The Rise Of The Super Power Essay, Research Paper

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April 24, 2000

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U.S. Foreign Policy

The Rise of the Superpower

Russia and the United States grew to become the main superpowers in the arena

of international relations during a specific time in history. The emergence of these two

countries as superpowers can be traced back to World War II. In order to be a

superpower, a nation needs to have a strong economy, an overpowering military,

immense political power, and a strong national ideology (Aga-Rossi 65). It was World

War II, and its results that caused each of these countries to experience such a plurality of

power (Ovyany 97). Before the war, both nations were fit to be described as great

powers, but it would be incorrect to say that they were superpowers at that point.

To understand how the second World War impacted these nations so greatly, the

causes of the war must be examined. The United States gained its strength in world

affairs from its status as an economic power. Prior to the war, America was the world?s

largest producer. During the same time in Russia, Stalin was implementing his ?five year

plan? to modernize the Soviet economy. From these situations, similar foreign policies

resulted.

It is important to discuss the leaders and their strategies during this time to

understand how these countries became superpowers. Many U.S. citizens believed that

America entered the war in order to save capitalist investments in Europe. Whether this

is the case or not, President Roosevelt signed the Neutrality Act of 1935, making it illegal

for the United States to ship arms to the antagonists of any conflict (Aga-Rossi 68). The

act also stated that the antagonists could only buy non-armaments from the U.S., and even

these were only to be bought with cash (Aga-Rossi 69).

In contrast, although Stalin was interested in European affairs it was only to the

extent to keep Russia out of war. Stalin wanted to consolidate Communist power and

modernize the country?s industry. The Soviet Union was committed to collective action

for peace, as long as that commitment did not mean that the Soviet Union would in turn

face a potential Nazi attack. Examples of this can be seen in the Soviet Union?s attempts

to achieve a mutual assistance treaty with Britain and France. These treaties, however,

were designed more to create security for the West, as opposed to keeping all three

signatories from harm. At the same time, Stalin was attempting to polarize both the

Anglo-French, and the Axis powers against each other. The important result of this was

the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, which petitioned Poland and allowed Hitler to start

the war (Divine 31). Another side-effect of Stalin?s policy of playing both sides was that

it caused incredible distrust towards the Soviets from the Western powers after 1940.

Author Robert A. Divine adds, ?this was due in part to the fact that Stalin made several

demands for both influence in the Dardanelles, and for Bulgaria to be recognized as a

Soviet independent? (31).

The seeds of superpowerdom lies here, R.J. Overy wrote ?stability in Europe

might have been achieved through the existence of powers so strong that they could

impose their will on the whole of the international system, as has been the case since

1945? (215). At the time, there was no power in the world that could achieve such a feat.

Britain and France were in sovereign decline, and more concerned about colonial

economics than the stability of Europe. Both imperial powers assumed that

?empire-building? would necessarily be an inevitable feature of the world system.

German aggression could have been stifled early, had the imperial powers acted

simultaneously. The memories of World War One, however, were too powerful and the

general public would not condone a military solution at that point (Morrison 35).

After the economic crisis of the 1930?s, Britain and France lost much of their

former international standing. As the world markets plummeted, so did their relative

power. The two nations were determined to maintain their status as great powers, without

relying on the U.S. or Russia for support of any kind. They went to war only because

further appeasement would have only served to remove from them their little remaining

world standing and prestige (LeFerber 127).

The creation of a non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany can

be viewed as an example of imperial decline as well. The common desire of many of the

great European powers for a change in the world state system meant that either a massive

war would have to be fought; or that one of the great powers would need to attempt a leap

to superpower status (Dukes 101). One of two ways war could have been avoided was

for the United State or Russia to have taken powerful and vigorous action against

Germany in 1939. Robert A. Divine holds that ?superpowerdom gives a nation the

framework by which a nation is able to extend globally the reach of its power and

influence? (32). This can be seen as the ability to make other nations, especially in the

Third World, to act in ways that the superpower prefers, even if this is not in the weaker

nation?s self interest.

The question must be raised, were the United States and Russia superpowers even

then, could certain actions taken by them have had such significant ramifications for

international order? It must be concluded that, while they were not yet superpowers, they

certainly were great powers with an incredible amount of influence that accompanies such

status. Neither the U.S. nor the Soviet Union possessed the international framework

necessary to be a super power at this time. It is likely that frameworks similar to NATO

or the Warsaw Pact could have been developed, but such infrastructures would have been

on much a smaller scale (Smith 7). At this time, neither the U.S. nor Russia had

developed the overwhelming advantages that they possessed at the end of the war.

The United States did not become a superpower by accident. Roosevelt had a

definite European policy that was designed from the start to secure a leading role for the

United States. After the war, Roosevelt perceived that the way to dominate world affairs

was to reduce Europe?s international role. The creation of a permanent superpower

rivalry with Russia was seen as the safest way to ensure world stability. Regarding

Roosevelt?s policy, author Elena Aga-Rossi states, ?Roosevelt sought to reduce Europe?s

geopolitical role by ensuring the fragmentation of the continent into small, relatively

powerless, and ethnically homogenous states? (81). These goals are very similar to those

of Stalin. Roosevelt was certain that World War II would destroy continental Europe as a

military and economic force, removing Germany and France from the stage of world

powers (Aga-Rossi 82). This would leave the United States, Great Britain, and Russia as

the last remaining European world powers.

It might be asked why Roosevelt did not plot the fall of the British Empire as well.

A cynical answer to this is that Roosevelt understood that the United States was not

powerful enough to check the Soviet Union?s power in Europe by itself. It made sense

because the United States and Britain are cultural cousins, the most extensive solution

would be to continue the tradition of friendliness. As far as economic or military

competition, Roosevelt knew that if he could open the British Empire to free trade it

would not be able to effectively compete with the United States.

It is fair to say that Roosevelt had originally planned to have a system of three

superpowers. Those powers being, the U.S., the UK, and the USSR. After it was seen

that either the Germans or the Russians would dominate Eastern Europe, the plan was

forced to change. It shifted from one where the U.S. and Great Britain would keep order

in Europe, to one where Great Britain and Russia would keep order in Europe as local

superpowers. The U.S. would act as a world wide mediator.

Roosevelt also hoped for the creation of an Anglo-American-Russia world police

force. However, he underestimated the power of the Russian ideology. He believed that

the Russians would back away from communism for the sake of greater stability in the

West. Roosevelt saw the Soviet Union as a country like any other, regardless of its

preoccupation with security (Overy 216). Such as the safety corridor in Eastern Europe

that Stalin insisted on. Yet Roosevelt thought this could be explained by the cultural and

historical background of Russia.

It was not thought unreasonable to request a barrier of satellite states to provide a

sense of security, given that the Soviet Union had been invaded at least four times since

1904 (Ovyany 98). It was felt that granting the Soviet Union some territory in Eastern

and Central Europe would satisfy their political desires for territory. Yet after World War

II, Soviet expansion and their quest for acquiring territory seemed unlimited. Roosevelt

felt that the position in Eastern Europe, vis-?-vis the Soviet Union, was analogous to that

of Latin America, vis-?-vis the United States (Dukes 46). He saw that there should be

definite spheres of influence, as long as it was clear that the Soviet Union was not to

interfere with the governments of the affected nations. Author Tony Smith states ?the

reason that Roosevelt did not object to a large portion of Eastern Europe coming under

the totalitarian control of the Soviet Union was that he believed the weakness in the

Soviet economy caused by the war would require Stalin to seek Western aid? (9).

Therefore opening the Russians to Western influence.

Many historians feel that Roosevelt was simply naive to believe that the Soviet

Union would act in such a way. Writer, Arthur Schlesinger saw the geopolitical and

ideological differences between the United States and the Soviet Union. He stressed that

the ideological differences were the most important ?the two nations were constructed on

opposite and profoundly antagonistic principles. They were divided by the most

significant and fundamental disagreements over human rights, individual liberties,

cultural freedom, the role of civil society, the direction of history, and the destiny of man?

(45). Yet it is much easier to comment on events of the past with the hindsight that

Roosevelt simply did not have.

Stalin?s views regarding the possibility of reconciliation between the Soviet Union

and the West were similar. He thought that the Russian Revolution created two converse

camps: Anglo-America and Soviet Russia. Stalin felt that the best way to ensure the

continuation of the communist world revolution was to continually annex the countries

bordering the Soviet Union, instead of attempting to foster revolution in the more

advanced industrial societies (Dukes 102).

The creation of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe did not come as a total surprise.

Roosevelt thought that America?s position after the war, vis-?-vis the rest of the world,

would put him in a very good position to impose his view of the post-war world order.

Others predicted that after the German defeat, the Russians would be able to impose any

territorial settlement desired in Central Europe and the Balkans. World War II caused the

Soviet Union to rapidly evolve from a military farce, to a military superpower (Dukes

102). In 1940, it was hoped that if the Soviet Union was attacked, they could hold off

long enough for the West to help fight them off with reinforcements.

In 1945, the Soviet Army was marching triumphantly through Berlin. It could

have been said that this event was planned by Stalin in the same way that Roosevelt

seemed to have planned to achieve world supremacy (Smith 87). Even though Stalin

desired to see Russian dominance in Europe, he did not have a systematic plan to achieve

it. Stalin was an opportunist and a skillful one. He demanded that Britain and America

recognize territory gained by the Soviet Union in pacts and treaties that it had signed with

Germany.

Stalin?s main plan seemed to be to conquer all the territory that his armies could

reach, and to create socialist states within it. From this it can be seen that one of the

primary reasons for the superpower rivalry was Roosevelt?s misunderstanding of the

Soviet system. Writer Elena Aga-Rossi states ?Roosevelt and his advisors thought that

giving the Soviet Union control of Central and Eastern Europe, would result in the

creation of states controlled somewhat similar to the way in which the United States

controlled Cuba after the Platt Amendment? (70). The State Department assumed that the

USSR would simply control the foreign policy of the satellite nations, leaving the

individual countries open to Western trade. This idea was alien to Soviet leaders, ?to be

controlled by the Soviet Union at all was to become a socialist state? (Ovyany 99). Stalin

assumed that his form of control over these states would mean the complete Sovietization

of their societies, whereas Roosevelt was blind to the internal logic of the Soviet system.

Roosevelt?s fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Soviet state can be

forgiven. Once it has been realized that an apparently peaceful nature was apparent at the

time, and that it had existed for a relatively short time. The United States wanted to

?eschew isolationism, and set an example of international cooperation-operation in a

world ripe for United States leadership? (Morrison 78). Yet, another attempt from the

U.S. to spread its ideology to the rest of the world. The United States believed that the

world at large, especially the Third World, would be attracted to the political views of the

West. The main goal of the U.S. was to show that democracy and free trade provided

citizens of a nation with a higher standard of living. It has been seen that Roosevelt and

his administration thought that this appeal would extent itself into the Soviet sphere of

influence. Yet, the Soviet Union was organizing its ideals around the vision of a

continuing struggle between two fundamentally antagonistic ideologies (Morrison 79).

At the end of the war, the United States was in the singular position of having the

world?s largest and strongest economy. This allowed them to fill the power gap left in

Europe by the declining imperial powers such as France and Germany.

In conclusion, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union possessed strong ideologies.

The ways in which they attempted to diffuse their ideas throughout the world after the

war classifies them into the category of being superpowers. It is the global dimension of

their political, military, and economic presence that makes the United States and the

Soviet Union superpowers. It was also the rapid expansion of the national and

international structures of the Soviet Union and the United States during the war that

allowed them to assume their roles as superpowers.

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