

NATO forever?

Bertrand Russell



First published in March 1968, this essay asks a pertinent question.

The opening of the Cold War is now beginning to receive the critical attention that it deserves. Until recently, the fervour of the religious crusade kept most of us orthodox. I like to think that my own attitudes have been not untypical. In the period before Hungary and Suez, the late Isaac Deutscher used to visit me at my home in Richmond. I would sit silently as he propounded his views on the Cold War. His scrupulous weighing of the evidence and his balanced presentation of opposing views were always scholarly, but I remained unconvinced. For me, Stalin's terror and the introduction of the one-party state throughout eastern Europe, following the purges and mock trials of the thirties, made unorthodoxy unpalatable, even unthinkable.

Ten years later, however, Deutscher was more persuasive. At a 'teach-in' at Berkeley, California, in May 1965, he summarised¹ his view of the Cold War. Russia had lost 20 million dead in the Second World War and countless million wounded. The war had been fought over its territory, backwards and forwards, with a ferocity unknown in the west, and its industry and economy were in ruins. This was the nation supposedly poised to overrun the rest of Europe to the Atlantic!

Deutscher was more persuasive because, as Stalin receded into history, he was able to quote more authoritative western sources. Ten days before his speech at Berkeley, a lecture² had been delivered by George F. Kennan at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva. Kennan, at the US Embassy in Moscow until 1946, advocate of the containment of Russia and

director of the policy planning staff of the State Department, was a leading architect of the theory which called NATO into being. ‘After the Second World War,’ said Kennan at Geneva, ‘American policy-makers could see communism only in terms of a military threat. In creating NATO ... they had drawn a line arbitrarily across Europe against an attack no one was planning ... After the war, the Soviet Union did not want to overrun other countries ... The Atlantic Pact was unfortunate because it was quite unnecessary ... It was perfectly clear to anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of the Russia of that day, that the Soviet leaders had no intention of attempting to advance their cause by launching military attacks with their own armed forces across frontiers.’ NATO could have been conceived, thought Kennan, only by ‘people capable of envisaging a favourable future for Europe only along the lines of a total military defeat of the Soviet Union or of some spectacular, inexplicable and wholly improbable collapse of the political will of its leaders.’ NATO, according to Kennan, was addressed to the wrong problem. It had ‘added depth and recalcitrance to the division of the continent and virtually forced individual countries to choose sides.’ From the time of its formation, ‘the peaceful solution of Europe’s greatest problems on any basis other than that of the permanent division of Germany and the continent, with the implied consignment of the eastern European peoples to inclusion for an indefinite period in the Soviet sphere of power, became theoretically almost inconceivable ... The problem of German unification, the removal of the division of the continent generally, the reintegration of the peoples of central and eastern Europe into the European community ... all these great objectives, vital to any hopeful vision of Europe’s future as also to the prospects for world peace, were sacrificed at a stroke.’

Kennan’s career underlines the full weight of his criticisms. Nearly all of his life as a professional diplomat has been spent in central and eastern Europe, or in Washington. In April 1947 he was chosen by Secretary of State Marshall to create a new department for the formulation of foreign policy.

Making full use of Kennan’s admissions, Deutscher went on at Berkeley to argue that the Truman doctrine and NATO, which proclaimed itself concerned for freedom, had hastened the Stalinization of eastern Europe. The ejection of communists from the governments of France and Italy had preceded Stalin’s creation of a single-party system in eastern Europe. Stalin, for all the horrors of his rule, was profoundly conservative, particularly in foreign affairs.

Lord Ismay, an early secretary-general of NATO, sought to dismiss all

this. In his book *NATO, the First Five Years, 1949-54*, he opened his first chapter with an account of the Kremlin's 'expansionist policies'. Under this heading he listed such items as the Vietnamese resistance to French attempts to regain control of Vietnam after World War Two. With the United States paying up to 80 per cent of the French colonial war effort in Indo-China, Lord Ismay had no difficulty in detecting Soviet expansionism.

The Truman doctrine of March 1947, which NATO inherited, declared America's will to 'support' and 'assist' what it called 'free peoples'. In his memoirs³ published recently, Kennan comments: 'since almost no country was without a communist minority, this assumption carried very far.' This is the diplomat's cautious recognition that the Truman doctrine announced America's determination to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations as it chose, in the name of freedom. Kennan, moreover, admits that his famous 'X' article in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947, which discussed the containment of Russia, had been written two months before the Truman doctrine was launched.

If NATO was, according to Kennan, misconceived 20 years ago, today it is quite unintelligible. Over the past five years we have been taught that the great source of evil in the world is no longer the Soviet Union but China. It is China that features in every discussion of US missile policy and China's embryonic nuclear weapons that 'threaten the world'. This is the moment at which Britain's Prime Minister announces the intended military withdrawal from east of Suez and the limitation of British military power to Europe. This proposed withdrawal from Asia, welcome in itself, although made for the wrong reasons, is quite at variance with what we are told to believe about the menace of China.

Opponents of colonialism cannot fail to notice that an important part of NATO activity is the support of the remnants of European colonialism. Algeria's one million dead testified to the proportions of American aid to France. Today Portugal is wholly dependent upon American assistance through NATO in its attempt to preserve its African empire. It is ironic that Portugal, a ruthless dictatorship, should be a founder-member of NATO, whose spokesman prate about the 'free world' and opposition to totalitarianism. In the same way, the Greek military dictatorship is a child of NATO, which put a gloss of supposed respectability on the mass arrests and tortures inflicted by the new regime.

If we wish to be associated with the increasingly aggressive policies of the American empire, we should have no illusions about the response we shall meet. Every 'hawk' in Washington has his counterpart, and it is idle

to suppose that belligerency provokes a will to seek agreement. It is instructive to recall that Khrushchev fell from power in 1964 only weeks after the United States began its bombing attacks on North Vietnam. Khrushchev, who had been at pains to convince his colleagues in the Kremlin that they could come to an understanding with America in the name of peaceful co-existence, had the carpet pulled from under him. If America had wanted to sabotage the possibility of agreement with Russia, the bombing of North Vietnamese ports in the Tonkin Gulf was all that was necessary.

There is a danger that those who watch with horror the barbarism of the United States in Vietnam, and the nauseous opportunism of Wilson and George Brown, may feel that this is nevertheless something remote from their lives. That is not so. We in Western Europe are the allies and hosts of that same America. As long as we are tied by treaty, we are the active accomplices of war criminals. It is a sad reflection on the brutality of our times that it is necessary to argue the case for an absolute dissociation from aggression, indiscriminate slaughter and experimental warfare. Only 20 years ago we hanged men at Nuremberg for such crimes. Today our Government applauds them.

Early next year, membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation will be reviewed under Article 13 of the treaty. This states that 'after the treaty has been in force for 20 years, any party may cease to be a party one year after its notice of denunciation has been given to the government of the United States of America'. The Wilson Government, to judge by its performance since 1964, must hope to confirm its membership without discussion. Whenever a general election is announced, we are assured by the Labour Party that support for the United Nations is the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Before Vietnam, Santo Domingo, Aden and apartheid, we heard much of this from Harold Wilson. It is clear that it is not UN but NATO which determines and dominates the foreign policy of Britain and of all the junior members of the American alliance. There are now important campaigns in several western European nations to withdraw from the organisation, though little of this is reflected in the British Press. I should like to see a similar campaign in Britain, and I see no reason why it should not be supported by a united peace movement and all in the Labour Party who are not craven supporters of Washington. If Britain were to choose to stay in NATO next year, it would lose the opportunity of an independent foreign policy for a further decade or two. Is this really what we want?

The North Atlantic Treaty Article 13

After the Treaty has been in force for twenty years, any Party may cease to be a Party one year after its notice of denunciation has been given to the Government of the United States of America, which will inform the Governments of the other Parties of the deposit of each notice of denunciation.

Notes

- 1 Published in *Containment and Revolution*, ed. Horowitz (Blond).
- 2 *Philosophy and Strategy in America's Post-War Policy*, May 11, 1965
- 3 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Atlantic-Little, Brown)



Pugwash's London address