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# The Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Collapse of the USSR and the End of Cold War A Chain of Surprises 'Too Big' to Be Predicted

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**T**he fall of the Berlin Wall, on the night of 9 November 1989, marked the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Distinguished scholars of the realist school have developed different theories on the root causes and predictability of the end of the Cold War and have sought to find whether the end of the conflict between the Western and the Eastern bloc was predictable under which terms it could be settled.

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Morgenthau, Aron and Waltz made a great contribution to identifying the root causes of the Cold War, and the factors led to the end of the conflict. They all agree that it was impossible to broker a peace agreement among the 'Enemy Brothers': Cold War system was also unlikely to end in a general war but would last forever. These thinkers never took the possibility of a Soviet collapse into serious consideration.

Morgenthau (1978) describes diplomacy as the key drive for solving power conflicts, including the Cold War. Aron (1966), like Morgenthau, focuses on diplomatic-strategic behaviour. He believes that the cause of ideological conflict lies in the differences between domestic political systems. Aron (1990: 47–50) criticizes Morgenthau's view, due to the fact that it is referred to as a homogeneous system, while the US and the USSR had heterogeneous systems. He considers that the Cold War is the logical manifestation of a bipolar and heterogeneous system, namely the difference among domestic systems (Aron, 1990: 47–50). Therefore, if all states have analogous regimes, statesmen obey time-tested rules or customs; rivals or allies know on the whole what they can expect or fear, and one can distinguish between state enemy and political adversary as a result of internal rivalries, and party struggles objectively become episodes of conflict among states. None of the 'duopolists' wanted to lose face, as it would be accused of 'treason' by its citizens. Aron does not make any predictions about the end of the Soviet empire and argues that the Cold War would last forever, although in different ways and forms. Obviously, he was wrong.

Both Aron and Morgenthau agree on the 'impossible peace, unlikely war', reinforced by the nuclear deterrence. Morgenthau (1970: 102) wonders

whether it is possible to predict the end of Cold War, as it originates in the impossibility of peace and the improbability of war, hence the conclusion of the conflict was predicated upon the disappearance of one or the other of these factors. Waltz, like Morgenthau and Aron, believes that the Cold War system is unlikely to end in a general war, because in a conventional world states it is believed that both they may win and that, should they lose, the price of defeat would be bearable, but nuclear weapons reverse or negate many of the conventional causes of war, and a country risks its own destruction due to the fact that success is not assured (Morgenthau, 1970: 102).

Waltz (1964; 1979; 1988; 1990) finds that wars, hot and cold, originate in the structure of the international system, even if structural factors alone are not enough to explain the stability of the post-war period. He gathers that ideology does not play a key role; the distribution of power accounts for the stability of the international system, and we can expect more stability in bipolar systems than in multipolar systems, as it reduces the occasion for dispute due to the size of the two superpowers.

According to Waltz, a settlement should be found between the US and the USSR, in their respective domestic spheres (Cesa, 2009: 185). He argues that the Cold War and its end depend on bipolarity and that the conflict would be over as bipolarity ceased; the bipolar system seemed likely to last because no third state had been able to develop capabilities comparable to those of the United States and the Soviet Union, even if the former was stronger than the latter (Cesa, 2009: 188). Waltz detected the root cause of the conflict in the international bipolarity structure, influenced by the Soviet internal factors, but eventually, he was not able to predict the end of the Cold War.

In 1951, Morgenthau figured that to reach a settlement as the only feasible way of putting an end to the Cold War; the Russian national interest should be compatible with the US national interest (Cesa, 2009: 180). He gathers that the world is politically organized into nations (Morgenthau, 1951: 68) that collide in an unending struggle for power (Morgenthau, 1946: 47) and therefore the proper way to manage this mechanism is through a developed and sophisticated diplomacy by way of negotiations (Morgenthau, 1958: 270–280). Morgenthau finds that the value of negotiations was widely recognized, but that the US is expecting to be in a position of unassailable strength, waiting for Moscow taking ‘the first step’ (Suri, 2002: 63–64). This position of ‘unassailable strength’ comes into force by the 1980s, with the space-based missile shield (Suri, 2002: 63–64), when the speed, complexity and high field costs of technological development left Soviet central planners far behind their overseas competitors (Goldman, 1987: 86–117). ‘[T]he first step’ theory, anyway, never entered into force, as Gorbachev called for deeper cuts in the arsenals of both superpowers after President Bush initiated in 1991 a series of remarkable unilateral disarmament measures of his own (Garthoff, 1994: 491).

Structural factors and ideological and institutional transformation in both societies contributed to bringing the Cold War to an end; the Communist

ideology was no longer a threat to American liberal capitalism (Thatcher, 1993: 459–463). Halliday (1995) suggests a ‘global’ theory, according to which it may not have been Communism, as such that failed in 1989, but capitalism that triumphed. Suri (2002: 62–63) concludes that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War were not inevitable, but a conjunction of internal difficulties and external pressures made some kind of major alteration of great-power politics almost unavoidable. For many observers, Communism was bad, inefficient, and worst of all, utopian, and its end was predetermined (Cox, 2007: 125–126).

### **The Role of Political Leadership**

Some writers consider that the decisions made by leaders had an enormous impact on the end of the conflict – Waltz does not ascribe any key role to political leadership. Other authors like Aron, Suri (2002: 61) and Cesa (2009) underline the role of policymakers and ideology. While most of the scholars ascribe to Mikhail Gorbachev the main responsibility about the collapse of the USSR, one (Cox, 2007: 125–6) argues that he wanted just to reform the system, and not to undermine it. The influence of Gorbachev’s leadership is widely recognized (Suri, 2002: 82), even if his views were by no means fixed and clear, and his reform ideas have been influenced and shaped into the social democratic mode, along the way, by most important contacts abroad with members of a reform-minded European left (Cox, 2007: 135).

An authoritative current of thought believes that without ‘new thinking’ and Gorbachev’s determination would not have been possible to see an improvement in East-West relations during the second half of the 1980s. The general secretary of Communist Party of the Soviet Union drew on an international community of opinion committed to overcoming Cold War divisions (Brown, 1996: 220–225; Evangelista, 1999: 269–285, 305–317; Legvold, 1991: 694–720). Suri (2002: 78–79) highlights that Gorbachev mobilized intellectuals and reformers in the USSR to support, as a radical redefinition of socialism, a Soviet ‘new thinking’ towards a Western European model of ‘social democracy’, thus making the ‘new thinkers’ relevant for the Soviet politics. More in general, Aron (Cesa, 2009: 183) and Suri (2002: 77–81, 91) emphasize the role of the Soviet leaders – Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, Yeltsin, Yakovlev, Shakhnazarov – as potential drivers of change.

Western leaders also played a prominent role. Suri (2002: 67–81) acknowledges that Reagan’s policy played a key role in overcoming the Cold War, even if many authors think he played no role whatsoever, and it was all down to Gorbachev (Cox, 2007: 129–130). Cox (2007: 129–130) argues that whether or not we see Reagan as a catalyst for change, his presidency marked an important transitional moment in the history of the Cold War, and according to some writers, in fact, we should not be seeking the causes of 1989 in one man, or even one presidency, but in broader changes taking place in the world economic system after World War II. Nevertheless,

Schweizer (1994) and Winik (1996: 293–295, 597–598, 614–620) believe that President Reagan did not have a plan of any sort to end the Cold War.

The ‘trust and goodwill’ relationship between the leaders of the two superpowers, Gorbachev and Reagan, brought a balance of interests among states (Welch Larson, 1997: 212–234) and led to a mutual trust which allowed the Soviet Union to sidestep the technical limits and bureaucratic obstacles inherent in arms control negotiations (Welch Larson, 1997: 83). Eventually, the race to disarm dominated the end of the Cold War (Garthoff, 1994: 406). The then US Secretary of State, George Shultz, writes in his memoir (1993: 486): “If the first Reagan term could be characterized by a building of strength, in the second term we could use that strength for determined and patient diplomatic efforts to produce greater peace and stability in the world”.

Some authors stress the role played by other western leaders. Chernyaev (2000: 222) and Greenwood (2000) underline the role of the Great Britain Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the European-Soviet dialogue. Mrs Thatcher (1993: 459–463) persuaded Reagan that Gorbachev was a man with whom it was possible to do business; the US President consequently pushed negotiations forward (Suri, 2002: 80-81).

Regan's successor also played a crucial role. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush played an important part regarding Germany: he reassured Germany's Western allies that the unification would not upset the balance of power in Europe, and also reassured Gorbachev that a united Germany would not be at the expense of the USSR, and that NATO would go no further than the new Germany (Cox, 2007: 131), even if the Alliance began to expand eastwards. According to Morgenthau, in the second half of the 1980s, US diplomacy played a fundamental role in German unification (Hertle, 2004: 282). Cox (2007: 127) overcomes the American point of view, which considers diplomacy having effectively changed the world by actively ‘winning’ the Cold War in Europe.

Most modern commentators accept the wrong common-sense view that the Cold War presupposed the division of Europe and a Russian presence in Germany and that until both came to an end, the Cold War would go on (Cox, 2007: 127). The German diplomat and chancellor Kohl, who pushed for German reunification and for its NATO membership, played a fundamental role, due to a series of important economic incentives in the form of economic transfers to the USSR (Cox, 2007: 137; Suri, 2002: 82). To build a genuinely international history about the events that led to the end of the Cold War, we should develop a truly multi-dimensional perspective (Cox, 2007: 137–8).

The so-called ‘Soviet Empire’ became an economic burden on Moscow by the 1970s and 1980s, together with the huge foreign debt (Lundestad, 2000). Economic reorganization and the reduction of imperial burdens became an externally imposed necessity that in turn, required internal reforms (Cesa, 2009: 188). Suri (2002: 78) states that the Cold War competition with the West drained resources from the USSR's domestic



need. Brown (1996: 242–243) argues that Gorbachev understood that his hopes for improving the Soviet economy and the quality of domestic life, in general, required a peaceful international context. Ongoing Cold War competition would have perpetuated the social stagnation, which the Soviet leader wanted to eliminate. Only extensive and unprecedented East-West cooperation could permit the allocation of resources necessary for domestic restructuring, historically known as *perestroika* (Suri, 2002: 78).

In 1990, President Bush worked with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl to cajole Gorbachev and buy him off with extensive loans and trade concessions (including a DM 15 billion (IS IT DOLLAR OR GERMAN CURRENCY?) assistance package from Bonn) (Beschloss and Talbott, 1993: 183, 219–221). Bialer (1986: 1–2, 40, 55–56) and Gaddis (1997: 283–287) conclude that domestic weaknesses destabilized Moscow's empire (Gaddis, 1997: 283–287; Bialer, 1986: 1–2, 40, 55–56). The economic landscape is among the causes of the Soviet crisis, but it is not the only cause of the fall of Communism.

### Too Big to Be Predicted

It was not possible to predict the end of the Cold War, nor the manner in which it finished. Historians accepted that precise prediction of the end of the Cold War was almost impossible; they simply “failed to anticipate what happened” (Quester, 2002). There is no consensus about the reasons for, or the meaning of, the end of the Cold War (Cox, 2007: 128). Likewise, there is no consensus, among the scholars, on the date of the end of the Cold War: in the 1950s, in the 1960s, in the early 1970s, or in the second half of the 1980s (Cox, 2007: 127–128). Maybe the Cold War was already over when the USSR ceased to exist as a superpower, and later as a state (Cesa, 2009: 188), even if this was not synonymous of the end of the conflict (Suri, 2002: 90).

Events after 1986 reflected particular choices not about *whether* to end the Cold War, but about *how* to end it (Suri, 2002: 81); only from there onward the end of the Cold War was clearly predictable. Our understanding of how, why, and when the Cold War ended surely remains incomplete (Suri, 2002: 91), even if it was not inevitable, as traditional analyses of realpolitik do not provide a detailed explanation (Gaddis, 1992; Lebow, 1995).

### Conclusions

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War were a 'big surprise' in history and politics; maybe too big to be predicted. The realist scholars — Morgenthau, Aron and Waltz — have not foreseen how the Cold War could eventually come to an end. They never took the possibility of a Soviet breakdown into serious consideration. The role played by political leaders, a new vision that would overcome the past ideological divisions, diplomacy for the reduction of armaments, the economic crisis of the USSR and, finally, the dissolution of the Soviet Union

can be ascribed as contributory causes of the end of the conflict. Much remains to be investigated about the impact of individual factors that have been clearly identified. However, the inability to predict these events is widely acknowledged.

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