
PRELUDE TO THE COLD WAR

The Tsarist,
Soviet,
and U.S. Armies
in the
Two World Wars



JONATHAN R. ADELMAN

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1

Introduction

The Soviet and U.S. destruction of the Third Reich in World War II marked an event of world-historical proportion. This rare and fleeting military cooperation between the two future superpowers produced results with enduring impact on the international order. The liquidation of Nazi Germany and ensuing political dominance of the United States and Soviet Union dealt a death blow to the European balance-of-power system that had characterized international politics for almost three hundred years since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. The improbable alliance destroyed the power of Germany, which had been unmatched on the European continent for seventy-five years since the final unification of Germany in 1870, and it smashed the twelve-year reign of the Third Reich that in June 1944 still dominated the European continent. So great was German power in World War I that even in November 1918 German troops remained on foreign soil. In World War II it took the Soviet Union, the United States, and the British Empire acting in concert almost four years of war to eliminate Nazi Germany.

The removal of German power from the heart of Europe—combined with the parallel demise of Imperial Japan, the exhaustion of Britain and paralysis of France emerging from four years of German occupation—opened the door to a new international order. This act avoided the possibility of a resurgence of German militarism that had plagued Europe in the 1930s and early 1940s, in the aftermath of a failure to decisively

defeat Germany in World War I. The military prowess of the United States and Soviet Union, whose armies met on the Elbe in the heart of Germany in 1945, propelled these two hitherto peripheral actors, and seemingly unlikely arbiters of the destiny of the world, to center stage as nascent superpowers in a devastated world order.

The passage of over four decades has dimmed the sense of wonder one feels at the emergence of these two particular states as predominant actors in the postwar era. This is especially true, given that the events of World War II seemed to reverse the result of World War I—a politically active but militarily impotent Russia and a politically isolationist but militarily untested United States. In 1945, both powers seemed to be both politically and militarily powerful, at least on the surface.

WORLD WAR II AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE SUPERPOWERS

The United States had for several decades refused to accept the mantle of world leadership that would inexorably flow to the world's greatest economic and strongest naval power. After a belated and brief (but successful) intervention in World War I, the United States had largely withdrawn from the international arena (with certain exceptions, like the disarmament drive of the 1920s) in the wake of the 1920 League of Nations debacle. During the 1930s it refused to use its potentially awesome power to arrest the inexorable spread of fascism across the European continent in the wake of the Great Depression. This reflected U.S. disenchantment with the outcome of World War I, traditional U.S. avoidance of European conflicts, overwhelming preoccupation with the Great Depression, the safety inherent in the vast expanses of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and the lack of any serious Axis threat to the United States until 1940. This also mirrored a generalized Western underestimation of the extent of the Nazi threat (one initially shared in 1933 by the Soviet Union) and lack of clarity about the true aims of Hitler until the late 1930s.

Having crippled itself with a tiny army (176,000 men in 1939) more appropriate to Bulgaria or Romania than a great power, the United States lacked not only the will but also the capacity to seriously intervene in Europe in the early years of World War II.¹

Geographic remoteness from Europe and the delay in hitting full war production until 1943, caused by lack of military preparedness, would take its toll in the early years of the war. Not until June 1944, almost five years after the beginning of World War II, would the United States be able to launch a serious military campaign that would engage a significant number of German troops on the European continent and threaten vital German objectives. Until then, U.S. military moves were restricted to air and naval objectives, limited campaigns in North Africa and Italy, and Lend Lease. The bulk of the fighting, inevitably, fell to British and Soviet forces. From such material it would seem unlikely that a superpower could be fashioned.

Nor were things any better with the other prospective candidate for superpower status, the Soviet Union. Indeed, Moscow seemed an even more dismal candidate than Washington. The glory of the march of the Imperial Russian army into Paris in 1814 had long since been superseded by a series of Russian military disasters from the Crimean War to the Russo-Japanese War and early years of World War I. The abysmal performance of the Tsarist army in World War I, symbolized by the 1914 disaster at Tannenberg, hastened the disintegration of Tsarism, the twin revolutions of 1917, and the shameful Tilsit Treaty of Brest Litovsk in 1918. In the wake of the 1917 October Revolution a weakened Russia, battered by the trials of World War I (1914–1917) and the Civil War (1918–1920), yielded not only Finland and Poland but also such vital western territories as the Baltic states and Bessarabia.

During the interwar era the Soviet Union remained a political pariah and ineffectual political actor in Europe. The activities of the Comintern, housed in Moscow, to promote revolution were a dismal failure everywhere, even during the Great Depression. In conventional diplomacy Soviet Russia made little progress apart from attaining diplomatic recognition and carrying out limited economic relations with the West. The crucial military/political connection with Germany—symbolized by the Rapallo and Berlin Treaties and secret military relations—abruptly ended with the rise of Hitler to power in 1933. The shaky alliance with France never developed into the needed full-blown military coordination that might have had an impact on the coming war. Belated Soviet entry into the League of Nations in 1934 only led to the Soviet expulsion from that impotent body in 1940 in the wake of the Winter War with Finland. Soviet support of the Republican forces

during the Spanish civil war terminated well before 1939 when it was apparent that the Fascists under General Franco were going to triumph. In short, the Soviet exclusion from the crucial 1938 Munich conference merely symbolized its isolation from the European political system and its perceived weakness by those same powers.

The image of Red Army impotence was strongly reinforced by the massive Great Purges (1937–1941), the poor performance in the Finnish Winter War (1939–1940), and the repeated disasters in 1941 and 1942 when the German army marched eastward. Even when the tide began to turn on the Eastern front in 1943, the enormous scale of the Soviet Union's human and physical losses and the weakness of its economic base seemed to call into question any Soviet preemptive claim to superpower status.

As these two countries, the Soviet Union and the United States, moved into the heart of Europe in the final year of the war, both the similarities they shared and the dissimilarities that separated them were striking. Both countries were huge land powers with great populations, enormous natural resources, and powerful economic capabilities. They both, as heirs of great revolutions, disdained the old European order, viewing themselves as prototypes of new progressive worlds, which would displace the decadent old world. Each had a strong vision of that new order centered around itself—for the United States a liberal international capitalist order, and for the Soviet Union an international socialist order. Both states were relatively inexperienced in foreign affairs and newcomers to the role of great power with bright hopes for the future.

In 1941 both the United States and Soviet Union had been reluctantly propelled into World War II by surprise Axis attacks that did serious damage to their best military services, the U.S. navy and the Soviet army. With their previous histories in the last half-century as relatively mediocre land forces winning victories only against weak enemies, the road back and onward to victory would be protracted, especially against the powerful German army. And World War II was the first and only total war that both the United States and Soviet Union have fought in this century.

Yet the differences between the two nascent superpowers in 1944 were far greater than the similarities, especially in the military, political, and economic spheres applicable to warfare. Economically, the United States was vastly more powerful than the Soviet Union, with the U.S. economy a staggering four times larger

than the Soviet economy in 1944.² Politically, the United States was much more influential in the world, counting most of the world's major powers as its allies. Militarily, the United States was a powerful naval power; the Soviet Union was an awesome land power. While by June 1944, the Red Army had been bled white, having lost five million prisoners to the Germans and suffered almost six million battle deaths, the U.S. army had suffered less than one hundred thousand casualties.³ While the United States had strong partners in the British Commonwealth, and later in France, the Soviet Union stood alone. The road to superpower status was protracted and diverse for the two nations.

The end of World War II, then, saw the emergence of two militarily powerful, nascent superpowers, which divided a prostrate Germany between themselves in the center of Europe. This new superpower order also soon developed several other features that differentiated it from the old balance of power system. The ideological rivalry between the capitalist West and socialist East soon reinforced the fracturing of the old international order into two power blocs, perpetually suspicious and hostile towards each other. These rigidities were reinforced by the advent of nuclear weapons, which would further set the superpowers apart from all lesser powers and heighten the dangers immanent in superpower rivalry.

World War II decisively decimated the old international political order and promoted in its place a new ideological and nuclear order dominated by the two superpowers. On the surface World War II bore a marked resemblance to World War I, which also left a strong impact on the international order. In one sense, they were two phases of one war. In both wars only a protracted struggle by an Allied coalition of states, including the United States, Russia/Soviet Union, France, and England, ultimately prevailed over a German-dominated coalition. In both wars the belated entry of U.S. power onto the European continent proved decisive for England and France, which were unable to dislodge Germany from Europe by themselves. And both wars saw the emergence of modern warfare on a vast scale.

But there were crucial differences between the two world wars, differences which were largely military in nature. In World War I, Germany, having knocked Russia out of the war, launched five great offensives in the spring and summer of 1918, and even Armistice Day found German troops remaining outside of Germany. In sharp contrast, the end of World War II saw Allied

troops dividing Germany among themselves while an abject and humiliated German army agreed to the humiliation of unconditional surrender. Second, the Russian army, whose disintegration had led to the abasement of the Treaty of Brest Litovsk in March 1918 in World War I, in World War II stood triumphantly in Berlin, Prague, Vienna, and Budapest at the end of the war. Third, France, which had played a powerful role in the Allied cause in World War I, had to be liberated in World War II by Anglo-American forces after four shameful years of Vichy France, German occupation and collaboration, and memories of the military disaster of 1940. These military events effectively neutralized France as a great power. Fourth, while England played a major role in both wars, it exhausted itself by its supreme effort and had already begun its irreversible decline even before World War II ended. Finally, the liquidation of Japanese military power and Allied occupation of the islands ended a potentially serious threat to Soviet and U.S. dominance of the postwar era.

The military events of World War II had profound implications for the new international order after 1945. The great Red Army victories, from Stalingrad to Kursk-Orel to Berlin, and subsequent occupation of Eastern Europe, legitimized Soviet claims to great power status as the world's leading land power and second leading economy. Without these decisive military victories, the Soviet Union would have had no viable claim to such status (nor would it today). The destruction and occupation of Germany and Japan removed the only main military challengers to Soviet preeminence in Europe and Asia. The importance of the military aspects of World War II in this regard are difficult to exaggerate. Without World War II's denouement, the undeniable military capabilities of Germany and Japan, as demonstrated so graphically from 1939 to 1942, combined with their emergence as economic superpowers in the postwar era, would have severely limited Soviet aspirations. Only their elimination as military powers by 1945 opened the door for the Soviet Union, using its own military might, to become the world's second superpower.

For the United States the war was less important but still significant on its road to becoming a superpower. There had never been any doubt about U.S. economic power, which by 1945, in the wake of the destruction of Japan and Germany, accounted for nearly 50 percent of the world's GNP.⁴ But in view of the United States' isolationist past and rapid withdrawal from Europe

after World War I and the League of Nations debacle, there were serious questions about U.S. political capabilities and willingness to participate in the international order.

There were even greater questions about U.S. military capabilities. Until World War I U.S. victories had been won only against such military nonentities like the Indians and Mexicans and the decaying Spanish empire, and the U.S. had done poorly in the War of 1812 against the British, whose fleet burned Washington. Only in the American Civil War had the United States demonstrated impressive military skill and even advanced the art of military science. But in its aftermath, the United States had reverted to its traditional weak military posture and had once again fallen far behind the leading European powers.

In World War I, as we will see in Section 1, the United States' only important campaign came in the Meuse-Argonne battle in the last two months of the war (September-November 1918). Its 71,000 battle fatalities accounted for less than 1 percent of the battle losses in World War I.⁵ This belated and limited military performance called into question U.S. power projection capabilities—although 1919 might have shown a very different picture. The U.S. retreat from political responsibility and massive demobilization to a miniscule army with weak technology in the interwar period called its capabilities into question. U.S. abstinence from the first two years of the war and weak U.S. military performance in 1942 and 1943, which we will see in Section 3, on the periphery of the European conflict did nothing to strengthen any claim to being a great military power. Thus, a moderately effective U.S. military performance and power projection in the last year of the war was vital to its postwar claims as a superpower, especially in light of the waning British contribution and weak French role.

IMPORTANCE OF ARMIES AND WARS

It is in this context that the study of armies and wars—and their nexus with politics and economics—becomes critical, for the fates of nations and great causes have traditionally been settled on the battlefield. Take the cases of the great revolutions. The outcome of the English, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions was resolved only in a series of bloody and protracted civil wars. The French

Revolution sparked a massive military struggle that lasted over two decades before the final defeat at Waterloo spelled the doom of the revolution.⁶

Similarly, World War I provoked the dissolution of four great dynastic empires (Imperial Germany, Tsarist Russia, Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire) and formation of a group of new European states. World War II liquidated fascism in Germany and Italy and militarism in Japan while it promoted the rise of a new world order dominated by two new superpowers. Wars have accelerated social change, with World War I helping to stimulate the February and October Revolutions in Russia, and World War II acting to establish socialism in Eastern Europe and later in China and Vietnam. On a less drastic level World War I promoted significant changes in English society after the war, while World War II brought major changes in U.S. society in the postwar era.

Military power, then, was a major factor in creating the postwar world as we know it. Internationally, wars are capable of rapidly transforming the entire international political order and even the economic order. Domestically, they reveal the strengths and weaknesses of a society; those found wanting may undergo radical changes or even perish. As Arthur Stein analyzed the impact of war on society,

Wars are major determinants of change: they affect all aspects of a nation's domestic life and transform polity, society and economy...war alters critical facets of domestic life. At the extreme, war can simultaneously rend the national fabric, shift the balance of governmental power and narrow the gap between richer and poorer.⁷

Of course, wars and military power are not the only factors in creating the international order. The importance of economic, political, technological, cultural, and diplomatic factors in shaping the contemporary era is beyond dispute. But what we are trying to accentuate here is that military power, so often ignored or underrated, should also be seen as a major factor in its own right.

How are we to comprehend wars and military power? Military power cannot be reduced, in a form of primitive Marxism, to being merely a function of economic power. Economic capability is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for military effectiveness. History in this century is replete with many examples of countries whose military power did not correspond to their economic power and of wars won by armies inferior in

numbers and equipment to their enemies. The United States, though the predominant economic power in this century, was traditionally a weak land power until the last year of World War II. Many other examples leap to mind: the repeated Israeli victories in five wars against larger and better-equipped Arab forces, the triumph of the poorly equipped People's Liberation Army in the Chinese civil war (1946–1949), and the victory of the North Vietnamese forces over the better-equipped South Vietnamese Army in 1975.

Clearly, wars reflect far more than simply the quantity and quality of men and equipment. They include, as Martin van Creveld has ably demonstrated, the moral-organizational aspects which he labels as "fighting power."⁸ These reflect the quality of military leadership, strategy and tactics, logistics, foreign interactions, and military technical capabilities. Military capacities mirror not only economic capabilities, but also overall societal capabilities, including governmental, political, and purely military capabilities. Thus, studying wars and military powers also tells us a great deal about the nations and societies involved in them—their strengths and weaknesses.

Armies themselves are not isolated from society—their structures and capabilities reflect those of the nations as a whole. Armies are a microcosm of the societies for they are created by the state as the ultimate, total institution to serve as its protector from domestic and foreign enemies. The human relationships in the army tend to reflect the class relationships in society. The nature of coercion in the military sphere is a heightened form of that extant in the civilian sphere. And the style of war tends to reflect societal morale and values.

Historically, then, wars and military power have been important forces shaping the international political order and domestic societies. They in turn have been shaped by a broad array of economic and noneconomic factors reflecting overall societal capabilities. In World War I German military superiority during the bulk of the war was not built on any corresponding economic superiority over the Triple Entente. In World War II the great German military victories of 1939–1942 were not matched by any concomitant German economic superiority; indeed in men and machines the Germans were only evenly matched with the French in 1940 and outnumbered by the Soviets in 1941. Similarly, the great Soviet victories of 1943–1945 on the Eastern front did not reflect any significant economic advantage over the Third

Reich—indeed the victories were built on an inferior base. The ultimate example, of course, is the Cold War. With a U.S. gross national product (GNP) four times that of the Soviet GNP in 1945, and with the disparity even greater when allies were counted, there was no basis for the continuing stalemate of the Cold War if only political and economic power were taken into consideration.

LITERATURE

The literature on the Cold War, while not yet rivaling that on the French Revolution, is increasingly voluminous and complex, as befits its subject matter. There are at least two ways to categorize this literature. One is through the often acrimonious debate over the causes of the Cold War between the orthodox, revisionist, and postrevisionist camps.⁹ The other is by looking at the particular method of analysis, whether political, diplomatic, or economic in nature, or some combination thereof.¹⁰ Both methods of categorization of the literature are extensively represented, with suitable changes over the decades reflecting political shifts in U.S. and Western politics and changing modes and styles in academia.

Despite this vast outpouring of work on an important topic, there remain some glaring omissions in the literature. The U.S., as befits the origins of the writers, the preponderance of academic specialization and available information (the Soviet archives are closed), is far more extensively and ably treated than is the Soviet Union. And, strikingly, although the political, diplomatic, and economic aspects of the origins of the Cold War are treated extensively and even exhaustively at times, the most obvious aspect of the dispute—the military—is routinely ignored. This is especially curious because it was precisely military events, that is, World War II, that finally liquidated the old order and created a new one, devoid of Japanese and German power. And it is even more curious since in 1945, as in 1988, it was only in the military sphere that the Soviet Union could properly be called a great power on the same magnitude as the United States.

Indeed, there is not a significant volume dealing with the military/political origins of the Cold War. The only real reference to military affairs comes in the concept, developed by Gar Alperovitz and the revisionists, of "atomic diplomacy."¹¹ Even here, though, the emphasis is on diplomacy rather than military

events. And this concept seeks to wrench from a far broader and richer military context only one isolated and exceptional element of limited importance in the first few postwar years.

This volume seeks to restore balance in several ways. It stresses the importance of military events both in themselves and as reflection of greater economic and political variables. Only by considering military events as well can the other variables attain the necessary capacity to explain complex events. And, second, this volume focuses as much on the Soviet Union as on the United States. This can be done since there is no aspect of a country's behavior that is as externally visible or the focus of foreign interest as that of an army, especially in wartime. And, finally, we try to put this in a comparative and historical mode so as to provide the basis to ask some interesting questions as to how the United States and Russia, relatively peripheral actors in most of World War I, emerged as predominant forces on the European stage by 1945.

Given the impact of the war and military power on the modern world, one would expect a plethora of books dealing with the issues of comparative military power of the Soviet Union and United States (perhaps Germany, England, France, and Japan as well) and the military/political nexus at the end of World War II. Despite the many thousands of books written on the war, there are almost no works dealing with this question. In some cases the mere suggestion of such comparative study arouses indignation. Only the Soviet literature has tended to raise these broader questions, and this is generally quickly dismissed by Western academics as special pleading by the Soviets or reflecting peculiarities of Marxist analysis of no relevance to the West.

The great majority of Western work on World War II, as on the later Cold War, focuses on the diplomatic, political, and economic dimensions to the neglect of the military and security dimensions.¹² Richard Gabriel has written that "the study of military forces used to be at best an academic curiosity" and remains little examined, except by military specialists and military historians.¹³ On a broader level there have been almost no comparative studies of the United States and Soviet Union since Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel Huntington's masterful study over two decades ago, *Political Power: USA/USSR*.¹⁴

The military specialists, mainly historians, have, of course, often refought the war on both sides, especially and naturally the U.S. side of the campaign.¹⁵ The Soviet war effort has been