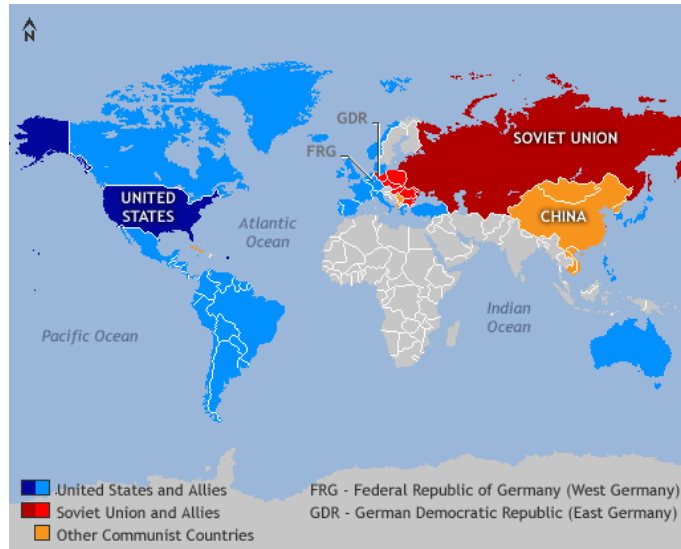


Recent Tensions between Russia and the West

By Fiona Allison

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century relations between Russia and the West have been strained at best. Although allies during World War I - until the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 - by the time of World War II, the West was more reluctant to have the Communist USSR as an ally. However, this was forced on them by Germany's invasion of the USSR in 1941; by this point in the war Britain was glad of the alliance. As soon as the war was over, diplomatic relations between the USSR and the West began to deteriorate, beginning with disagreements over the division



The Cold War divided the world into two hostile blocs
http://encarta.msn.com/media_701722302/cold_war_alliances.html

of Germany. Britain and the United States had every reason to be apprehensive about the USSR's intentions considering that Stalin had incorporated most of Eastern Europe into his vast Soviet Empire. In the 1950s, the Cold War between the USSR and the West escalated, and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the threat of a nuclear war was very real. The USSR was determined to become the world's biggest super-power, supplanting the United States, and Communist influence spread through South-east Asia, countries in Africa and parts of Latin America.



The Berlin Wall came down in 1989 signalling the end of the Cold War
http://europa.eu/abc/12lessons/lesson_2/index_en.htm

In the very late 1980s and early 1990s a period of democracy ensued, but also of economic troubles, during which many Soviet Republics, such as the Ukraine and Kazakhstan, broke away and formed independent nations. In recent years, Russia has moved once again toward a one-party monopoly, and tensions with the West are on the rise. This Discovery Guide analyses the current political climate in Russia and examines its relations with the West in order to explain to what degree, if any, there has been a return to the Cold War era. It will review relations between Britain and Russia, the USA

and Russia, as well as Russia's relations with its former Soviet states, its economy and the recent presidential elections.

Britain and Russia



After its fall the Soviet Union fragmented into Republics, with Russia by far the largest
<http://magicstatistics.com/2007/05/31/soviet-union-redux/>

Although the Cold War ended peacefully in 1991 with the complete collapse of Communism in Europe, Russia and its former Soviet states have struggled with the transition to capitalism and liberal democracy, and many serious issues remain. While some countries of Eastern Europe, such as Poland, developed effective economies, this has been far from true in Russia. Due to the financial chaos that occurred immediately after the collapse of Communism and the concomitant opportunities for corruption, Russia became a land of oligarchy. The transition to capi-

talism from over 70 years of Communist rule proved disastrous. To implement capitalist features such as private enterprise into a country which could not, politically or financially, support them was regressive for Russia. What happened in post-Communist Russia is reminiscent of other capitalist countries in the early 20th century; completely unregulated economies lead to massive disparities throughout society. And to an extent the problems Russia experienced can be likened to the economic and political disasters of central Europe during the inter-war period, from 1919-1939. Under Boris Yeltsin economic reforms only made matters worse. The years 1993-94 were particularly bad, with uncontrollable inflation, a massive drop in production and widespread unemployment. Conflict with Chechnya began under Yeltsin and continues even now. Other republics have struggled without the Soviet Union, notably Moldova, whose Transdniestr region declared it was independent from Moldova and part of a Soviet Union which had ceased to exist. No other countries have recognised this independence and it actually caused a short civil war which involved Russian troops in Moldova. This issue remains unresolved today. Relations between Russia and its other former republics have varied. The more successful countries, which have gone on to join the EU, are going from strength to strength and try to have as few dealings with Russia as is possible. Poland is a prime example of this; since independence it has become more Western orientated in its government and economic policies. Other countries haven't fared as well under capitalism and rely heavily on Russia for supplies and financial help. Unfortunately for these countries Russia has taken full advantage of this dependence. For example Georgia has had much interference from Russia in its domestic affairs and over some small disputed territory, Russia is also actively trying to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO by

threatening a major crisis if they do. However the situation in Russia began to change since Putin was elected president in 2000. Russia's military strength and economy have increased vastly, largely due to Russia's massive energy resources, many of which are exported to the West and former Soviet states.



Alexander Litvinenko in his hospital bed
http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=557508&in_page_id=176

Although Britain has endeavoured to maintain good relations with Putin, the murder of former spy Alexander Litvinenko in London in November 2006 caused a sharp deterioration. The murder could have come straight from a Cold War novel, but it was a serious security issue for Britain, because the poison, radioactive polonium (PO210), was administered in a public place and traces of the substance were detected elsewhere in the area. Moscow refused to extradite the main suspect in the murder, Andrei Lugovi, and in response Britain expelled four Russian diplomats, returning them to Moscow. While these political moves may seem petty and insignificant, more accusations of Cold War-esque spying have been aired and there could be serious implications both for Britain and for the West in general.

Moscow next accused the British Council offices in St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg of being a front for spies and ordered them to close down. The Kremlin has since cracked down on other foreign and domestic NGO's, particularly groups supporting human or gay and lesbian rights, according to a report by Amnesty International.¹ The Russian government is unsupportive and even repressive of homosexuality, unlike the West. This conservative cultural outlook is exacerbated by the dwindling population of Russia, and an increase in AIDS and the HIV virus. Britain has hit back with counter claims from the director general of MI5, Jonathon Evans. He has stated: "Since the end of the Cold War we have seen no decrease in the numbers of undeclared Russian intelligence officers in the UK – at the Russian embassy and associated organisations conducting covert activity in this country. So despite the Cold War ending nearly two decades ago, my service is still expending resources to defend the UK against unreconstructed attempts by Russia, China and others to spy on us."² This is a startling statement of fact, not an anonymous rumour, from the head of Britain's security service.

The United States and Russia



Plan for missile defense to be based in Poland or elsewhere in mid-Europe

<http://poland.usembassy.gov/news/missile-defense2/proposed-missile-defense-assets-in-europe/proposed-u.s.-missile-defense-assets-in-europe/>

to feel threatened by US plans to build missile detection and defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, and that has compelled them to renew the arms race. Although Washington has repeatedly stated these defence systems are to guard against attack from Iran, Russia claims that they are directed against it. Russia has now gone one step further, and threatened to deploy nuclear missiles in the Baltic if the United States persists with its plans.³ Recently, too, Russia has been provocative in its military exercises and demonstrations. Although its missiles were tested in neutral waters, NATO was closely monitoring the activities. Last year RAF planes were scrambled to intercept Russian jets that had apparently gone off course and flown into restricted British airspace over Scotland.

Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia on February 17, 2008 has spurred the latest threat from Russia to the United States. Russia is one of the few countries which refuse to recognise Kosovo's independence, whereas Britain and the United States have done so. The Russian Foreign Ministry released a chilling statement shortly after the United States declared its support for Kosovo - "We confirmed our principled position on the unacceptability of unilateral actions by Pristina [Kosovo's capital city] declaring its independence. We underlined the dangerous consequences of such a step, which threatens the destruction of world order and international stability which have developed over the decades."⁴ This is yet another example of Russia's increased aggression towards the United States, Britain and Western Europe.

It is not only Britain that Russia has been challenging; the Kremlin has threatened the United States on numerous occasions and is on record as declaring that a new arms race has begun. Russia has been demonstrating its rapidly growing armed forces as it once again strives to compete with the United States on the world stage. The Kremlin has portrayed Russia as a victim of NATO and Western expansionism, a view not shared by the West. Russia claims

Russian Presidential Elections 2008

The Russian presidential elections which took place on March 2, 2008, attracted worldwide attention. The focus was on the run-up to the elections and the candidates, rather than the actual outcome, which was a foregone conclusion due to the repression of the opposition candidates. Putin's chosen successor, Dmitry Medvedev, unsurprisingly won a landslide victory -



Sentenced to jail . . . Chess grandmaster and opposition leader Garry Kasparov.

Photo: Reuters

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/kasparov-sent-to-rison/2007/11/25/1195925651972.html>

and immediately declared Putin as his prime minister. They have merely exchanged positions; it is widely thought that Putin will be the one really in power. This signifies that relations are highly unlikely to improve, and that Russia will continue threatening the West. Outside observers of the Russian election were concerned in particular about the treatment of one of the opposition candidates; former world chess champion Garry Kasparov. A long-time denouncer of Putin's policies, Kasparov is well known outside Russia, and he appeared on a number of topical programmes in the United States before his campaign was abruptly terminated. This happened because Kremlin laws require at least 500 supporters to meet in a hall in Moscow to endorse a presidential candidate. However, Kasparov was prevented from renting a hall of sufficient size by the deadline and thus had no option but to withdraw from the elections. Kasparov had already been arrested a number of times for organising protest marches in Moscow and St. Petersburg in opposition to Putin's government. Other candidates were accused of forging signatures of their supporters and subsequently banned from standing. The remaining opposition candidates missed out on essential publicity as state-owned television channels and newspapers gave them little or no media coverage. Medvedev by contrast enjoyed much coverage, especially on the television alongside Putin. It should be noted that the Kremlin controls two out three main television channels whilst the state owned Gazprom controls the third. Two of the three Russian news agencies are also owned by the state, constituting a lack of press freedom often criticised by the West.

The elections had been surrounded in controversy since the decision earlier this year by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, to boycott them due to limitations imposed by Moscow. Immediately after the elections the *only* Western watchdog which had been able to observe, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, PACE, stated that "Russia's democratic potential was unfulfilled."⁶ Accusations of electoral fraud also came from the runner-up, Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party, although his vote total was nowhere near that of Medvedev. The election results mean that re-

lations with the West are unlikely to change, especially as Medvedev is regarded as Putin's puppet; effectively it will be the latter running the country.

Relations with former Republics were a key issue in the election, as many Russians resent their loss. Moscow fears that the nearby Republic of Georgia will gain a pro-Western government as happened in the Ukraine in the so-called Orange Revolution. Russia in many ways behaves towards its nearest former Soviet states as though it still controls them; it has interfered in numerous regional conflicts over territories supplying arms to their favoured side.

In the case of Moldova, mentioned earlier, Russian troops supplied arms and fought for the residents of Transdniestr, even now Russian 'peace-keeping' soldiers remain in the area. Moldova is another example of a former republic heavily reliant on Russia for its energy supplies. Russia's stance towards its former Soviet territories is still criticised by Western leaders, as the Kremlin, under the guise of Gazprom, wields much power and influence



A Soviet era mural in Transdniestr where the Russian military remains a presence.

2006 Magnum Photos, Jonas Bendiksen

over countries such as Georgia and Ukraine. It is almost as though Russia resents their political independence but still enjoys some authority by being able to control their energy supplies. On many occasions Gazprom has cut off gas supplies to Georgia (over apparently unpaid bills) to ensure the country's cooperation with Moscow. Russia has also threatened serious consequences to Europe and Georgia should the latter join NATO, an action which would further isolate Russia. Tension remains regarding unresolved conflicts over small territories between Russia and Georgia. It must be remembered that Russia is not an EU member, not an ally of the USA and not an ally of China; although this makes it a potential partner to any it also makes them a potential enemy as it stands somewhat alone.

Conclusion

Despite all the above factors and the Kremlin's current anti-Western stance, a new Cold War is highly unlikely. While the world is a very different place to that of forty or fifty years ago, it is true that there is still a culture of spying, distrust and political rows. Russia deeply resents Western interference in their matters such as the elections and issues of human rights. Although tensions are unlikely to ease with the West in the near future, particularly with the United States, money does make the world go round. The massive impact of economic globalisation and lucrative trade agreements have so far prevented these political disagreements from escalating any further than verbally. Russia's economic boom is mostly due to its exports of natural gas and oil. In fact oil, natural gas, metals and timber add up to more than 80 percent of Russia's exports and makes up more than 30 percent of government income.⁷ The state-run Gazprom supplies one-third of Western Europe's gas; this includes Britain.⁸ According to Gazprom, in Russia's vast but largely inaccessible expanses it has the largest natural gas and oil reserves in the world.⁹ Russia needs the revenues from its gas and other exports as much as Western Europe needs the supply. Taking this into account, the West and Russia need to maintain their trade agreements, for the health of the economies on both sides. Russia has been so verbally aggressive towards the West because there is not one pro-Europe or pro-West party in the Russian parliament. Strong nationalistic feelings have increased in Russia; the general stance of the Kremlin is being enforced on the Russian people, by adding to a sense of Russian isolation and existing Russian nationalist sentiment. Putin did immensely well in shrewdly turning the instability of the 1990s to his own advantage, through blaming the economic crises and hyperinflation which occurred immediately after the collapse of Communism on Western interference, and on Russia's pro-Western leaders at the time. Putin has thus capitalised on, and intensified anti-West feeling throughout Russia and has been using the growing economy to reinforce this after Russian was left weak in the years immediately following the collapse of Communism. Under Putin the country has gained new strength on a global scale, largely due to its oil and natural gas.



Europe receives 80 percent of Russian gas imports through pipelines that cross Ukraine
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/10/03/wrussia103.xml>

By definition a cold war, as opposed to a 'hot' or shooting war, is a state of extreme hostility between global superpowers, including an arms race, ideological and diplomatic conflict, and hostile measures of many kinds except military confrontation. In this sense a political feud,

containing some elements of a cold war between the superpowers, is in the early stages, but not the *new* Cold War as the ideological conflict is lacking today. It is impossible to say what will happen between Russia and the West in the near future. Perhaps disagreements can be reconciled though at the moment this seems unlikely; a complete breakdown in diplomacy is unexpected but is still a possibility. For the West this will be the worst case scenario and Western nations are wary of provoking Russia any further, but Russia also needs to ease its aggressive rhetoric in order to maintain global stability and prevent these political rows from escalating into something deeper.

Footnotes

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