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**Cold War “Victory” for the West:
The Demise of the Communist Ideal**

The United States won the Cold War. To argue differently ignores the fact that the Cold War was *defined* as a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Many others struggled against the “evil empire”—dissidents, nationalists, even reformers—but their role in the fall of the USSR does not place them as protagonists in the Cold War. American ambassador Jack Matlock makes an important point when he argues that the end of the Cold War and the end of the Soviet Union are often seen as “somehow synonymous” when they are actually distinct, although contingent, historical events.¹ The Cold War ended on December 7, 1988 when Gorbachev made his speech to the U.N declaring autonomy for the Warsaw Pact nations and an end to hostility between the East and the West. At this point, regardless of continued aggressive American policies, the Soviet Union moved away from the confrontational foreign policy that defined the Cold War; you can’t have a war if only one side is fighting. The fall of the Soviet empire took place later as the unintended result of Gorbachev’s efforts at reform through perestroika. Within this general framework of understanding (American victory in the Cold War and the separation of the Cold War from the fall of the Soviet empire), however, there remains a major question left unanswered: why did the United States win the Cold War? The answer is that the ideas of democracy and capitalism that the U.S represented were stronger than the ideas of centralized control and communism that were embodied by the Soviet Union.

¹ Harry Kreisler, “The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the End of the Cold War: A Diplomat Looks Back” University of California, Berkeley, <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Matlock/matlock-con4.html> (accessed July 14, 2009)

The Cold War was essentially a contest of ideas. This is not to say that military conflicts in third-world countries and economic competition did not play an important part—they did—but they were indicators of the relative successes of competing ideologies, not the primary sources of conflict. Now, it is important to note that this argument is specific to the Cold War and not wars in general. Often countries at war are governed by similar principles, and in that case the war is truly a contest of military power. However, the Cold War was not defined by a massive military engagement where power and not ideas are paramount. Instead, the Cold War featured two antagonists with vastly different ideas about the best way of life. In the end, the West was more successful than the East and the East's desire to "keep up" hastened its collapse.

Describing the Cold War primarily in terms of ideology seems naïve or idealistic to some. Surely, they argue, it is the realpolitik of competing national interests that governs international affairs. This line of thinking fails to recognize that ideas are not simply located in abstract discussions at universities, but also take their place at the frontline of hard-nosed politics. A simple way to view this concept is by examining economics—a stalwart in the vernacular of the realist. Although economics is often the battleground in which nations compete, "whether a highly productive modern industrial society chooses to spend 3 or 7 percent of its GNP on defense rather than consumption is entirely a matter of that society's political priorities, which are in turn determined in the realm of consciousness."² By not attempting to control the public's production and instead facilitating innovation, the United States was better able to utilize the talents and energy of its people.

² Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* (Summer 1989), 4

It could be argued that the battle of ideas was itself a power struggle and not a true test of what is the better way of life. In one way, that is a valid critique. The ability to produce goods is not the ultimate arbiter of quality of life. And advocates of communism have argued that there is less morality and sense of purpose in capitalism. Judgment on the morality of each system will not be addressed here, however, only discussion on which set of ideas was stronger and also which was more embraced by the people. What is clear is that democracy came to be almost universally preferred over authoritarian government. For this reason, Bruce Cummings writes that the collapse of the Soviet Union could be seen as simply “one among many people’s movements against dictatorship throughout the world.”³ Totalitarian systems such as Stalinist communism ceased to be a plausible system of governance in the modern world; the re-emergence of a similar government in a major country is as likely as the return of feudalism or fascism.

What also appears clear is that capitalism is much better at harnessing human potential than socialism. Because of the empowerment of the individual, the economy as a whole was much stronger than its counterpart, centralized planning. Citizens in the East recognized the superiority of goods in the West and clamored to integrate Western goods and culture into their lives. It is in this context of cultural envy that the popularity of rock music and blue jeans can be understood.

The consumption of Western products undermined the Soviet empire in several ways; first, it created a consumer demand that could not be matched by socialist production and, second, it served as a subtle critique of socialist-produced goods and culture. With the inferiority

³ Bruce Cummings, “Time of Illusion: Post-Cold War Visions of the World,” in *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History After the Fall of Communism* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 72

of the state-planned economics established, the only remaining ambiguity in the contest of ideas is whether the demise of communism as an idea necessarily means unregulated capitalism should be championed.

Charles Maier argues in *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the end of East Germany* that the victory of the West was neither inevitable nor complete. Using East Germany as a case-study, he depicts the economic struggles of communism in the 1970's as part of a global recession and not an inherent weakness in socialism. Due to an aging gerontocracy that resisted necessary reforms, it was "ultimately a political crisis and not an economic one that led to the upheaval of 1989."⁴ While both the East and West faced changing technologies and high unemployment, the economy of the West, led by the entrepreneurship of individuals and untethered by the government, was able to adapt and concentrate development in emerging markets. The "communist regimes, however, shrank from the logic of reform and sought to reaffirm the principles that had guided the Soviet Union since the 1930's."⁵ It was this failure of leadership, according to Maier, that doomed the East. He believes that had reforms been initiated in the 70's and not in the 80's under Gorbachev, it is possible the Soviet Union could still exist. Further, in the triumphalist glow of American victory in the Cold War, Maier argues that the weaknesses of non-regulated capitalism were overlooked. Although the average standard of living was higher in the West, its suffering was borne to an unjust degree by a small minority. Therefore, it would seem, the success of the West was a result of the specific circumstances of the Cold War and not an inherent superiority of capitalism over socialism.

⁴ Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 79)

⁵ Maier, *Dissolution*, 82

Maier is correct in his critique of capitalism, and recent troubles in the unregulated market support his argument. From the disaster of “shock therapy” in Russia to the current bank and real estate struggles in the United States, it is apparent that the volatility of the marketplace is a problem. Maier is not correct, however, with his claim that socialism is still viable. He simply reverses the flaw in reasoning that assumed capitalism was perfect because socialism had failed. In this case, he assumes that weaknesses in capitalism necessarily indicate the strength of socialism. What he fails to recognize is that socialism was failing and that all hope for success was based on reforms away from a planned economy and towards the market. Therefore, his hypothesis that reforms in the Warsaw Pact could have worked had they been implemented earlier misses the point that the resulting countries would have ceased to be socialist. Gorbachev’s vision for the “second wind” of socialism was not an implementation of the communist ideal espoused by Lenin, but a convergence of socialism, democracy, and the marketplace in a blend similar to governments of Western Europe. Socialism as a practical ideology was dead.

By the late 1980’s the new generation of Soviet elite recognized that their system was not internationally competitive. They came to understand this hard reality through personal experience in the West. During Khrushchev’s “thaw” many children of Soviet leaders studied in Europe and saw with their own eyes the seemingly miraculous supply of goods. Gorbachev himself was deeply influenced by his time in the West. Before he rose to become the General Secretary, Gorbachev spent time in Canada, France, and England. His motivation was to demonstrate the sincerity behind perestroika, but the “meetings’ greater impact was on

Gorbachev himself.”⁶ Talks with French president Mitterand were especially impactful on Gorbachev’s New Thinking, as they helped convince him that the future of the Soviet Union depended on an incorporation of some Western ideas towards a socialist-democratic model.

Another critical element in the new generation’s disillusionment with Soviet communism was Moscow’s response to the “Prague Spring” of 1968. As the first post-Stalin generation they were heavily influenced by Khrushchev’s “secret speech” of 1956 and were encouraged by the idea of rejecting orthodoxy and making communism better. Successful reforms in Hungary and Yugoslavia gave hope to those who believed Marxism was a work in progress. In this atmosphere of renewed optimism, “there were few anti-socialists among the Moscow intelligentsia...we believed again.”⁷ The crushing of the Prague Spring, then, came as a tremendous blow. Unlike the invasion of Hungary in 1956, which was accepted by many as a response to Western intrusion, the invasion of the Czechoslovakia was seen as unadulterated imperialism. Stripped of their belief in the morality of the Soviet system, the new generation could no longer justify being economically behind the West as a noble sacrifice. And behind the West they were, and they knew it.

Due to the government’s control of information, knowledge about the weakness of the Soviet empire was only available to the limited few. Holders of privileged knowledge, Gorbachev and his close advisors were faced with a dilemma: should they expose the general public to the truth, risking the security of the empire in an attempt to rejuvenate the system? Guided by both morality and belief in a radical gamble, Gorbachev decided to attempt a “second

⁶ Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals & the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 212)

⁷ English, *Russia & the Idea of the West*, 111

wind” through perestroika. The results were historic. In the span of a few years members of the Warsaw Pact were granted sovereignty, the Soviet public gained access to formerly classified information, and the Soviet government began rapprochement with the West.

Because of Gorbachev’s historic actions some claim that he deserves recognition as the person who ended the Cold War. Andrei Grachev insists Gorbachev “raised the ‘iron curtain’ that came down after the Second World War and allowed and encouraged the reunification of Germany and Europe after more than forty years of division.”⁸ On the other side of the argument are those who believe Reagan was responsible for the West’s triumph over the East. Both of these positions are limited. True, Gorbachev made sweeping changes in both Soviet domestic and foreign policy, and his unilateral actions towards disarmament—a moratorium on nuclear testing, reducing conventional forces—facilitated the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War. However, Gorbachev would not have made these decisions if the Soviet Union was not struggling. The ideological foundation of the USSR was unable to create a society that met the demands of its citizens, and it was that failure which compelled Gorbachev to take radical action.

Similarly, Reagan “triumphalists” are confused when they champion Reagan as the Soviet-slayer. His policies are best summarized as having had a contradictory effect of hastening Soviet decline while also hindering Gorbachev’s attempts at reform. Regardless, even if the triumphalists are right in their opinion of Reagan’s role, again, his accomplishments must be seen in proper context. The United States was much stronger economically and had a more stable political system. Only with these advantages, which were made possible by the ideological foundations of capitalism and democracy, was Reagan able to “negotiate from

⁸ Grachev, Andrei, *Gorbachev’s Gamble: Soviet Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2008), 230

strength.” The end of the Cold War was heavily influenced by the actions of political leaders, but ultimately it was the strength or weakness of the ideas underpinning their respective countries that determined the victor. The elite of the Soviet Union knew their system was struggling. And as the general public became better informed, they too soon recognized the failure of communism.

Scott Shane is currently a journalist for the New York Times, but during the 1980's he was the Russian correspondent for the Baltimore Sun. In his excellent book *Dismantling Utopia: The Role of Information in the End of the Cold War*, Shane convincingly describes how the KGB and Gorbachev increased public access to information in Russia, and the resulting widespread disenchantment with the communist system. An early, prominent example of this process was television correspondent Alexander Milchakov's exposé on the horrors of the mass executions carried out during Stalin's "purges." Far from a pedantic academic exercise, the revisionist history that came to light during perestroika changed not just the public's understanding of the past, but their identity in the present. Instead of being proud participants in a noble experiment of government, they now saw themselves as victims of a violent regime that killed its own citizens and made pacts with Hitler. Communism as an alternative model for society was no longer appealing. The new hope for Soviet citizens was to reintegrate themselves as part of the global community; not standing in opposition, but living as neighbors. And with this new perspective, the bipolar worldview of the Cold War was over.

The Cold War was won by the ideas championed by the United States: democracy and capitalism. Socialism in its pure form was proven to be untenable. We should not shy away from these clear conclusions. What is to be avoided, however, is the overly simplistic

championing of the West; socialism's weakness does not mean capitalism and American democracy are perfect. It is necessary to maintain a critical perspective towards government and not fall into complacency. Although socialism was defeated, the status quo of today is not the "end of history" Fukuyama predicted.

The Western liberal democracy that Fukuyama claims represents the endpoint in governance is in fact inherently ever-changing. In a democracy the rights of the individual and the rights of the people to govern themselves are destined to collide. For this reason, both the Left and Right argue about how abortion is either for or against the principles of this nation. The answer is that they are both: the individual woman has the right to choose what is right for her baby, but the people also have the right to legislate against what they deem a horrible crime. Within the liberal democratic framework there will be an endless balancing act between these two core values.

In addition, capitalism and democracy have an uneasy relationship. In order for democracy to function well there needs to be an educated middle class. Fukuyama argues that "surely the class issue has been successfully resolved in the West."⁹ He is wrong. Capitalism, when unregulated, has the tendency to consolidate power, thereby undermining the democratic process. The increasing stratification of American society demonstrates this process well. If governments do not actively safeguard against the deterioration of the middle class, the conditions for alternative forms of government will be created. The highly authoritarian regimes in China, Russia, and North Korea prove that Western liberal democracies require careful

⁹ Fukuyama, "The End of History?", 7

cultivation. And glorifying the West's strengths without critically examining ways to improve its weaknesses is a step in the wrong direction.

An overly simplistic championing of the West creates problems in contemporary politics because misperceptions in history affect current policy, and there are those who use the triumphalist version of Cold War history to justify a conservative agenda. It is as if the books are closed on political debate: "Unregulated capitalism won the war and was proven to be the best—what don't you get?" Ellen Schrecker correctly perceives that Cold War triumphalism "serves a partisan function."¹⁰ Conservatives have used the fact that the Cold War was won during a Republican administration (Reagan or Bush, depending on opinion) as fodder for domestic politics. The reality is that the ideas which won the Cold War transcend political parties and that the timing of the Soviet Union's collapse was contingent on a number of factors—American foreign policy being only one. Unfortunately, the mantra of the invincibility of the free market became official government doctrine during the 1990's. It took an economic crisis of global proportions to reawaken the realization that the United States' economy is not an example of "pure capitalism," but an organic result of generations of struggle and accommodation between unions, protectionism, federal spending and the free market. The current swing towards neo-Keynesian economics demonstrates that the wild ride of history is here to stay.

¹⁰ Ellen Schrecker, "Cold War Triumphalism and the Real Cold War," in *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History After the Fall of Communism* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 2