

The Berlin Wall and Missed Opportunities

Exclusive: The U.S. State Department's obsession with "information warfare" as a strategic weapon has made U.S. credibility one more casualty of the Ukraine crisis, along with any remaining trust in the mainstream U.S. media. It was not always thus, laments ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Which President to believe on Ukraine: Obama or Putin? Which top diplomat: Kerry or Lavrov? Which country is more to be trusted: USA or Russia?

For the first half of my adult life, "USA" was the instinctive answer one that seemed undergirded by real-life evidence, not simply blind patriotism. Now, white hats and black hats have merged into a drab gray; in fact, at times the hats seem to have switched heads, as inconvenient reality shatters instincts and preconceptions. And, as Aldous Huxley once put it, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you mad."

To cite a small but telling example, is it really being "sanctimonious," as President Barack Obama would have us believe, to think that those who ordered and implemented torture in our name should be held accountable? It was not always thus.

I have lived through a lot of war and not enough peace in my 75 years. I was born on the day that Stalin and Hitler formally agreed to carve up Poland, a week before German tanks invaded that country. Yet, by far the saddest sequence of events during the second half of my adult life began 25 years ago, when the fall of the Berlin Wall brought with it a genuine opportunity for peace in a Europe "whole and free."

That is how then-President George H. W. Bush foresaw the implications of that epochal event. But, as has now become abundantly clear, that opportunity was squandered by those preferring a divided Europe and the perceived advantages of continuing to marginalize Russia as a preternatural, perpetual *bête noire*.

The current hysteria around Official Washington over Russia's reaction to hostile developments in neighboring Ukraine simply does not measure up to genuine concerns that existed during the Cold War.

On Aug. 13, 1961, the East Germans, with Moscow's blessing, began to build a wall separating Communist-controlled East Berlin from West Berlin, and sealing off the well-worn "escape route" from the East to West Berlin and ultimately freedom somewhere in the West.

What a graphic demonstration of the bankruptcy of Communism, that millions living in East Germany and other East European "satellites" of the USSR had already chosen to leave home for an uncertain but hopeful future in the West via Berlin. For skeptics who saw little difference between East and West, John Kennedy's famously advised, "Let them come to Berlin."

The Communist leaders running East Germany were so desperate to stem the flow of emigrants that they gave orders to shoot those attempting to climb over or chisel through the Wall. And how alarming was the weeklong standoff between American and Soviet tanks just 100 meters apart at the Wall's Checkpoint Charlie in late October 1961.

In the fall of 1961, I had just completed a stint as "adjunct instructor" of Russian at Fordham University in a New York State-designed program to equip high school teachers to teach Russian. I was a year away from an M.A. in Russian Studies.

The building of the Berlin Wall was the second clear affirmation given me that I had chosen a field of study that enabled me easily to respond to Kennedy's inaugural challenge, fresh in my ears, to "ask what you can do for your country." The first affirmation had come on Oct. 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite, just three weeks after I had chosen, as a college freshman, to study Russian.

The strategic danger from Russia took ominous shape when, in the fall of 1962, the Soviets emplaced medium-range nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles in Cuba. (We learned only later that some of them were actually armed and ready to fire.)

Through a tough but flexible combination of public and private diplomacy seldom seen in Washington before or since, President John F. Kennedy got the Soviets to back down. A pivotal moment came when U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson unveiled high-altitude reconnaissance photos of the Soviet missile base in Cuba, top-secret information that convinced the world that the United States was telling the truth.

Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev eventually removed the missiles (as part of a negotiated arrangement with Kennedy), but Moscow's brazen attempt to steal a strategic march on the U.S. had brought the world very close to a nuclear exchange and left deep traumatic scars.

How close we came to war over Cuba became clear to me in a very personal way when I reported on active duty at Fort Benning, Georgia, on Nov. 3, 1962. The Infantry Officer Orientation Course in which I was enrolled had virtually no weapons for us to train with. Most had been swept up a few weeks earlier by an

Army division headed south to Key West less than 100 miles from Cuba.

Later, while posted in West Germany I was not far from the border with Czechoslovakia when, on Aug. 21, 1968, the Soviets sent in tanks to crush the experiment in democracy called the "Prague Spring." A subsequent assignment as chief of CIA's Soviet Foreign Policy Branch left me in little doubt as to which country was America's "main enemy" or "glavniy vrag," the term used by the Soviets for the U.S.

There was widespread feeling that this Cold War could not basically change in any near future. But just two decades later, the Berlin Wall fell amid widespread unrest in the rest of Eastern Europe. And there was a real chance for lasting peace in a Europe "whole and free" from Portugal to the Urals.

Blowing a Unique Opportunity

The unwelcome truth is that it was the U.S. that bears primary responsibility for sabotaging that unique opportunity; Washington decided to expand rather than disband NATO to match the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact. To those who cared about the U.S. relationship with Russia, this was a profound disappointment.

Regarding U.S. assurances that NATO would not be expanded, former Ambassador to the USSR Jack Matlock took copious notes at the summit between U.S. President George H. W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in Malta just three weeks after the Berlin Wall fell. Matlock was there again two months later (early February 1990) in Moscow when promises were made during the visit of then-Secretary of State James Baker, who told Gorbachev that if Russia would acquiesce to the peaceful reunification of Germany, NATO would not move "one inch" eastward. [See "[U.S. Welched on Promise NATO Would Not 'Leapfrog' Over Germany.](#)"]

Some of the brightest thinkers about East-West relations have lamented the U.S. failure to live up to those assurances. For example, former Democratic Sen. (and Rhodes scholar) Bill Bradley called NATO's expansion eastward, reneging on Washington's explicit promise not to do so, a fundamental blunder of monumental proportions." In a speech on March 4, 2008, Sen. Bradley bemoaned what happened as a "terribly sad thing."

A month before Bradley's speech, U.S. Ambassador to Russia William Burns (now Deputy Secretary of State) was warned by Sergey Lavrov, Russian foreign minister then as now, that Moscow was unalterably opposed to NATO's plan to make Ukraine a member of the military alliance, regarding that as a dire strategic threat to Russia.

We have unique insight into this critical warning, courtesy of Pvt. Chelsea

(formerly Bradley) Manning and WikiLeaks, who made available the text of a State Department cable dated Feb. 1, 2008, from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow bearing the unusual title: "NYET MEANS NYET: RUSSIA'S NATO ENLARGEMENT REDLINES."

The IMMEDIATE precedence that the cable bears shows that Ambassador Burns was addressing a priority issue under active consideration in Washington. Here is Burns's introduction to the message that he sent to Washington after his lecture from Lavrov:

"Summary. Following a muted first reaction to Ukraine's intent to seek a NATO membership action plan at the [upcoming] Bucharest summit, Foreign Minister Lavrov and other senior officials have reiterated strong opposition, stressing that Russia would view further eastward expansion as a potential military threat. NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains 'an emotional and neuralgic' issue for Russia, but strategic policy considerations also underlie strong opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia.

"In Ukraine, these include fears that the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene."

Ambassador Burns continued: "Russia has made it clear that it would have to 'seriously review' its entire relationship with Ukraine and Georgia in the event of NATO inviting them to join. This could include major impacts on energy, economic, and political-military engagement, with possible repercussions throughout the region and into Central and Western Europe."

In his closing comment Burns wrote: "Russia's opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia is both emotional and based on perceived strategic concerns about the impact on Russia's interest in the region. While Russian opposition to the first round of NATO enlargement in the mid-1990s was strong, Russia now feels itself able to respond more forcefully to what it perceives as actions contrary to its national interests." [For more details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[How NATO Jabs Russia on Ukraine.](#)"]

But the Lavrov/Burns warning fell on deaf ears. On April 3, 2008, a NATO summit in Bucharest formally announced: "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."

(Paragraph 23 of the NATO Declaration)

This past spring, with real trouble brewing in Ukraine, Lavrov returned to the subject in an interview with Bloomberg News on May 14, 2014. He said Russia remains "categorically against" Ukraine joining NATO, recounting Moscow's

longstanding concerns about NATO's eastward expansion. He thus explained Moscow's position to a large English-speaking international listeners, many of whom were learning about this history for the first time.

Ukraine's NATO Membership

Even earlier, in a Memorandum for the President dated May 4, 2014, the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity called on President Obama to ask NATO to rescind the part of the April 3, 2008 Bucharest summit declaration that states: "We agreed today that these countries [Georgia and Ukraine] will become members of NATO."

The memo added: "Once that intention is disavowed, you, [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, and Ukrainian leaders should be able to work toward a Ukraine with considerable regional autonomy domestically and neutrality in foreign policy. Finland is a good model. It lives in Russia's shadow but, since it shuns membership in NATO, it is not seen as a threat to Russian national security and is left alone to prosper."

The Memorandum, which called for an early Obama-Putin summit, got considerable coverage in Russian print and electronic media, both controlled and independent. It got none in U.S. media; and we are still awaiting a response from the White House.

It will be highly interesting to watch how NATO's leaders choose to deal with this central issue or to duck it at the upcoming NATO summit on Sept. 4-5 in Wales, since it seems a safe bet that the violence in Ukraine will continue.

Meanwhile, the steady flow of anti-Russian propaganda coming from the U.S. State Department and the simplistic good guy/bad guy narrative favored by the U.S. media (with Putin as the ultimate villain) have done a huge disservice to Americans trying to understand the actual background to the Ukraine crisis and the role played by the U.S. and NATO.

It is certainly no longer easy to say which side in this and other global controversies is more trustworthy. [For more details on this credibility question, see Consortiumnews.com's "Who's the Propagandist: US or RT?"]

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. During his former 27-year career as a CIA analyst, he was chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch, chaired National Intelligence Estimates (as Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Western Europe), and during President Ronald Reagan's first term briefed his top national security aides mornings with *The President's Daily Brief*.
