

Teaching About
the U.S.S.R.

Images

of the Cold War

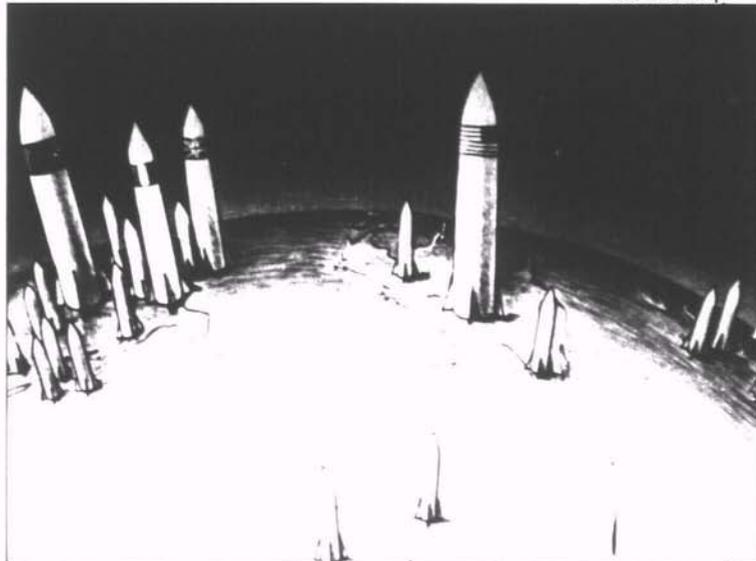
An understanding of how ideology is shaped by national self-interest will prepare students to see beyond propaganda and myth in interpreting past and current events affecting our two nations.

We tend to think of the Cold War as a long-lasting confrontation between the two states that emerged with superpower status from the ruins of World War II, with intermittent moves toward detente and periods of extreme tension that threatened the very existence of human civilization. Other events of contemporary history are generally regarded as ancillary to the Cold War conflict or as framed within it.

Seeds of the Cold War

On each side the dominant perception has been that the state is adopting a defensive stance in the face of threats from a brutal and an aggressive antagonist bent on world domination. Soviet propaganda depicts the U.S.S.R. as defending itself from "capitalist encirclement" led by the United States, which aims to extend its global hegemony by incorporating the Soviet Union within these domains. Prevailing U.S. doctrine is described as "containment" of aggressive Soviet power,

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which seeks to spread communism over the world and to destroy democracy defended by the United States. The Soviet Union is depicted as an "evil empire" that is "the focus of evil in our time" (Ronald Reagan), a "monolithic and ruthless conspiracy" committed to world domination (John F. Kennedy). The scholarly literature traces "historical Soviet expansionism and zero-sum thinking about international politics" to "Soviet Stalinist domestic institutions," which use "the militant ideology and the exaggeration of the foreign threat to justify their self-serving policies" (Snyder 1978-79). In a virtual mirror image, Soviet scholarship explains the U.S. drive to control the world in terms of the inherently expansionist nature of capitalist institutions, which exploit an alleged Soviet threat for domestic mobilization and foreign adventures. Leaders on both sides warn that eternal vigilance is needed in response to the security threat. "Peace cannot be begged for" but "can be safeguarded only by an active purposeful struggle," Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev declared, adopting terms that are regularly voiced here as well.

These images do not lack some measure of reality. The threat of mutual destruction has been real enough and remains so. A Brookings Institution study documents 19 cases between 1946 and 1973 when the U.S. deployed strategic nuclear weapons or placed them on alert (Blechman and Kaplan 1978); and there were other cases when "we damn near had war," in the words of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (1983), referring to the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war when the U.S. "turned around a carrier in the Mediterranean" and Soviet Premier Kosygin warned President Johnson over the hot line that "if you want war, you'll have war." The most extreme threat was during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when President Kennedy and his advisers estimated the probability of war at one-third to one-half, according to memoirs (Sorensen 1965).

The image of a "defensive stance" against an aggressive opponent also has some empirical support on each side. The Soviet Union traces the Western threat to the military intervention,

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including U.S. forces, immediately after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. During World War II the U.S.S.R. bore the brunt of the war against Hitler and regards the Eastern European states—some of them allied with Hitler in an attack that came close to destroying the U.S.S.R. and caused countless casualties and massive devastation—as a buffer zone against a rearmed Western Germany that is the forward element of a hostile military alliance.

The U.S.S.R. is in fact surrounded by hostile forces, including major NATO bases on its borders in Turkey, with U.S. missiles on alert status directed at the Soviet heartland. The U.S. has never faced any remotely comparable threat but can and does appeal to the takeover of the Baltic states and the imposition of Soviet rule over Eastern Europe as evidence of Soviet expansionism and aggressive intent. Soviet actions in the Third World, some in support of national liberation movements or states under the threat of subversion or attack by the United States, have also regularly been cited as proof of their plans for world domination.

The conventional U.S. picture traces the Cold War to Soviet violation of wartime agreements, while the U.S.S.R. alleges that it has responded to American violations. In a close analysis based on declassified documents, diplomatic historian Melvin Leffler

(1986) concludes that "in fact, the Soviet pattern of adherence [to Yalta, Potsdam, and other wartime agreements] was not qualitatively different from the American pattern." For one recent and readable scholarly assessment, see Paterson 1988.

In the major scholarly study of the containment doctrine, John Lewis Gaddis (1982) observes that

to a remarkable degree, containment has been the product, not so much of what the Russians have done, or of what has happened elsewhere in the world, but of internal forces operating within the United States. . . . What is surprising is the *primacy* that has been accorded economic considerations [namely, state economic management], in shaping strategies of containment, to the *exclusion of other considerations*.

Gaddis notes that "the term 'containment' poses certain problems, implying as it does a consistently defensive orientation in American policy," though this remains "the central theme of postwar national security policy" because "American leaders consistently *perceived* themselves as responding to rather than initiating challenges to the existing international order"—a perception he regards as realistic. Soviet leaders express the same perception, as have leaders of other powers throughout history. Quite commonly, there is at least some basis for such perceptions, however misguided or cynical they may be, and they are, of course, sometimes realistic. An accurate evaluation is often not a simple matter, even putting aside the question whether "the existing international order" might be justly challenged—as in the American Revolution, for example.

Why the Cold War Continues

In the early stages of the Cold War, official U.S. policy understood "containment" as intended to "foster the seeds of destruction within the Soviet system" with the "objective to negotiate a settlement with the Soviet Union (or a successor state or states)" (NSC 68, April 1950, shortly before the outbreak of the Korean War). The same secret document, which laid the basis for subsequent policy, estimates the economic power of the Soviet bloc as approximately the same as Western Europe, with the Soviet gross national

product about one-fourth that of the United States and its military expenditures about half as great. It called for a vast expansion of military spending, warning that the West would face "a decline in economic activity of serious proportions" without a stimulus by government spending. The military budget almost quadrupled shortly after, justified by the Korean War. At the time this was interpreted as proof of Soviet expansionism, though evidence for this proposition was scanty then, and the conclusion is generally regarded as having little merit.

Throughout this period, such policies of "military Keynesianism" have been instrumental in the growth of high technology industry and have served as a mechanism of state industrial management. This widely recognized observation lends credibility to the interpretation of the Cold War as, in part at least, a reflection of the needs of domestic institutions. Within the Soviet system, the military has had priority in claiming resources; and military force has been instrumental in controlling the internal empire and the dependencies and in projecting Soviet influence elsewhere.

A close look at the events of the Cold War suggests that the conventional image of superpower confrontation is somewhat misleading. On the Soviet side, the major events of the Cold War include the sending of Soviet tanks to Berlin in 1953 to control a workers' uprising there; the invasion of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968; and the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the only time that Soviet forces have been deployed beyond the territory held by the Red Army at the end of World War II. In each case, the population was successfully mobilized in support of these interventions through appeals to the fear of aggressive U.S. imperialism.

On the U.S. side, major events of the Cold War include the counterinsurgency operations in Greece in the late 1940s; the CIA coup that restored the Shah of Iran to power in 1953, overthrowing a nationalist regime; the CIA-directed invasion that terminated Guatemala's brief experiment with capitalist democracy in 1954; Kennedy's abortive invasion of Cuba and the subsequent CIA-directed terrorist operations against



Cuba; the U.S. wars in Indochina; repeated interventions in Central America and the Caribbean; to name only a few. In each case, the domestic population was mobilized to the cause by invoking the fear of the "evil empire" alleged to be the initiator of subversion or "internal aggression" (Adlai Stevenson 1964), against which the United States was defending the country under alleged threat and protecting U.S. security interests. In none of these cases can a credible case be made that the actions were truly defensive despite the conventional rhetoric, which has largely been effective for domestic mobilization.

From Confrontation to Coexistence

The symmetry is obvious and significant. To a considerable extent, the Cold War has come to have a certain functional utility for the political leadership of both superpowers, providing a means to ensure domestic support for costly, destructive, and aggressive actions undertaken for quite different purposes. In this regard, the domestic populations of both superpowers are themselves victims of the superpower confrontation, while the primary victims of the Cold War have been the population of dependencies and client states.

Recent moves toward renewed détente lend further support to the conclusion that the Cold War derives, in significant measure, from the needs and functioning of domestic institutions in both superpowers. There is little doubt that Gorbachev's efforts to reduce international tensions are motivated in part by his recognition that the serious problems of the Soviet economy cannot be overcome if it is geared toward war rather than productive investment. As for the United States, the inflammatory rhetoric of

the early 1980s was the familiar concomitant to the resort to military Keynesianism to support high technology industry, and, in this case, to help overcome the effects of the Indochina wars, which were harmful to the U.S. economy while strengthening its industrial rivals.

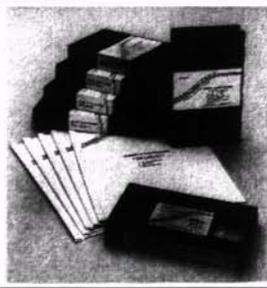
But these measures, too, carry familiar costs; in the present case: huge budget and trade deficits, and a highly inefficient mode of state industrial management, particularly in contrast to Japan, which directs investment to the commercial market without channeling it through the military system. Recognition of these problems has led to an elite consensus that confrontation must be replaced by relaxation of international tensions and retraction of the public subsidy to high technology industry through the military system and to a corresponding interest in détente. Temporarily at least, there is superpower convergence on the need to move from confrontation to a form of coexistence, with a corresponding abatement of international tensions. The reasons on each side are in part domestic, perhaps primarily so.

An Urgent Task for Educators

For educators, there are few tasks more urgent than to help develop popular understanding of the superpower conflict, which, if unconstrained, is likely to lead to the destruction of human civilization, and short of that, is the source of tremendous suffering throughout the world and criminal waste of scarce human and material resources. We correctly stress the need to understand the Soviet Union, overcoming the illusions of propaganda and ideological constructions. It is less often stressed that we must also address a more urgent task: to understand ourselves, our own

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institutions, our own behavior and its sources—always the most difficult problem.

The United States is an unusually free and open society. There is a vast documentary record open to inspection, which provides great insight into the thinking that lies beyond policy formation over many years. There is a rich historical record also open to inspection in a society not subject to state censorship and controls. The scholarly literature provides a rich source of documentation and analysis, which must, of course, be studied with the care and critical skepticism that is always necessary in inquiry into complex issues of great human and social import. The Soviet Union, in contrast, has long been a closed society, though there are notable and hopeful changes under way. We therefore lack any comparable sources for inquiry into its policies and their sources in domestic institutions, though, again, there are valuable scholarly studies, revealing accounts by journalists and other visitors, and an illuminating historical record. All of these materials can be used effectively in an imaginative educational curriculum.

These matters must be approached in a spirit of honest inquiry with a recognition of the pitfalls and problems that inevitably arise. There are few self-evident truths well-established on the basis of solid evidence and theoretical understanding. The role of ideology and interest is substantial in providing the presuppositions of discussion, influencing the choice of evidence, and coloring the interpretations that are offered. Students should be helped to gain a clear understanding of how past and current history and the phenomena of social life generally are presented within the framework of ideology and interest. They should also be encouraged to seek ways to disentangle history from myth and to discover the factors that guide research and interpretation.

To these ends, it would be useful to study the practice of other states and societies, where we find it less difficult to discern the factors at work or our own earlier history, which provides ample evidence of the force of persistent illusions. To cite an instructive example, it is only within the past generation that we have begun to

come to terms in a serious way with the fate of the indigenous population of the United States (see, for example, Jennings 1975 and 1988, Debo 1986). It would make good sense, I think, to study the Cold War in the context of earlier conceptions that faced little challenge at one time but are now seen to have been in large measure illusory, a product of readily identifiable interests. Measures of "intellectual self-defense" and an understanding of how ideology is shaped by interest are more important in the long run than the correction of particular misinterpretations, since the problems are sure to recur, and are, in fact, unavoidable in trying to make sense of a complex and often threatening world. □

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