

**THE USSR AND THE USA IN THE POSTWAR YEARS.
DIPLOMATIC AND MILITARY ASPECTS
(1944-1960)**

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Abstract

The postwar Soviet-American relations, circumscribed to the so-called period of the Cold War, represent one of the most interesting and complex chapters of the contemporary universal history. This study aims at capturing some significant snapshots that marked the two world superpowers manner of reporting to the military and diplomatic challenges of the 1944-1960 interval, characterized by an unusual density of political events.

Keywords: the USSR, USA, diplomacy, Cold War, threat, arming

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At the time of Nazi Germany surrender, the USSR recorded 20 million deaths and also considerable economic loss equivalent to its gross domestic product for six years. On the other hand, it would get important compensations by maintaining the conquests gained between 1939-1941, to which were added the North of Eastern Prussia and Czechoslovak Ruthenia².

The U.S. lost 300,000 people during the Second World War, which, relative to its demographic and military potential, was rather little. The U.S. territory remained sheltered from the direct effects of the conflagration, significant being (among other things) that during that period the U.S. airspace had only been penetrated by one (Japanese) enemy aircraft and its charge resulted in the burning of a forest area. Overall, World War II stimulated the American industrial potential. Thus, the gross domestic product doubled, reaching almost 50% of world production. The dollar would become the currency of international trade, event established through the Bretton Woods agreements of 1944³.

In 1945, the U.S. owned two-thirds of the world merchant fleet, ranked first in all areas of production and also held the monopoly over the atomic weapon.

The postwar US-Soviet relations are also interesting to observe from the perspective of the psychology of international relations. Walter Lippmann said in 1944 that, concerning the perception of the USSR by the White House, the Americans should avoid any exaggeration: neither excessive pessimism, nor oversized optimism but only tracking vital interests, under the aegis of protecting the Western parliamentary democracies⁴.

In October 1945, at the meeting of foreign ministers in London, an American observer noted that the Soviets substantially altered their attitude towards the Americans, meaning that, during the course of the Second World War, they had cultivated friendly relations with the U.S.A., and then subsequently, they adopted an increasingly glacial position.⁵

From the beginning, the Americans had considered a direct confrontation with the USSR impossible. A tremendous distance should have been crossed and about that there was a kind of witticism which read: the U.S. could not invade and occupy the Urals through Alaska, as could not the USSR invade and occupy the Mississippi River Valley through Siberia. At least during 1944-1948, no notable military strategist from Washington would take seriously such a scenario⁶. On June 3rd, 1947, though President Harry S. Truman had been explained that there were all the conditions for the U.S. to build not less than 12 atomic bombs, the reality was quite different, in that, not even one had been assembled yet. The U.S. military strategy took into account the construction of approximately 400 atomic bombs, their completion being scheduled for 1953, but the pace of production was still rather slow, despite official propaganda, extremely imaginative, and the increasingly tense atmosphere, directed towards a radical anti-communist speech⁷. The 1950s brought to the fore the personality of Senator Joe McCarthy, the initiator of the so-called "witch-hunt", who argued that in the U.S. State Department would have worked no less than 205 supporters of the Communist Party. The hysteria of McCarthyism divided the country for a while, the Senator seemed convincing to many through the harshness of his interventions and the certainty with which he delivered to the media a lot of information which later on proved partially false. A radical Republican, McCarthy was in fact a character obsessed with acquiring fast a nationwide reputation. Therefore, what he called an anticommunist crusade, had largely a promotional motivation, his extreme self-centeredness and untidy private life, gradually eroding his public image and then compromising it for good in the eyes of the Americans. On the other hand, the period of McCarthy's rise coincided (as noticed by Paul Johnson) with the collective drama the U.S. lived by their involvement in the conflict in Korea⁸. Not least, the victory of the communist forces in China (1949) had a devastating psychological impact on the public opinion and the political elite in the U.S. Basically, this event had modeled for years the specific of Washington foreign policy. The dominant feeling was one of frustration and insecurity,

² Pascal Boniface, *Relațiile Est-Vest. 1945-1991*, Ed. Institutul European, Iași, 1998, p.7

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Walter Lippmann, *U.S. War Aims*, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1944, p.130 și urm.

⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Democrația*, Ed.All, București, 1998, p.397.

⁶ Walter Lippmann, op.cit, p.134.

⁷ Paul Johnson, *O istorie a lumii moderne. 1920-2000*, Ed.Humanitas, București, 2003, p.431.

⁸ Ibidem, pp.447-448.

and the initial belief, that communism could be stopped and kept away from the geopolitical space controlled by the Americans, was shattered⁹.

The 1953-1961 interval (corresponding to the Eisenhower administration) was considered by American historians as equivalent to a mini-era of prosperity of the country, given that the President's image was already partially mythologized, due to his exceptional military value, proved in the course of World War II. General Eisenhower illustrated (perhaps better than many other American politicians), the type of traditionalist, Christian practitioner statesman, driven by the belief that the significance of the last universal conflict would amount to a decisive struggle between the forces of Good and Evil¹⁰.

The U.S. considered that Stalin's disappearance (1953) correlated with some tension and adversity recorded inside the Kremlin, would have created an encouraging premise for a certain weakening of the USSR. The Eisenhower administration admitted, however, that the U.S. needed to look more realistically at the international political landscape, admitting that the communist ideology could be a tempting model in those areas that had suffered in the colonial period, or, during the years of the last World War. True to his spiritual formation, President Eisenhower was convinced that the U.S. needed to win the hearts and minds of the peoples of the world in a pragmatic and intelligent manner, the ultimate pursued goal being to divert the political leaders of those nations from the seduction of communism¹¹.

This approach did not at any time weaken the usual vigilance of Washington against the USSR and its allies, the Secretary of State Dulles (for example), stating repeatedly that in his view, the communist ideology was an international conspiracy and in no case could it be explained as having local roots, the role of the USSR in orchestrating it being essential.

Some exaggerations regarding the Communist threat also appeared, as there was a tendency to consider any radical nationalism from a social point of view, as a potential danger of communist extraction. The experts in Washington considered the direct US-Soviet clash equivalent with a utopian confrontation between a whale and an elephant¹².

The Americans and the Soviets could only confront each other through intermediaries, allies or satellites, and if such a conflict would be globalized, the issue of a frontal collision would have been raised. A seemingly paradoxical conclusion was reached, according to which, peacekeeping was determined by maintaining the equilibrium of the specific external policies of their ideological or strategic partners¹³. One of the scenarios constructed by the Americans in the postwar years stated that if the USSR would eventually conclude an alliance with Germany, Japan or other important country (usually Western), the risks of a new conflict would be significantly increased¹⁴.

Combining the arming constancy with active defensive diplomacy, the U.S. relied on the effect of the unpredictable. According to this view, the USSR had to expect a surprise reaction at any moment, as did America itself which treated the Soviet colossus with the utmost concern and seriousness. Prior to George Kennan's famous article, since April 1946, the new direction of the U.S. foreign policy took shape¹⁵.

George Kennan plastically sketched for the first time, in a registry of a gravity that the politicians from Washington had not for long known, the image of a Soviet state perceived from within its inner fiber. As if he would have projected a beam of X-rays, Kennan was ambitious to make a radiograph of the clotting substance of the USSR and concluded that Lenin and Stalin's homeland is nothing but a huge collective prison meant for self-destruction. It was worse that Kennan's analysis targeted the very historic structures of the Russian mentality, which he considered incompatible with the ideals of freedom and democracy. "*Evil resides in the Russians*", proclaimed Kennan and the USA

⁹ David Priestland, *Steagul Roșu. O istorie a comunismului*, Editura Litera, București, 2012, p.467.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p.406.

¹¹ Ibidem, p.468.

¹² Walter Lippmann, op.cit, p.134.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Pierre Lellouche, *Le Nouveau Monde: de l'ordre de Yalta au desordre des nations*, Paris, Grasset, 1992, p.98.

¹⁵ Wilfried Loth, *Împărțirea lumii: istoria războiului rece. 1941-1955*, Ed.Saeculum, București, 1997, p.105.

basically received the first serious impulse of the future strategy for stopping the spread of communism¹⁶.

In a speech to Congress on March 12th, 1947, the U.S. President Harry S. Truman stated, *inter alia*:

*"I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way."*¹⁷

A year before, in the spring of 1946, Truman also won a psychological victory over the Soviets, when asking them for the evacuation of Azerbaijan and the Russian forces had complied. In 1947, a former advisor to President Roosevelt (B. Baruch) first used a phrase that will make career for many decades: *"The Cold War"*¹⁸

Prudent, Stalin was aware that he could not risk a confrontation with the U.S. at that time. Through the voice of sinister Jdanov, the Kremlin propaganda was emitting a stream of emphatic statements designed to build an image of power, which would be characteristic to the USSR. A sample: *"Two groups have been formed in the world: on the one hand the anti-democratic imperialist camp, which essentially aims at establishing world domination, on the other hand, the anti-imperialist and democratic camp, whose essential purpose is to undermine imperialism, to strengthen democracy, to eradicate the traces of fascism"*¹⁹.

According to this propaganda, the USSR would represent a true bastion of universal peace, a state where the fundamental freedoms were observed and protected and the democracy of popular/proletarian type was the only truly viable democratic model. The Soviet media proved to be extremely active in this respect, controlled and orchestrated by the party and state apparatus. By contrast, the capitalist world (with the U.S. as the exponential leader) was presented either in dark shades or in a caricatural manner, suggesting that capitalist democracy would be nothing but a huge ideological lie. The Soviet propaganda symbolism generated a multitude of textual, pictorial, graphical, auditory elements, which sought to induce into the collective psychology, the sense of superiority over the capitalist community, axiomatically considered as dominated by occult, selfish interests, fundamentally opposed to the fundamental interests of individuals.

The coup in Czechoslovakia (February 1948) was the final impulse received by the U.S. and it generated the creation of NATO. The officials in Washington defined this body in a manner that combined in approximately equal doses, ambiguity and paradox *"the predominance element of the power for peace"*²⁰

It was claimed that NATO would not support territories, but principles, that it did not oppose change but the use of force, in order to produce change.

The American legal experts were expressing their thoughts regarding the balance of the principle represented by NATO, the fact that an alliance against war appeared which did not share the basics elements of the most important duties of a typical military alliance²¹.

Obviously, as it happens in such cases, there appeared a kind of mythologizing. Many American analysts believed that the appearance of NATO, correlated with the state of mutual US-Soviet suspicion, was in fact, a difficult but necessary test, which the U.S. would have to pass in order to demonstrate the viability of the values it cultivated. Some admitted that America was designated by history to be the moral and political leader of *"the free world"*²²

*"Only by the practical affirmation, both outside the borders and at home, of our essential values, we can preserve our own integrity, in which the real frustration of the Kremlin plans resides"*²³

¹⁶ Henry Kissinger, op.cit, p.411.

¹⁷ Pascal Boniface, op.cit, pp.12-13.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p.20.

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp.12-13.

²⁰ Henry Kissinger, op.cit, p.415.

²¹ Ibidem, p.417.

²² Ibidem, p.419.

²³ Ibidem.

It was not very hard to decode in the subtext of such statements, echoes of the texts of America's Founding Fathers.

A decisive aspect of any military strategy is represented by the economic and human potential of that particular State. From this perspective, the USSR was at an obvious disadvantage compared to the U.S. For example, in 1950, the production of coal registered in the U.S. was of 505 million tons, while the similar Soviet production reached 268 million tons. The Soviet oil production was 37 million tons, and that of the U.S. - 270 million tons. The Soviet energy capacity was 90 billion kW, and that of the U.S. was of 329 billion kW. The Soviet steel production in 1950 was 27 million tons and the U.S. one was of 88 million tons. In 1950, the USSR produced a total of 307,000 cars and trucks, and the U.S. - 6,288,000²⁴.

From a sociological point of view the Soviet world had its own physiognomy, largely influenced by the ideological factor, even if we consider the prison system in the USSR, where in 1947 there were 5 million inmates. Their role in the Soviet economy was not minor, as they provided for 20% of the industrial workforce and over 10% of the industrial production of the USSR²⁵.

In 1950 the U.S. government made a considerable effort to speed up arming. There appeared new plants of serial production of airplanes, chariots, cannons. In three years term, the U.S. capacity of iron manufacturing industry increased by 15 million tons of steel. The same phenomenon was registered in terms of electric energy²⁶.

During 1950-1953, the U.S. created an additional siderurgical potential almost equal to that of the United Kingdom. Almost naturally the question arises: how long would it have taken the USSR to achieve something similar? The main advantage of the U.S. over the USSR was the actual productivity of labor, aspect which the Soviet propaganda kept silence about or present it exactly the other way. Every American worker produced three to four times more than a Soviet worker. In the American food industry and agriculture were employed 9 million people that actually provided food for the 150 million countrymen, and still a more than sufficient production remained for export. In the USSR, five times more workers produced a significantly less amount. The USSR was recognized a unique superiority: that of human effectiveness. From this point of view, the American strategists believed that the Soviet troops could prove superior in a possible confrontation with military less equipped countries in the Middle East²⁷.

During 1945-1946, Winston Churchill suggested almost imperatively to the U.S. to take the responsibility (along with the U.K. and other possible Western allied countries) of giving a decisive blow to the Soviets, considering that the Westerners would not be able to find soon a more favorable opportunity than when the Kremlin military force was recovering from the colossal combative efforts that it had supported during the war²⁸. Churchill proved therefore even more radical than Kennan.

Although the strategy of stopping the spread of communism was officially justified by a moral base and it had illustrated for many years a horizon of education, tradition and expectation of the American public opinion, it also had a number of critics.

One of the most competent critics was Walter Lippmann, who pointed out that such a strategy would cast a huge shadow of responsibility over the U.S. and would cause a quasi-permanent defense which would eventually dissipate the Pentagon's enormous military potential. The USA (in the opinion of Lippmann and his supporters) would have to continuously support a number of regimes more or less heterogeneous, theoretically animated only by a declarative anticommunism.

The elements of democracy went into the background and the Pentagon might also have against it the time factor. The critics of the stopping the spread of communism theory proposed replacing the general principles with the interests of America, a return to a "realpolitik" which later, after the tragedy in Vietnam, Henry Kissinger would propose as essential principle of the State Department actions²⁹.

²⁴ F.Houtisse, *La Coexistence Pacifique*, Paris, Editions Monde Nouveau, 1953, p.56.

²⁵ David Priestland, op.cit, p.352.

²⁶ F. Houtisse, op.cit.

²⁷ Ibidem, pp.61-62.

²⁸ Henry Kissinger, op.cit, p.422.

²⁹ Ibidem, p.420

The stopping the spread of communism theory postulated in fact a paradox, typical of the structure of American utopian elements: the ideological opponent (in this case the USSR) had to be finally converted precisely by the U.S.

Some Wilsonian echoes are to be recognized here. After all, did not Woodrow Wilson (at his time) have the ambition to transform himself into a Christian statesman? On the other hand, moments such as 1956 exasperated the U.S. supporters. The Americans did not intervene, considering that the USSR was firmly determined at that time not to give up its hegemony over Hungary. The State Department took into account the risks of starting a nuclear conflict. After all, no moral principle could replace the immediate interests.

The Pentagon officials must have probably felt relief when, in 1991, the Soviet Union officially ceased to exist. The condition of solitary superpower would actually constitute a real trap, confirming Lippmann's fears. The U.S. will finally get a categorical public image victory over the USSR, but the risks it had to face were not gone. As long as the bipolar system of power had dominated the international political landscape, the strategic and political movements and calculations were somewhat predictable. Multi-polarity has introduced a new set of challenges, for some of which, the U.S. proved it was not at all prepared.

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