of the decision-making process within the Kremlin. This was a problem which constantly affected Britain’s assessments of the ‘Soviet threat’, and during the late 1940s this factor led officials to assume the worst.⁶ British officials showed little concern at the imposition of Soviet client regimes on the East European states – as demonstrated by Churchill’s ‘percentages agreement’ with Stalin on the respective British and Soviet spheres of influence in the Balkans (October 1944). However, the USSR’s expressed interest in expanding its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East posed a threat to Britain’s overseas empire. During the autumn and winter of 1945 Stalin’s inherent paranoia led him to reassess the USSR’s foreign policy, and to mobilise the Soviet economy and populace for a resumption of rivalry with the capitalist

⁴ Kitchen, *British policy*, 244, 260–1; Aldrich, *Hidden hand*, 52–63

⁵ H. Thomas, *Armed truce*, London 1986, 296; M. Hopkins, ‘Herbert Morrison, the Cold War and Anglo-American relations’, in M. Hopkins, M. Kandiah and G. Staerck (eds), *Cold War Britain, 1945–1964*, Basingstoke 2003, 21.

⁶ JIC(47)7/1 (Final), ‘Soviet interests, intentions and capabilities’, 6 Aug. 1947, TNA, CAB 158/1; P. Hennessy, *The secret state: Whitehall and the Cold War*, London 2002, 3, 12–14.

world.⁷ From the British perspective the USSR had changed from an alliance partner (albeit an obstreperous one) to a potential enemy. The Foreign Office had initially adopted a sanguine view of Soviet intentions in 1944, but the Northern Department's response to the three despatches sent by the *chargé* of the Moscow embassy, Frank Roberts, in March 1946 demonstrated how attitudes had changed.

In Roberts's opinion, the USSR considered that the UK's financial difficulties and diplomatic isolation presented opportunities to expand its influence in Europe and Asia. Soviet ideology stressed that tensions, or 'contradictions', between Western states (notably between the UK and USA) would lead to the disintegration of capitalism and the triumph of world Communism; this conclusion, that Stalin believed that capitalist states were preordained to clash with each other, has been confirmed by recent research.⁸ Roberts emphasised the fundamental difference between pre-war Anglo-Soviet relations and the situation after 1945 by stating that all the other powers that had hitherto blocked the USSR's expansion had been devastated during World War Two. Although he qualified this assessment by commenting on the inherent inefficiency and backwardness of the Soviet system, Roberts's despatches had an effect in London similar to that which George Kennan's 'Long Telegram' (February 1946) had on officials in Washington.⁹ One Northern Department official expressed the widely held opinion that the Soviets were 'practising the most vicious power politics in the political, economic, and propaganda spheres' against British interests, and that the USSR would 'stop at nothing short of war' to achieve its objective of a Communist world. In retrospect this rhetoric appears alarmist, but the extent of Soviet espionage in Britain – conducted by Donald Maclean, Kim Philby and other traitors in the Foreign Office and intelligence services – showed that official fears of a hostile USSR and of Communist subversion were not unjustified.¹⁰

Roberts's despatches had a clear influence on the Foreign Secretary, who in April 1946 told Attlee that the Soviets 'have decided upon an aggressive policy based upon militant Communism and Russian chauvinism'. Bevin and his subordinates were aware that Britain could not counter the Soviet 'threat' alone, but in the immediate aftermath of the war the administration of Harry S. Truman had shown complete disinterest in retaining alliance

⁷ Bullock, *Bevin*, 124–37; V. Zubok and C. Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, Cambridge, MA 1996 36–40.

⁸ V. Mastny, 'NATO in the beholder's eye: Soviet perceptions and policies, 1949–56' (CWIHP working paper xxxv, 2002), 36–7; Zubok and Pleshakov, *Kremlin*, 52–3, 73–4.

⁹ F. Roberts (Moscow) to E. Bevin, 14, 17, 18 Mar. 1946, N4065/97/38, N4156/97/38, N4157/97/38, FO 371/56763; interview with Frank Roberts, DOHP, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, transcript, 13.

¹⁰ C. Warner (ND), 'The Soviet campaign against this country', 2 Apr. 1946, in R. Aldrich (ed.), *Espionage, security and intelligence in Britain, 1945–1970*, Manchester 1998, 174–5; Hennessy, *Secret state*, 83.

ties with the UK. The Foreign Secretary and his officials toyed with the concept of a ‘third force’ bloc – incorporating the West European states and their African colonies – but concluded that this proposal was unrealistic. About the same time that the Attlee government came to regard the USSR as a hostile state, the Truman administration likewise gradually adopted a policy of restraining the expansion of Soviet influence. During 1946 the COS and British intelligence services established close ties with their American counterparts, and the following year the US and British governments began openly to collaborate with each other in a policy of ‘containing’ the USSR.¹¹

Until the spring of 1948 British officials regarded East-West rivalries as being confined to the political, economic and diplomatic spheres, and did not perceive the USSR to be an overt military threat. The JIC concluded that due to the human and material losses the latter suffered during World War Two, the Soviet government would focus on reconstruction and the consolidation of its authority over Eastern Europe. The USSR and its satellites would be in no position to wage war until the mid-1950s at the earliest, but would continue to use diplomatic and subversive means to weaken the capitalist world. As far as British officials were concerned, this assessment was confirmed by Yugoslav, Albanian and Bulgarian support for the Greek Communist insurgents fighting the pro-Western regime in Athens (1944–9). In this respect, the Attlee government shared the American concern that Western Europe was vulnerable to internal collapse and Communist takeover, and Labour ministers therefore supported both the Marshall Plan for European economic recovery and integration (June 1947), and the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany two years later. After the Communist *coup* in Czechoslovakia (February 1948) and the Berlin blockade (July 1948–June 1949) British officials were concerned not only that the French and Italian Communist Parties might emulate their Czechoslovak comrades, but by the apparent imbalance between Soviet and Western military power in Europe. By March 1948 the Foreign Secretary’s tone was more strident, depicting the USSR as an existential threat to the Western political and social order. Bevin persuaded his Cabinet colleagues that Britain had to align with the USA, the Commonwealth states and other West European democracies to counter the Soviet threat. Events in Czechoslovakia and Berlin served to reinforce Bevin’s arguments. Having backed American efforts to promote West European economic recovery with the Marshall plan, the British played the principal role in creating the Brussels defence pact with France and the Benelux states in March 1948 (subsequently named the Western European

¹¹ Bullock, *Bevin*, 234; C. Bartlett, ‘*The special relationship*’: a political history of Anglo-American relations since 1945, London 1991, 13, 23–5; J. Dickie, ‘*Special*’ no more: Anglo-American relations: rhetoric and reality, London 1994, 33–68.

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