



Adam Ulam, “A Few Unresolved Mysteries about Stalin and the Cold War in Europe: A Modest Agenda for Research,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 1, Issue 1 (Winter 1999): 110-116.

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Adam Ulam, in his short article about Stalin and the Cold War in Europe, noted that if scholars are interested in coming up with the right answers about that conflict, they first need to figure out what the right questions are. And his goal in the piece was to propose a “modest agenda for research” by developing certain questions about Stalin’s policy in two areas: his policy toward eastern Europe at the end of World War II and in the immediate postwar period, and his policy on the German question. Was the Soviet leader determined to dominate and communize the part of Europe his armies controlled in 1945? Was it the case that “short of a military confrontation with Moscow,” the western powers could have done nothing to prevent the communization of the eastern half of the continent? How susceptible was Soviet policy to lesser forms of foreign pressure? And, similarly, was Soviet policy on the German question simply set in concrete from the start? Was Stalin determined from the very outset to create a Soviet satellite state in his zone of Germany, or was his policy considerably more flexible than that? Was the USSR willing to consider some kind of reunification-cum-neutralization deal at the time of the Moscow Conference on the German question in the spring of 1947 and again during the “Stalin Note” affair in 1952?

All these questions are, of course, quite important, but how exactly should we go about answering them? In the case of eastern Europe, the obvious answer is through a series of case studies: studies of the communization of all the different countries in the area, studies rooted in whatever new archival evidence is available and sensitive to the question of whether outside pressure made, or would have made, any difference at all. The Polish case is of prime importance here: how did the Soviets react to American and British policy on this question in the immediate pre-Yalta period, in the course of the Yalta conference, right after Yalta, and so on, and how did those reactions affect, if at all, what was going on in Poland itself? And, of course, as Ulam suggests, the analysis of this issue should not be limited to a study of Soviet policy toward those areas that were in fact communized. Soviet policy toward Finland in this period, and especially policy toward Iran, also need to be studied in detail. In the Iran case, the key question is whether the Soviets pulled back in 1946 because of the possibility of war with the United States. Some important work on this latter subject, and on the related subject of Soviet policy toward Turkey at the time, has come out recently (especially a major article by Eduard Mark), and Fernande Schaud of Yale University is preparing a study based in part on an important trove of Stalin correspondence she found in Baku. If this work shows that Stalin was deterred by the prospect of armed conflict with the United States, this case would not support the conclusion that something short of a military confrontation might have prevented the satellization of eastern Europe. But it’s hard to know what this sort of work will reveal; these are all still very much open issues.

The German question is even more of an open issue, because here the Soviet position was weaker: the western powers, with the largest and most valuable part of Germany under their control, had a much stronger hand to play. Once again, this question has to be analyzed by studying key episodes very closely, and Ulam refers specifically to the 1947 Moscow conference and the Stalin Note business in 1952. Of these two, I personally think the 1947 affair is more puzzling. There is a vast, mostly German language, literature on the 1952 episode, and there is a good deal of evidence bearing on this issue in U.S., British and French archives. Many of the documents to be found in those western sources are quite suggestive, but the piece of evidence that struck me as decisive came from a Soviet source. This new evidence was cited on p. 127 of John Gaddis's *WE NOW KNOW*: "Soviet diplomat Vladimir Semyonov," Gaddis writes, "recalled Stalin asking: was it certain the Americans would turn the note down? Only when assured that it was did the Soviet leader give his approval, but with the warning that there would be grave consequences for Semyonov if this did not prove to be the case." (Gaddis's source for this is an unpublished 1994 paper by Alexei Filitov.) This, I thought--and if I'm wrong, I'd appreciate it if someone could tell me why--was as close to a smoking gun as we ever get in historical work.

There are other reasons for not taking the Stalin Note affair too seriously, but the 1947 business is another matter entirely. The puzzle here is that when you read the records of the Moscow conference, Soviet policy does not seem the least bit intransigent. But the Americans, and especially Secretary of State Marshall, had exactly the opposite impression. You have the sense, therefore, that you must be missing something; it really is very hard (for me, at any rate) to understand what exactly was going on there, and, in particular, whether the Soviets really would have accepted a unified, and, in the western sense, democratic Germany--and if so, at what price.

There is a more basic issue here having to do with Soviet policy on the German question as a whole throughout the Cold War period. The Soviets, like the western powers (and, indeed, like the Germans themselves) had to decide what was preferable from their point of view: the Cold War status quo, with western Germany dependent on the western powers for protection (and thus, basically, locked into the status quo, which was not a bad thing from the Soviet point of view), or a reunified Germany, not part of either bloc, perhaps ultimately a rearmed Germany, able to chart its own course in international affairs. Each alternative had something to say for it, and each had certain drawbacks: which, on balance, was better for the USSR? This had to have been a fundamental question for Soviet leaders in the early Cold War period; it would be very interesting to know how the issue was dealt with, how the discussion ran its course, what conclusions were reached, and how they affected actual Soviet policy. But in analyzing this issue, scholars should not simply assume that the reunification-cum-neutralization concept was obviously the way to go--that is, that a solution of this sort would obviously have been better for everyone all around.

Ulam concludes that the time has come to get away from what he calls the "who is guilty" syndrome," and to study the Cold War in a more dispassionate way. He is certainly right about this; this sort of approach is, in fact, long overdue. But it is not the new archival material from the east that will bring about a new understanding of the Cold War. (I personally am less impressed with what we have been getting in recent years from Soviet and other former east-bloc

sources than Ulam evidently is; we have, I think, gotten a lot of interesting tidbits, but nothing like the sort of evidence we really need.) The basic approach is changing because the question of who is to be blamed for the Cold War now seems terribly old-fashioned and ahistorical, while at the same time people are coming to see how interesting the straight historical issues in fact are. Those issues can be dealt with quite effectively by examining existing sources with a fresh mind--and by far the great bulk of the relevant material comes from western archives.

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