



The Marshall Plan as Tragedy

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Michael Cox and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe believe that a “new Cold War orthodoxy” has taken shape. The “central purpose” of their article on the Marshall Plan is to challenge that “new orthodoxy with its working assumption of Soviet guilt and U.S. impartiality” and “to question the increasingly influential thesis that new evidence does indeed bear out old truths about the Cold War.” Their discussion of the Marshall Plan, they say, shows that the United States played an important and perhaps leading role in the process that led ultimately to the division of Europe and thus to the Cold War itself. They are quite critical of American policy in 1947 and indeed in the post–World War II period more generally. The United States, in their view, refused “to recognize that Moscow had certain security needs in Eastern Europe.” The U.S. government, they claim, “never accepted the ‘loss’ of Eastern Europe and did everything it could short of war to eliminate Communist influence in the region.” In their view, America’s policies with regard to the Marshall Plan were not “primarily defensive” in character; the “American goal all along” was to bring about the loss of Soviet control over Eastern Europe.¹

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, according to Cox and Kennedy-Pipe, pursued a more reasonable and more moderate policy in the Marshall Plan negotiations. The Cold War, they believe, was something the Soviet leader, Josif Stalin, “never wanted because he realized that the Soviet Union was manifestly unable to compete with the United States over the long term.” The “orthodox line” that the Soviet Union wanted a divided Europe after the war is in their view incorrect: “The division of Europe,” they say, “was possibly the outcome [Stalin] least desired.” But although Soviet leaders wanted to cooperate with the West, they could not “compromise Soviet security interests” by allowing the Eastern European states to accept the American terms and take part in the Plan. So, “with great reluctance,” Stalin broke with the West, and the Cold War was on.

What is to be made of these arguments? What, first of all, are we to make of the claim about a “new orthodoxy and its working assumption of Soviet

1. Michael Cox and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, “The Tragedy of American Diplomacy? Rethinking the Marshall Plan,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 2005), pp. 97–134.

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guilt and U.S. impartiality”? Perhaps I am wrong, but my sense is that very few scholars interpret the Cold War in such simple terms. This does not mean, of course, that people now go to the opposite extreme and blame the United States while whitewashing the Soviet Union. If anything—and this is particularly true of Melvyn Leffler’s *A Preponderance of Power*, “the best book anyone has yet written on the United States and the origins of the Cold War,” as John Gaddis himself put it—the prevailing tendency today is to emphasize the defensive goals of both sides and to interpret the conflict as a clash of essentially defensive policies.²

The real issue, however, is not what historians believe but what the story actually was. That means we need to focus on the claims made by Cox and Kennedy-Pipe about first American and then Soviet policy. They argue that U.S. policymakers were serious about rollback, and they contend that the Marshall Plan must be understood in the context of that policy. But was it true that “the United States never accepted the ‘loss’ of Eastern Europe and did everything it could short of war to eliminate Communist influence in the region”? The U.S. government may not have welcomed Soviet control of Eastern Europe, but from the start it had little problem in practice in accepting that area as a Soviet sphere of influence. The authors cite the works of Gregory Mitrovich and Peter Grose about the “rollback” operations that began in the late 1940s, but, in reading those books, one is struck by how little was actually done and by how long it took to implement a “rollback” policy.³

Can it really be said that the Americans were doing all they could, short of war, to “eliminate Communist influence” from Eastern Europe? The U.S. government in the late 1940s was obviously not doing everything it could to build up its military power, and a tough policy—one aimed at the liberation of Eastern Europe, even without a war—would have needed a strong military

2. Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), esp. p. 99. Given its topic, and given also the fact that Cox and Kennedy-Pipe cite it favorably in their article, Scott Parrish’s working paper on Soviet policy on the Marshall Plan is of particular interest in this context. “What the new documentation helps us see more clearly,” Parrish says, “is that the real difficulty and source of conflict in 1947 was neither Soviet nor American ‘aggression.’ Rather, it lay in the unstable international economic and political conditions in key European countries which led both sides to believe that the current status quo was unstable, and that assertive action was required to defend that status quo.” Scott D. Parrish, “The Turn toward Confrontation: The Soviet Reaction to the Marshall Plan, 1947,” in Mikhail Narinsky and Scott D. Parrish, “New Evidence on the Soviet Rejection of the Marshall Plan, 1947: Two Reports,” Working Paper No. 9 (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, March 1994), p. 5.

3. The first paramilitary effort was the Albanian operation of October 1949; it involved only a handful of individuals and ended in disaster. Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America’s Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947–1956* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 42–45; and Peter Grose, *Operation Rollback: America’s Secret War behind the Iron Curtain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), pp. 158–159.

base.⁴ The United States was much too weak to pursue a true rollback policy in the late 1940s; the U.S. government at the time even questioned its ability to keep Communist influence at bay on its side of the line of demarcation in Europe. The American felt too weak, for example, to intervene militarily on the Italian mainland, even if the Communists seized power there through illegal means.⁵

Is the Marshall Plan itself to be understood as an important part of a rollback strategy, or is it to be understood instead in mainly defensive terms—that is, as part of a policy of building up Western Europe and of thus “containing” Soviet power? It does not seem that the Plan was taken too seriously as an instrument for loosening the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe. U.S. leaders knew that the Soviet Union, which itself (as the authors correctly note) was to be excluded from the Plan, could also prevent the East Europeans from taking part, and they were not surprised when Stalin did so. The authors quote Secretary of State George Marshall as saying, after the Soviet Union did prevent the East Europeans from taking part in the program, that “he had believed all along that Czechoslovakia would not be permitted to join,” and they depict Dean Acheson as describing the withdrawal not just of the Soviet Union but also of Czechoslovakia as “the desired result.” Cox and Kennedy-Pipe criticize William Taubman toward the beginning of their article for saying “that ‘Marshall’s intentions,’ and presumably those of the Plan, were ‘primarily defensive’ in character.” But in their conclusion they seem to say pretty much the same thing: “the chief American concern was the reconstruction of the democratic West European countries, rather than the plight of the East Europeans.” In any event, the impression one gets both from the published *Foreign Relations of the United States* documents on the Marshall Plan and from the most important historical accounts of the subject is that the policy focused quite heavily on Western Europe and that considerations relating to Eastern Europe were of relatively limited importance.

But if American policy was essentially defensive in character, how is Soviet policy to be characterized? Cox and Kennedy-Pipe say that although the “traditional or orthodox line” is that “division was the option most favored by Moscow after the war,” they believe that “the division of Europe . . . was possi-

4. One is reminded here of Paul Nitze’s later remark that it would take “clearly preponderant power” to make progress by peaceful means, “probably more power than to win military victory in the event of war.” Nitze to Matthews, 14 July 1952, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, Vol. II, p. 59 (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers).

5. See “The Position of the United States with Respect to Italy,” NSC 1/2, 10 February 1948, in *FRUS, 1948*, Vol. III, pp. 767–769.

bly the outcome [Stalin] least desired.” But the traditional line was *not* that the Soviet Union wanted a divided Europe; the traditional view was that Stalin wanted to take over *all* of Europe—a claim that was central to the traditional interpretation of the Cold War. For if Soviet leaders were happy just to hold on to the area they controlled in Eastern Europe, and if, as the traditionalists argued, U.S. policy was also purely defensive—that is, it was not directed toward the overthrow of the Soviet order in Eastern Europe—how then could the Cold War be explained? Can it seriously be argued that a divided Europe was the *least* desired outcome for the USSR? Obviously, the loss of Eastern Europe would have been much worse. What Cox and Kennedy-Pipe really mean here, I suspect, is simply that, from the Soviet point of view, a more cooperative and less hostile relationship with the West would have been a lot better than what actually resulted.

Is this point valid? Would Soviet leaders have preferred a more cooperative relationship with the United States and other Western countries? Well, yes, if by “cooperation” we mean a system in which the Soviet Union received U.S. economic aid with no strings attached. The Soviet Union of course would have wanted “cooperation” if that meant getting assistance without having to make any political concessions in return. This seems to be precisely the way Soviet leaders viewed cooperation with the United States in 1947. As Cox and Kennedy-Pipe themselves summarize the Soviet view: “the United States could provide aid, but it would have to be aid without any conditions.”⁶ Stalin, they believe, expected the United States to respect the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and the USSR in turn would respect the U.S. sphere in Western Europe. The basis for an understanding, in the Soviet view, was that the two sides would avoid “undue interference in each others’ sphere of influence.” This would seem to imply that Soviet leaders were indeed thinking in terms of a Europe divided into two separate spheres and scarcely seems to be consistent with the idea that a divided Europe was the last thing they wanted.

The question of whether the Soviet Union was willing to treat the whole of Western Europe as a U.S. or Western sphere of influence is open to debate, but it does seem abundantly clear that Soviet leaders believed the West would have to treat Eastern Europe as an area in which Soviet interests were predominant. That concern lay at the heart of Soviet policy regarding the Marshall Plan. As Mikhail Narinsky, the leading Russian expert on these matters, noted in 1994: “An analysis of the Soviet stand on the Marshall Plan leads one to the

6. See also Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 28, in Cox and Kennedy-Pipes, “The Tragedy of American Diplomacy?” p. XX n. 95.

conclusion that the establishment and consolidation of Soviet control over the countries of Eastern Europe was the first priority of Moscow's foreign policy strategy.⁷ Because it was at first not inconceivable that the United States might be willing to send aid to Eastern Europe without insisting on conditions that would tend to undermine Soviet control in that area, it made sense for Stalin to take the Marshall Plan talks seriously.

Soviet leaders had a further reason to take those talks seriously. They very much wanted to prevent the Western countries from coming together in an anti-Soviet bloc. "Any attempt," Narinsky writes, "to set up a Western bloc, dominated by the United States, was simply intolerable to Moscow."⁸ As Scott Parrish shows, the Soviet ambassador to the United States explicitly noted that the USSR's "participation in the design of the program" would hinder U.S. plans "for the creation of an anti-Soviet bloc."⁹ Soviet participation, Parrish writes, would in the ambassador's view "give the USSR the opportunity to shape the American aid program to Soviet advantage."¹⁰ But Soviet leaders' willingness to deal seriously with the West in the Marshall Plan talks does not mean that they wanted to avoid the division of the continent or that it was the Americans who were primarily responsible for the "creation of a two-bloc system in Europe"—unless one means by this that Soviet leaders wanted only *one* bloc in Europe (namely their own) and that the Americans were mainly responsible for the creation of a *two*-bloc system by creating a Western bloc as a counterweight to Soviet power on the continent.

Are the events of 1947 to be viewed as a "tragedy" because things could have, and in a sense should have, taken an entirely different course? Cox and Kennedy-Pipe quote Vojtech Mastny as arguing that "the Marshall Plan was not 'the turning point it was later made out to be' for the Soviet Union." They of course disagree with Mastny, but I think he is essentially right. What happened in 1947 followed naturally from the course that events had taken up to that point. It was natural that by 1947 the United States would want to see Western Europe revive economically, and that the U.S. government would want to see the Western countries in general, and the West Europeans in particular, come together politically and begin to organize themselves into a kind of bloc. It was natural that the United States would not want to enter into a one-sided "cooperative" relationship with the Soviet Union—a relationship in which U.S. officials would do the giving and Soviet leaders would do the tak-

7. Mikhail Narinsky, "The Soviet Union and the Marshall Plan," in Narinsky and Parrish, "New Evidence on the Soviet Rejection of the Marshall Plan," p. 51.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Novikov to Molotov, 24 June 1947, cited in Parrish, "The Turn toward Confrontation," p. 22.

10. Parrish, "The Turn toward Confrontation," p. 22.

ing. Adversary powers do not generally make love-presents to each other; they give only when they expect to get something in return. It was equally natural that Soviet leaders would resent what the United States was doing, and that they would respond negatively to actions that resulted in a weakening of their power position in Europe.

The events of 1947 are thus part and parcel of the larger story of the Cold War. These events played a major role, but it would be a mistake to exaggerate their significance. The bloc system in Europe took years to develop, and the Marshall Plan was just one part of the story. Although it is important to understand how the “two-bloc system” took shape, it is also important to remember that understanding this story is not the same as understanding why the East-West conflict developed. The whole question of the origins of the Cold War does not reduce itself to the question of the origins of the bloc system.¹¹ The United States and the Soviet Union could get along quite well in a Europe divided into blocs. The division of Europe in fact should be seen as a *solution* to the problem of how the two sides could get along, not as the *source* of that problem. To understand what the Cold War was about, it makes sense to get away from these issues of who was to blame and what might have been. It is hard enough to see things for what they were, so why should the historian take on the additional burden of sitting in judgment on the past?

11. “It was American policies,” Cox and Kennedy-Pipe write, “as much as (and perhaps more than) Soviet actions that finally led to the division of Europe *and thus to the Cold War itself*” (emphasis added).