



Empire Building During the Cold War – Attempt of a Definition

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Abstract

After the end of World War II, the European imperialist powers conceded their leading function in constructing the world's policy to the Soviet Union and the United States. For the next 45 years, the world was shaped by their struggle. The following essay tries to find an answer to the question whether both superpowers built up empires in that time.

Introduction

This essay questions, whether both superpowers of the second half of the twentieth century built up empires. The challenge in this issue lies in the circumstance that both powers represented different anti-imperialist models of economic development and that the flowering time of both started with the end of the so-called imperialistic era. Nevertheless, we find the attribution "empire" very often used these days with regard to both the United States and the former Soviet Union; but that term is often used too rashly.

One of the first goals of this essay is to find the most fitting definition of the word empire find an answer to the paper's inquiry.

The first section establishes a definition. In that part, the term "empire" should be defined. The example of Great Britain should also show, what a typical empire looked like. Section two examines the United States. Section three is about the Soviet Union. In these sections, the definition should be applied in order to find out, whether the both Cold War superpowers fit the term "empire". The last section is about drawing a conclusion from the essay's empirical material. Finally, an answer to the main question of the paper should be found.

The "Typical" Empire

What is a "typical" empire? What does it look like? Answers on these questions have to be found before a response to the basic inquiries of the essay can be given. Various reference books offer numerous definitions. A very fitting definition was provided by the diplomatic historian Paul Schroeder in a speech he gave at a meeting of the American Historical Association in January 2009.

"[...] empire means political control exercised by one organized political unit over another unit separate from and alien to it. Many factors enter into empire – economics, technology, ideology, religion, above all military strategy and weaponry – but the essential core is political: the possession of final authority by one entity over the vital political decisions of another. This need not mean direct rule exercised by formal occupation and administration; most empires involve informal, indirect rule. But real empire requires that effective final authority, and states can enjoy various forms of superiority or even domination over others without being empires."¹

According to Schroeder, a "real empire" has at least two main attributes. One of the most important characteristics is the **exertion of political control** of one political unit over another. Influences from economics, technology, ideology, religion and above all military, strategy and weaponry can be important for the empire building process, but a "real empire" requires effective political control. This has not to be implicit in the form of direct rule, but an empire in its traditional sense needs **one effective final authority** (direct or indirect). Very often, the empire building process is accompanied by military expansion and the extension of authoritarian power at home.²

¹ Paul Schroeder, Is the U.S. an Empire?, [http://hnn.us/articles/1237.html], o.D., eingesehen 17.11.2009.

² Charles S. Maier, Among Empires. American Ascendancy and its Predecessors, Cambridge-London 2006, S. 7.

Probably the best example for a global empire is the 19th century British Empire. This worldwide imperial structure was ruled by an effective political center of power, located in its capital London, which was also the financial center of the world. According to the economic historian Niall Ferguson, British policy makers “aspired not just to export the idea of free trade, of free markets, but more than that, they sought to export the institutions social, ultimately also political institutions”.³ A specific characteristic of the British Empire was that it expanded its political power and also its political structures to subordinated countries. Usually, it did that by means of military power. The inhabitants of the countries within the British Empire could feel the access of the “effective final authority”. They were aware that they lived in the Empire.

The “US - Empire”

The “imperialistic” development of the United States was very different from that of Great Britain. Similar to the British Empire, the United States was from its inception an interventionist power that based its foreign policy on territorial expansion.⁴ But unlike the European imperial powers, the United States had a “new and revolutionary message” – free men and free enterprise. To solve the question whether the United States built up an empire it can be very helpfully to look back at the early phase of the country’s expansion. According to historian Odd Arne Westad, most Americans of the late 18th and the early 19th century shared a reluctance to accept one of the main conditions for empire building – centralized political power.⁵ But especially the 19th century brought the United States her most important territorial gains. Nevertheless, America avoided to be seen as an empire in that time, because she treated all people in her country as equals. There was no privileged center of power with a “superior” population as it was London within the British Empire, and there were also no legal differences between the residents, at least official. American expansion from the Atlantic to the Pacific allegedly produced just a big and influential country rather than an empire.⁶

With the end of World War two, American influence in world affairs was predominant. The United States came out of the war by far the strongest military power. By 1955, for example, Washington’s soldiers were stationed in about 450 bases within 36 countries.⁷ Nearly every nation looked to America at least for economic assistance. Especially the

³ Niall Ferguson, Is the U.S. an Empire in Denial? A Lecture by Niall Ferguson, [http://www.fpa.org/topics_info2414/topics_info_show.htm?doc_id=193437], o.D., eingesehen 18.11.09.

⁴ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War. Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Cambridge-New York-Melbourne 2005, S. 9.

⁵ Westad, *Global Cold War*, S. 11.

⁶ Maier, *Among Empires*, S. 31.

⁷ Geir Lundestad, *Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe 1945–1952*, in: *Journal of Peace Research* 23 (1986), S. 263–277, hier S. 265.

Europeans, more than others, attempted to influence the Americans in the direction of taking greater, not lesser, interest in their affairs.⁸ After seven terrible years of war and devastation, the great civilizations of Western and Central Europe were at the end of their tether. They needed not only American economic assistance but also American military help, especially with respect to the expansion of the Soviet Union.

American policy makers on the other hand also knew that the prosperity of their country depended to a large extent on transatlantic prosperity.⁹ They helped because they had to secure markets and the enormous potential of the Western European political economy against the fast expanding Soviet “empire” with its planned economy. Along with economic and military help and the revitalization of the trade, came the opening of the Western European markets for American products and the growing influence of American popular culture and lifestyle. But unlike most empires, including the British, this development was not a one-way street. It merely allowed a modernization of the European society. After the modernization and recovery process on the “old continent” was finished, America, unlike the most other empires, was also open for European influences.¹⁰ The relationship between the United States and her allies was often a relationship of mutual influence.

At the end of World War two, the United States therefore rather appeared as “defender of modernistic developments and progress” (consumer society, free markets) than as creator of an empire in the usual sense of the word. That was mainly because Washington’s interests were focused on other, more modern fields like free trade and markets for which a big international market with high purchasing power is required rather than a smaller imperialistic market controlled by one country. According to different economic theories, economic development and worldwide trade relations often are opponents of empires.¹¹ As historian Victoria de Gracia mentions, the United States showed massive presence in that time in order to defend a “market empire” – a modern empire without frontiers, ruled by the pressure of its markets and the persuasiveness of its models.¹² This modern “Market Empire” was rather an idea (global trade, consumerism) than an empire in the usual sense with a power center, clear defined borders, and subordinated countries.

What also speaks against American Empire building is the circumstance that the biggest part of the so-called “western world” was composed of several autonomous

⁸ Lundestad, *Empire by Invitation*, S. 268.

⁹ Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, Cambridge 2007, S. 55.

¹⁰ Richard Pells, *Not like Us. How Europeans have loved, hated, and transformed American Culture since World War II*, New York 1997, S. 313.

¹¹ Maier, *Among Empires*, S. 48.

¹² Victoria de Gracia, *Irresistible Empire. America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge-London 2005, S. 3.

coordination units enjoying juridical equality (status, sovereignty, rights, and international obligations). According to Maier, foreign territories that are directly controlled by the United States did not really have “the scope needed to suggest an empire”.¹³ Within her alliance system, the United States did not rule over subordinates, as an imperial power would do. In the international state community, America was rather a “*primus inter pares*”, a first among equals. As Schroeder pointed out, the use of the term “hegemony” is more suitable to describe the role and function of the United States within the Western World during the Cold War.¹⁴

Although it had the possibility after World War two, the United States did not build up a formal empire in the basic definition of the paper of the word. But the situation changed after the end of the Cold War and especially after the terror attacks of 9/11/2001. At the moment, the United States is a “wannabe empire”, according to Schroeder.¹⁵

With the break-up of the Soviet Union, the enormous military machine America kept around the world to contain its counterpart, lost its purpose. But instead of dismantling the outsized and expensive army, the Pentagon continued to advance its global military presence and build new advanced weapon systems that could project American power on land and sea and in the air anywhere on the globe within hours of a new threat.¹⁶ With the invasion of Iraq, without a UNO resolution and against the will of most of its political partners, the Bush government pushed the United States more and more towards the building of an “American empire”. For Schroeder the Bush Doctrine “proclaims unquestionably imperialist ambitions and goals”. He sees all indications for the erection of a “formal empire” in Iraq through “conquest, occupation, and indefinite political control”.¹⁷

The “SU - Empire”

Similar to the United States, the Soviet Union actually represented an anti-imperialistic ideology. From the very beginning of the Soviet state, communists tried to undermine the Western empires by setting up rebellions in the Third World against colonialism.¹⁸ For many of those in the Third World who opposed foreign domination, the Russian revolution also had been a signal event: not only did the Soviets want to set up a new

¹³ Maier, *Among Empires*, S. 66.

¹⁴ Paul Schroeder, *Is the U.S. an Empire?*

¹⁵ Ebd.

¹⁶ Günter Bischof, *Empire Discourses: The „American Empire“ in Decline?*, in: *Kurswechsel. Zeitschrift für gesellschafts-, wirtschafts- und umweltpolitische Alternativen* 2 (2009), S. 14–23, hier S. 18.

¹⁷ Paul Schroeder, *Is the U.S. an Empire?*

¹⁸ Westad, *Global Cold War*, S. 51.

state of their own that did away with colonial oppression and ethnic domination, but they also promised to support all movements worldwide that had the same aim.¹⁹

The anti-imperialistic Soviet state still became a real empire due to one single person – the dictator Joseph Stalin. He came to power in 1924 as successor of Wladimir Illjitsch Lenin, the Soviet Union's first leader. After getting rid of all possible opponents, he began a dramatic campaign of rapid collectivization and industrialization.²⁰ During that time, he began with the intensive extension of authoritarian power in his country – according to Maier, one of the main conditions for empire building.²¹

In 1939, Stalin started the “imperialistic expansion” of his country with the conclusion of the so-called Non-aggression-pact, on August 23. In a secret additional protocol, the two powers Germany and the Soviet Union decided the division of Poland “by the line of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San”, and the partition of Eastern Europe in two spheres of influence.²² Stalin was a very suspicious nature who avoided trusting other persons. After the unexpected German invasion, his suspicion against others heightened dramatically. “The Nazi attack confirmed us that outsiders wanted to destroy us, to annihilate us physically”, the later Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnaze remembered forty years later.²³

Stalin was determined never to let that happen again. He therefore decided to protect his country, and if nothing else, himself by a security belt of dependent satellite states. He proposed the British foreign secretary Anthony Eden (a few months after the start of the German attack) a plan of a new post war Europe again divided into spheres of influence.²⁴ But because of the uncertain war outcome, western official's recognition of Stalin's imperial territorial claim should have to wait until the conclusion of the so-called “percentage agreement” between Great Britain and the Soviet Union in the fall of 1944. From then on, the West had to accept the “accomplished fact” that there was a future “informal, if not even formal” sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.²⁵

After the worsening of the East-West relations and the American dropping of the atomic bomb, Stalin more and more began to close his security belt against western influences. In order to assuage his reinforced feeling of menace, Stalin adopted his imagination of a security belt in his neighborhood into a Soviet empire dependent on

¹⁹ Westad, *Global Cold War*, S. 51.

²⁰ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind. The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, New York 2007, S. 14.

²¹ Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires. American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*, Cambridge-London 2006, S. 7.

²² Yale Law School, *The Avalon Project*, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/addsepro.asp], o.D., eingesehen 1.12.2009.

²³ Leffler, *Soul of Mankind*, S. 379.

²⁴ Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity. The Stalin Years*, New York-Oxford, S. 16.

²⁵ *Ebd.*, S. 20.

the Kremlin.²⁶ Until 1949 he transformed all European countries occupied by his army into communist one-party-states based on the model of the Soviet Union. To step up his influence the subordinated countries, the Soviet dictator rebuilt the institution of the COMINFORM (Communist Information Bureau) in 1947.²⁷ By early 1950, Stalin's empire building was finished. The actual anti-imperialistic Soviet Union had created a "classical empire" with a powerful "center" (Moscow) that ruled over several subordinated states by means of military pressure. All of her successors were preoccupied with the maintenance of that enormous behemoth, whose only aim was the saturation of Stalin's insatiable craving for security. The price of being one of the world's vastest empires finally was the distension of the limited means of the country that ended in the disaggregation of the Soviet Union 40 years later.

Conclusion

Were the United States or the Soviet Union empires? In the end, the answer to that depends on the definition. According to the interpretation chosen above, there is an easy answer in the case of the Soviet Union and a more difficult one in the case of the United States. The Soviet Union was an empire because she had all the formal structures and competences that are necessary for it. She had, for example, a powerful center, which controls the subordinated periphery by means of military pressure. The ruler in the Kremlin could dictate the policy for the whole empire. One good example therefore is the Marshall Plan, when Stalin ordered his subordinates not to participate although most of them wanted to accept American help.

In the case of the United States, the answer is not as easy. America was a powerful, highly armed country that played an important role in defining the politics of the Western world. But unlike Moscow, Washington was a first among equals. The United States had democratic allies not subordinates. She had to convince her allies rather than dictating her orders. Therefore, America did not built up an empire during the Cold War. The term "hegemony" is more fitting to describe the role and function of the United States within the Western World during that time.

²⁶ Mastny, *Stalin Years*, S. 16.

²⁷ *Ebd.*, S. 30.

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