THE ORIGINS
OF THE PRESENT
SUPERPOWER
CONFRONTATION
A vectorial analysis

by K.L. Kinsman

The best of several good things in Jack Blake’s article in ALR 74 (May 1980) was the use he made of history. In this he has the support, not only of Thucydides, but (more recently) of Professor P.M.S. Blackett, who, in 1948, said: “The first maxim of the scientific study of current events is that one should not attempt to predict the future until one has attempted to understand the past”. (1)

When Prime Minister Fraser said that the issue was not the Olympic Games but Afghanistan, President Carter corrected him. The issue is not Afghanistan, the President said in his State of the Union Message, but the relationship between our two countries over the past thirty-five years — that is, the relationship between the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. I think President Carter was quite right, except that he did not take it back far enough. I propose to take it back to the beginning — 1917.

But before starting on this brief but epic journey, there are certain things I should like to make clear. First of all, the method. What I have attempted to do is to present, as it were, an historical vector — a path carved out through the highly complex web of historical events, intended to help make that
complexity more simple, more intelligible — a process, with which workers in the communications field are familiar, of disentangling a message from its accompanying noise.

It is, of course, a personal vector; which is all you would get from anyone, no matter how expert. And this leads me directly into my second point; which is, that the use of this method enables me to disavow any suggestion that my own personal vector is more true, more correct, more humane etc than anybody else’s personal vector. More helpful, possibly — but that is for the reader to decide.

My third point relates to the message of this particular personal vector; namely, that the Soviet Union’s external actions, almost from its inception, have been dictated by the requirements, as seen from within the Soviet Union, of national security. This is not the same thing as saying that those actions were justified by security considerations. These are two separate propositions, requiring separate validation. I am concerned with the former, not the latter.

Fourthly, my concern has been with the origins of the present superpower confrontation. Consequently, the vector stops in 1947, with the launching of the Marshall Plan. By that time, the main parameters of the game had been determined, and such events as the Berlin blockade or the CIA takeover of Iran were as logically deducible from previous positions as an end game of chess. I do believe, however, that the end of the war presented the world’s statesmen with an opportunity to solve the world’s problems which was as criminally bungled as the opportunity presented by Versailles.

Finally, the vector is a vector. Almost by definition it is highly selective, its prime aim being to disentangle message from noise — or indeed from other messages. I have therefore restricted it to cover only the Soviet Union’s external actions, and not all of them. Accordingly no reference is made to internal events, such as the Moscow trials, which could be looked at from a security point of view, but whose interpretation, not to say relevance, would unquestionably be challenged. They would, therefore, tend to obscure, rather than clarify, the events under discussion.

The Analysis

Intervention

Actually we do not need to go all the way back to 1917. March 1918 will do, when the Bolsheviks, under duress, signed the Treaty of Brest Litovsk, by which Germany acquired vast areas of formerly Russian territory.

This treaty was nullified the following November. But the day before the Armistice, Winston Churchill gave a foretaste of what was to come, when he told a Cabinet meeting: “We should not attempt to destroy the only police force in Germany. We might have to build up the German army...for fear of the spread of Bolshevism”.

Churchill’s warning was soon startlingly justified. In January 1919, Karl Liebnecht and Rosa Luxemburg were arrested, and then murdered on their way to Moabit prison. Noske was governor-general of Berlin at the time, and Pinson records him as saying: “Someone must become the bloodhound. I cannot evade the responsibility”. Pinson also says that “Ebert’s aim was not ‘to combat the revolution’, but to combat Bolshevism. But in pursuing this aim, Ebert and Noske came to rely heavily on the old-line soldiers.”

While Ebert and the old-line soldiers combated Bolshevism in Germany, Churchill found plenty of willing volunteers to help combat it in its own heartland — Bolshevik Russia. There were at least five, not counting the Czechs — Britain, France, Japan, America and Poland. The intervention in the west ended in October 1920, with the Treaty of Riga, leaving Poland in occupation of large areas of the Western Ukraine and Western Byelorussia, well east of the ethnic boundary proposed by Lord Curzon the previous July. The Americans had left in April, but the Japanese stayed on until 1922.

Following the departure of British troops from Persia and Baku, the Soviets signed treaties with both Persia and the Turkey of Kemal Ataturk. Also with Germany — the Treaty of Rapallo, 1922. The Entente powers took the hint, and in 1925 broke up the rapprochement between these two pariah states by inducing Germany to sign the Treaty of Locarno. Recognition of the U.S.S.R. by European powers was gradually achieved during the twenties, but not by America until after the advent of Roosevelt.
— 1933, the year Poland signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler.

The Thirties

By this time a new threat to Soviet security had arisen in Central Europe. In 1934 the U.S.S.R. joined the League of Nations, which Nazi Germany and Japan had just left. In May 1935 the U.S.S.R. signed pacts of mutual assistance with France and Czechoslovakia. During 1936/8 the Soviet Union sent food and military aid to the Spanish Republic. And sometime in this period, Anthony Eden coined the phrase: "Steady and collective resistance to all acts of unprovoked aggression".

However, in September 1938 the policy of collective security, with which the name of Litvinov is linked just as much as that of Eden, collapsed. Munich excluded the U.S.S.R. from Europe, and presented Hitler with the Czech fortifications as a free gift. In the middle of the crisis, the U.S.S.R. offered the Czechs military aid independent of France. The offer was refused.

25 March — the occupation of Prague. 20 May — Sir Alexander Cadogan records that the "P.M. says he will resign rather than sign alliance with Soviets". 25 July — Admiral Sir Reginald Aylmer Ranfurly Plunkett-Erle-Erle-Drax led a military mission by a particularly slow boat to Moscow. Adamthwaite comments:

During the months of haggling...the one question that really mattered, whether Poland and Romania would allow Soviet forces to cross their frontiers, was never raised. It was left to Voroshilov to ask this key question...on August 14th. The failure of the Western negotiators to give a satisfactory answer led directly to the suspension of the military conversations.4

24 August — the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed, with a secret protocol delimiting German and Soviet spheres of influence in Poland and the Baltic States. The German invasion of Poland was launched on 1 September. The Red Army marched into the non-ethnic areas of Poland on 17 September. Arrangements were made for strategic bases in the Baltic States — followed, after the fall of France, by their incorporation in the U.S.S.R. Finland was less accommodating, and war broke out on 30 November. A fortnight later the U.S.S.R. became the first state ever to be expelled from the League of Nations.

The French formed an army in the Middle East under General Weygand (the Saviour of Warsaw) and Britain seriously thought of sending to Finland planes that were going to be badly needed in south-east England, as soon as the phoney war was over.

The so-called "winter war" ended in March 1940. The sole demands made on Finland were the original strategic demands the rejection of which had started it — demands that can fairly be said to have saved Leningrad. To the south-east of the Soviet Union, additional depth was obtained by the acquisition of Bessarabia and N. Bukovina.

The War

Came June 1941 and the collapse of Stalin's gamble. A.J.P. Taylor says that "Churchill had decided his policy in advance, and announced it over the radio the same evening — unreserved solidarity with Soviet Russia in the war against Hitler".5

Taylor has a note (same page) that "Some Conservatives took the line, which Senator Truman did in the USA, that Germans and Russians should be left to cut their own throats. Moore-Brabazon, the Minister of Aircraft Production, indiscreetly said this in public, and protests from the workers in aircraft factories forced him to leave office". What Taylor does not say is that Churchill kicked Moore-Brabazon upstairs to the House of Lords.

One of Stalin's first demands was for the opening of the Second Front. This demand was reiterated in May 1942, when Molotov came to London to sign the twenty-year Anglo-Soviet Treaty of Alliance. Roosevelt was in favour of opening the Second front in 1943, but Churchill was able to delay it until May 1944.

The following sequence of events in 1945 is interesting:

- 17 January - capture of Warsaw;
- 29 January - Zhukov crosses the 1938 German frontier;
- 4 February - Yalta Conference opens. Stalin promises to enter the war against Japan three months after victory in Europe;
- 14 February — the bombing of Dresden
- 7 March - American forces cross Rhine;
- 12 April - death of Roosevelt, accession of Truman;
- 13 April - Red Army takes Vienna;
• 23 April - Red Army reaches Berlin; - Czechoslovakian Skoda Works destroyed by U.S.A.F.;
• 30 April - Hitler’s suicide;
• 2 May - Berlin surrenders to Red Army;
• 8 May - VE-Day (Anglo-Americans)
• 9 May - capture of Prague, VE-Day for the U.S.S.R.

Attention then switches to the Far East, and we have:
• 16 July - Atom test bomb exploded in New Mexico;
• 17 July - Potsdam Conference opens;
• 6 August - Hiroshima;
• 8 August - U.S.S.R. declares war on Japan, exactly on time;
• 9 August - Red Army invades Manchuria; - Nagasaki;
• 14 August - Japan agrees to surrender;
• 24 August — Japanese Kwantung Army surrenders to Red Army;
• 2 September - Macarthur receives formal Japanese surrender aboard the U.S.S. Missouri;
• VJ-Day;
• the end of Lend Lease;
• the end of what Doris Lessing calls the second intensive phase of the twentieth century war.

Potsdam

There have, as President Carter points out, been 35 years of intermission. Taylor singles out the meeting at Potsdam as marking "the beginning of the Cold War, and therefore of post-war history. Any chance of permanent friendship was lost," he suggests, "when Truman forgot about the reconstruction loan to the USSR which Roosevelt had contemplated".6

The Potsdam meeting was, in fact, the first public exercise in Trumanship — something that was later enshrined in the Truman Doctrine. Henry Stimpson, the then Secretary of War, is quoted as saying: "Truman stood up to the Russians in the most emphatic and decisive manner, telling them as to certain demands that they absolutely could not have, and that the US was entirely against them....He told the Russians just where they got off, and generally bossed the whole meeting".7

The basis for Truman's aggressive attitude was the successful atom bomb test in New Mexico. Stimpson said that the President was "tremendously pepped by it", and quotes the President as saying that "it gave him an entirely new feeling of confidence in talking to the Russians".8

The key public issue at Potsdam was not, however, the atom bomb, to which I shall return, but reparations. The Yalta proposal for joint reparations from the whole of Germany was abandoned in favour of each country having a free hand in its own zone. "The Russians", Werth says, "fought this proposal for over a week." Werth comments: "Potsdam marked....the beginning of the end of the 'Big Three Peace', of which the main pillar, as the Russians saw it, was joint control of Germany."9

The Atom Bomb

It is extraordinary — and extraordinarily illuminating — to read Churchill's own account of how Stalin was told at Potsdam about the atom bomb. The problem was how to tell Stalin that the Anglo-Americans possessed a new and powerful bomb, "but not with any particulars". In the end, Truman said "I think I had best just tell him, after one of our meetings, that we have an entirely novel form of bomb which we think will have a decisive effect on the Japanese". "On July 24th", Churchill continues, "after our plenary meeting had ended, I saw the President go up to Stalin, and the two conversed alone....I can see it all as if it were yesterday. He seemed to be delighted....I am sure he had no idea of the significance of what he was being told. 'How did it go?' I asked Truman. 'He never asked a question,' he replied." 10

The point was that, with the development of the atom bomb, the participation of the U.S.S.R. in the Pacific war was no longer required — indeed, was no longer welcome. "The President and the State Department," says Taylor, "would have liked to get through without Soviet assistance at all," as Churchill confirms in a minute to Eden.11

Events themselves bear out this analysis. In June 1945 the Franck Committee, in a memorandum to the President, strongly deprecated the first use of the bomb against Japanese cities. On 8 August, the Washington correspondent of the London Times reported that:

The decision to use the new weapon was apparently taken quite recently, and amounted to a reversal of previous policy...In the view of some highly placed persons, those responsible came to the
conclusion that they were justified in using any and all means to bring the war in the Pacific to a close within the shortest possible time.

This report is confirmed by Stimpson in an article in Harpers Magazine in February 1947. "On 1 June, after discussion with the scientific panel, the Interim Committee unanimously adopted the following recommendations," of which the first was that "the bomb should be used against Japan as soon as possible."

Why the hurry? After all, it took nearly three years to organise the Second Front. The answer has already been given: to forestall Soviet entry into the war, or at least create the conditions for the occupation of Japan as an exclusive American prerogative.

In a speech on 9 August Truman said two things:

We gladly welcome into the struggle against the last of the Axis aggressors our gallant and victorious ally against the Nazis.

Though the US wants no territory or profit or selfish advantage out of this war, we are going to maintain the military bases necessary for the protection of our interests and of world peace. Bases which our military experts deem to be essential for our protection, and which are not now in our possession, we will acquire.

After the War was over

The history of the immediate post-war years is dominated by three main features:
1. The launching of the Cold War in February 1946 by Winston Churchill, at Fulton, U.S.A.

2. The publication of the Baruch Plan in June 1946.

3. The Marshall Plan, which was outlined at Harvard exactly a year later.

I do not wish to say anything about Fulton, except that it came less than six months after VJ-day, and less than four years after Churchill’s own government put its signature to the Twenty-year Anglo-Soviet Treaty of Alliance.

On 24 January, 1946, just a month before Fulton, the U.N. Assembly set up the Atomic Energy Commission. In March, just a month after Fulton, the State Department released the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, described by Blackett as a "brilliantly written document...whose initial assumptions, that there can be no monopoly by one nation of the atomic bomb...closely follow those of the Franck Report". 12

This new report proposed an Atomic Development Authority which would own and operate all key atomic plants, and envisioned a transitional period during which stockpiles of bombs and plants to produce fissile material would "continue to be located within the United States....Our monopoly on knowledge cannot be, and should not be lost at once". 13

Three months later, on 13 June at the first meeting of the Atomic Energy Commission, Bernard Baruch put forward, on behalf of the U.S. Government, proposals for the international control of atomic energy. At the second meeting, six days later, Andrej Gromyko presented the Soviet proposals.

Blackett comments that "the American proposals amounted to the adoption of the Acheson-Lilienthal Report with the important addition that decisions relating to atomic energy...should not be subject to the veto power". 14 Baruch himself, in his introductory statement, said, "The subject goes straight to the veto power contained in the Charter of the United Nations....The matter of punishment lies at the very heart of our security system".

Of the proposed Atomic Development Authority, Baruch said that, "The personnel should be recruited on a basis of proven competence, but also, as far as possible, on an international basis" (my emphasis). And he concluded: "But before a country is ready to relinquish any winning weapons it must have a guarantee of safety, not only against offenders in the atomic area, but against the illegal users of other weapons — bacteriological, biological, gas — perhaps — why not? — against war itself". 15

Nobody seems to have pointed out to Baruch that the Red Army was also, in its way, a winning weapon — like possession of the Carpathian mountains, or a strategic area like Afghanistan. In short, the Baruch Plan was rejected by the Soviets.

Adam Ulam, in his biography of Stalin, suggests that, "Once the Soviet Union demonstrated that it would not play ball (at least not according to the American rules) at the U.N., a considerably body of opinion reverted to the theme that Stalin aspired to world domination". He comments, "If the Americans had been less neurotic, Soviet-
American relations could have been correct, if distant”. 16

The basis for the American neurosis was clearly indicated by Stimpson, in an article in the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists February 1947. “The future may see a time when such a weapon may be constructed in secret and used suddenly against an unsuspecting nation or group, of much greater size and material power.” This will readily be recognised as being very different from constructing it in secret and using it against an unsuspecting nation of smaller size and material power, which is trying to find someone to whom to surrender.

Finally, the Marshall Plan — 1947. Primarily, this was the translation of the thinking behind the Baruch plan into the economic arena. Ulam comments: “In the State Department there was surprise, not unmixed with apprehension...when the Soviet Government accepted the ... invitation to meet and examine the U.S. initiative....How could one persuade Senator Taft that Communism could be fought by handing over money to Stalin.” 17

Conclusion

P.M.S. Blackett wrote in 1948:

The Baruch Plan failed because, in its attempt to secure nearly complete security for America, it was inevitably driven to propose a course of action which would have put the Soviet Union in a situation whereby she would have been subservient to a group of nations dominated by America...The only way in which the American people can obtain complete safety from atomic bombs is by effective American control over all other nations. 18

I remember those days well. When the Atomic Energy Commission was set up I was still in the army. By the time the Marshall Plan was proposed I was studying at the London School of Economics. Ever since VJ-day the talk had been about internationalism — the United Nations — One World. That was the title of a book by a group of American scientists One World or None published in March 1946.

Unfortunately the Soviet and American peoples — yes, and the British and Australian peoples too — were “hot for certainties”, to borrow a phrase from George Meredith. And they got what he would have called a very "dusty answer".

FOOTNOTES

1 P.M.S. Blackett Military and political consequences of Atomic Energy, Turnstile Press, 1948. I have made liberal use of secondary sources, but of none more freely than of this book by Blackett. First published in 1948, it is a better guide to the international relationships of the 1980s (if any) than anything I have seen written in the last twelve months, and indeed beyond, for a good many years.


3 K.S. Pinson, Modern Germany Macmillan, 1966, Ch. 14, pp. 384 and 389/70.


6 Ibid, p. 720

7 Alexander Werth, Russia at War, 1941-1945, Pan Books, 1965, p 914.

8 Ibid, p. 914


11 Taylor, p. 728. The Churchill minute to Eden is referred to by Werth, p. 921.

12 Blackett, p. 108.


14 Ibid. p. 131


16 Adam B. Ulam, Stalin, Allen Lane, 1974, pp 640-1. This book was first published in America in 1973. The following year, Ulam was appointed Director of the Russian Research Centre, Harvard, where he had been professor of Government since 1950. The biography is fundamentally anti-Stalinist, but it has some interesting passages, such as those quoted.


18 Blackett, pp 144-5. It is good to open and close with a quotation from this absolutely first class book.