

Reviews

THE SHATTERED PEACE

Daniel Yergin

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On May 19, 1945, Joseph Grew, Harry Truman's Assistant Secretary of State wrote: 'war with the Soviet Union is as certain as anything in this world can be certain'. Grew was at that time advising the new President daily on the conduct of American foreign policy.

The context of Grew's judgement was the dispute between Yugoslavia and the Western powers over Trieste, which he interpreted as a case of 'totalitarian aggression' by the Soviet Union, with Yugoslavia acting as a dutiful puppet serving the purposes of the USSR. According to Grew, the Trieste affair was just the beginning of the unfolding of the Soviet plan to conquer Europe and then the world.

At the time Grew was formulating this immensely important judgement the Soviet government was condemning the Yugoslav action as 'dangerous and provocative adventurism' but nevertheless, on the basis of Grew's advice, the US and its dutiful ally Britain, mounted a show of force and the Yugoslav claim to Trieste and the Giulia hinterland was rebuffed. It became a model for future Western behaviour towards the USSR.

Daniel Yergin describes these events and much more in his book *The Shattered Peace*, the theme of which is the disintegration of the wartime alliance of the USA, USSR and Britain and the emergence of the policies which characterised the cold war between the erstwhile allies.

The crucial event which transformed American policy towards the USSR was the death of President Roosevelt on April 12, 1945. Roosevelt's Soviet policy was not only his own creation but it was also operated by

the President and a handful of trusted colleagues independently of the State Department and in the face of strong State Department hostility. It was on Roosevelt's insistence, for example, that the USA granted recognition to the government of the USSR in 1933. He did so because he saw the USSR as a potential ally in countering the growing menace of Japan in the Far East.

This was also the basic weakness of the policy in so far as it depended so much on Roosevelt himself and the close understanding he had with a handful of political friends. In that part of the State Department which specialised in Soviet affairs there was virtually unanimous hostility towards the USSR, most of the officials having gained their formative experience serving prewar in the Riga Office of the State Department, working in an atmosphere totally hostile to the Soviet Union. It was these 'men of Riga', as Yergin calls them, who later rose to high rank in the American foreign service and achieved complete domination of American foreign policy, when Truman came to office.

Truman was inexperienced and knew little of international affairs; he understood even less about Roosevelt's Soviet policy. Roosevelt had died just before the Potsdam conference, leaving Truman almost totally dependent on James Byrnes, a trusted friend and a Roosevelt man. Byrnes was not a State Department man, he was a professional politician to his fingertips and an experienced negotiator. The hostility between Byrnes and the State Department is illustrated by a statement Byrnes made during the London conference in September 1945; '... I might tell the President sometime what happened, but I'm never going to tell those little bastards at the State Department anything about it'. By any standards that is an interesting remark for a foreign secretary to make about his own department.

In the event Byrnes lost to 'those little bastards at the State Department' and control of foreign policy fell into the hands of Russophobes like Loy Henderson and Joseph Grew.

Yergin argues that what was happening at that time was a restructuring of international affairs from being a Euro-centred system to a global system based on the USA. The background to this was the emergence of the USA as the dominant superpower at the end of the war and the total annihilation of isolationist thinking in American politics as a result of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Henceforth, it was argued, American interests are worldwide and therefore are everywhere at risk and must be defended against any potential enemy. To be made plausible for the American people, such a policy had to be

predicated on the existence of a definable enemy. With Germany and Japan defeated and their economies wrecked, there was only one possible candidate; the USSR.

And there was no shortage of people within the American political establishment who were not only prepared to argue that the USSR was the enemy but had been doing so for some time. Averall Harriman and George Kennan, for example, had been referring to the USSR as 'the enemy' for months before the end of the European war; Admiral Leahy, who had advised Roosevelt and stayed on to work with Truman was a confirmed Russophobe. Within the State Department this attitude permeated all levels.

The immediate task facing the State Department apparatchik was the reversal of the understandings reached by Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill at their Yalta and Tehran meetings. This was in effect to challenge the principles underlying Roosevelt's policy with the principles formulated by the men of Riga.

Roosevelt took the view that the men who governed the USSR were subject to the same constraints as any other rulers, that their primary responsibilities were to the interests of the nation-state they governed. In other words, Roosevelt judged that the Soviet government would act in accordance with their perception of the USSR's national interests and he saw nothing in Stalin's behaviour or arguments to contradict this view. Although Churchill was deeply imbued with anti-Soviet prejudice he readily fell in line with Roosevelt's approach; he too understood the imperatives of statehood. Yergin describes how, at one of their meetings, Churchill 'took a half sheet of paper and wrote out the percentages that were to reflect the degrees of "predominance" (by the allied powers in Europe): Rumania, 90% for the USSR; Greece, 90% for the UK/USA; Bulgaria, 75% for the USSR; Hungary and Yugoslavia, 50-50, etc. He pushed the paper across the table to Stalin. The dictator paused, then made a large tick with a blue pencil and passed it back. "Let's burn the paper", Churchill said. "No, you keep it" replied Stalin.'

On that basis the three leaders were prepared to carve up Europe and live together recognising that each had recognisable and negotiable interests. Stalin, for his part, implicitly recognised superior American global power; he readily conceded American hegemony over Japan, Italy and China; in the interests of ensuring Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe he bargained away the rights of the Western Communist parties to act as free agents in their own countries. Being Stalinists themselves they had no option but

to follow the line laid down by Stalin in his negotiations with his allies.

The State Department view, the view of the men of Riga, was that the USSR was a revolutionary state, hell bent on world conquest; this was the gist of the famous 'Kennan long telegram' sent from the US's Moscow embassy in February 1946 which effectively defined the terms on which the US would wage the cold war against the USSR. It asserted that the USSR was not a state like any other, it had a revolutionary purpose which threatened American interests everywhere and should be resisted with all power wherever it manifested itself or appeared to do so. It amounted to an abandonment of diplomacy by the United States in its dealings with the USSR and the adoption of a permanently hostile posture towards that country.

Having taken control of American foreign policy, the men of Riga then found it necessary to persuade the American people that the USSR was their enemy. They knew that the central implication of their policy was the permanent militarisation of the American state, which the American taxpayer would not stand for in the absence of a compelling reason.

That compelling reason was provided by one of the most intensive propaganda campaigns of all time. It was begun by Winston Churchill, who had once been so eager to sit down with Stalin and carve up Europe, in his notorious Fulton speech. Mr Yergin points out that the real British reason for Churchill's 'iron curtain' speech was that the British government needed to persuade the US Congress to grant a large loan to Britain, then suffering the first of its many postwar economic crises. In the aftermath of Churchill's speech, Congress was eager to have such a willing ally in her Soviet policy and the loan was granted without further trouble.

Soon after, the US embarked on her rearmament programme, creating a global air force and a global navy; the allies' Far Eastern policy, joint control of Korea, allied trusteeship over Indo China until independence, was reversed and the long war of independence made inevitable; the atomic bomb was waved ostentatiously in the USSR's face.

Nobody noticed that the USSR was not a global power; nobody noticed that the Soviet economy had been shattered beyond recognition and could not recover for years; nobody noticed that Stalin's foreign policy had always been characterised by extreme caution and was not remotely imperialist; nobody noticed Stalin's willingness to make concessions to the Western powers except,

strangely, to see it as a response to the USA's 'get tough' policy. Nobody noticed that there was no necessary connection between the USSR's totalitarian domestic policy and her foreign policy. Anyone dissenting from the new conventional wisdom, like Henry Wallace and James Byrnes, were instantly ruined and banished to oblivion. Thus, based on an ideological fantasy bearing no relation to military, economic or political reality, the world was divided into two soon-to-be heavily armed camps, constantly frightening one another into yet more extravagances of military expenditure.

Walter Lippman's commentary on the 1946 San Francisco conference sums up much of this sad story; 'I am more disturbed about the

conduct of our own policy. . . . Though the issue has been drawn between the Soviets and ourselves, this alignment is not inherent in the nature of things but is due to inexperience and emotional instability in our own delegation . . . this would never have happened if President Roosevelt were still alive and it will lead to great trouble'. It did indeed, and the men of Riga have much to answer for.

Mr Yergin has done us all a great service with his book. I only regret there is no comparable volume showing the development of Soviet policy during the same period with the same amount of detailed and fascinating documentation.

Tom Litterick