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NATO 1949: The Origin of an Offensive, Expansionist, Imperialist Military Alliance

By Mike Faulkner

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US troops in Lithuania, NATO's way of showing support for the Baltics against an imaginary Russian "aggression."

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, was launched sixty five years ago following the signature of the Atlantic Pact in 1949. The original member states that came together under US tutelage claimed that their alliance was dedicated to the preservation of peace and to the defence of Western Europe against the supposed threat of military aggression. It is noteworthy that the launch of NATO coincided with the intensification of the Cold War, the political division of Germany and the first tentative steps by the US and Britain to rearm the new West German state.



In his memoirs published in 1989, Andrei Gromyko, who was Soviet Foreign Minister from the mid-1950s when he succeeded Molotov, to 1985, recounts an episode from his long career that has received scant attention in the West. It concerns the Soviet response to the establishment of NATO. It is worth quoting in full:

“In 1955 a meeting of the heads of government of the USSR, USA, Britain and France took place in Geneva. Sharp exchanges occurred revealing serious differences between the former allies. Eisenhower, Eden and Edgar Faure fiercely argued that NATO was a force for peace, especially in Europe, whereas in fact their plan was aimed at swallowing up East Germany into West Germany, and whitewashing the remilitarisation of West Germany in peace-loving propaganda.

In an effort to deprive the three Western powers of their notion that the Soviet Union was not doing its part in consolidating peace, the Soviet delegation, consisting of Khrushchev, Bulganin, Molotov, Marshal Zhukov and myself, announced that the Soviet Union was willing to join NATO. We argued that, since NATO was dedicated to the cause of peace, it could not but agree to include the USSR. It is hard to describe the effect this announcement had on the Western delegations when it was made by Bulganin, as President of the Council of Ministers. They were so stunned that for several minutes none of them said a word. Eisenhower’s usual vote-winning smile vanished from his face. He leaned over for a private consultation with Dulles; but we were not given a reply to our proposal.

After the meeting, Dulles caught up with me in the corridor and asked, ‘Was the Soviet Union really being serious?’ I replied, ‘The Soviet Union does not make unserious proposals, especially at such an important forum as this.’

Dulles was about to add something, when Eisenhower came up. Now a smile did appear on his face, as he said: ‘We must tell you Mr. Gromyko, that the Soviet proposal will be carefully examined by us, as it is a very serious matter.’ At later meetings of the four powers, however, it was evident the Western delegations did not wish to discuss our proposal further and they simply steered clear of it, giving mysterious, oracular smiles whenever it was mentioned. The fact is NATO simply did not know how to deal with it and so they simply hushed it up. Often I have mentioned our proposal to US officials of later generations and very few of them have ever heard of it.”



Russian military long range bomber aircraft photographed by an intercepting RAF quick reaction Typhoon (QRA) as it flies in international airspace. Russia’s defense minister says the military will conduct regular long-range bomber patrols, ranging from the Arctic Ocean to the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. Sergei Shoigu’s statement comes as NATO has reported a spike in Russian military flights over the Black, Baltic and North seas as well as the Atlantic Ocean. It reflects Moscow’s increasingly tough posture amid tensions triggered by the West over Ukraine.

Although obvious to everyone at the time of its formation in 1949 that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was a military alliance directed against the Soviet Union, its *raison d’être* as such was never explicitly stated by its founders. Instead it was presented in the Western Cold War generalities common at the time as an alliance dedicated to the defence of the “Free World”, more particularly Western Europe, which faced a supposed threat of aggression by an unnamed totalitarian power or powers. NATO was supposedly dedicated to the cause of peace and the defence of small nations. The North Atlantic Treaty (April 1949) included the following signatory states: Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, France, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Canada and the United States. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO membership had expanded beyond the original signatories to include Greece and Turkey (1952), West Germany (1955) and Spain (1982). The first expansion into Eastern Europe occurred in 1990 with the inclusion of the former German Democratic Republic in a united Germany. Since then twelve more states, most of them former members of the Warsaw Pact nations, joined NATO. From the outset the alliance was dominated by the United States. Its supposed commitment to the defence of democratic nations and its claim to be a North Atlantic alliance were belied by the inclusion amongst the early member states of a fascist regime in Portugal, military dictatorship in Greece, and Turkey which bordered the Soviet Union in the Caucasus.

Dismissing legitimate grievances as the work of insidious “outside professional agitators”

The idea that ordinary people could have legitimate grievances against their governments (ruling classes) on account of appalling corruption and super exploitation has traditionally been dismissed by US (and British) propoganda as the work of insidious “outside professional agitators.”

The conventional wisdom accepted as unassailable truth by the proponents and devotees of Western Cold War propaganda, has it that the United States and its allies who came together to form NATO were reacting in the late 1940s to a grave and imminent Soviet military threat to the “free” nations of Western Europe. Had it not been for their fortitude and unity in the face of this threat, the Red Army would have rolled westwards from Berlin and enslaved the whole of Western Europe. This would have been the prelude to the triumph of Communism on a world scale. According to this account, in 1949 NATO was the shield that defended the “Free World” in the hour of danger grim.



As usual, Izzy Stone was absolutely correct about Korea and the Cold War—but alone in blowing the whistle. The gentlemen of the patriotic “Free Press” were not interested in such heretical matters.

This scenario now seems ludicrously fanciful even to many of the liberals who a few decades ago accepted it at face value. At the time that the Atlantic Pact was signed in 1949 the independent radical journalist, I.F. Stone, exposed the truth behind the propaganda. In a piece titled *From Butter to Guns* July 31, 1949, (from *The Truman Era, 1945 – 1952*) he noted that in promoting the Atlantic Pact, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who had earlier sold the Marshall Plan to Western Europe as a response to the urgent need for economic aid to alleviate hunger and discontent, now emphasised the importance of military assistance. The “two-fold objective” of the Atlantic Pact is “first to protect the free North Atlantic Pact countries against internal aggression inspired from abroad,” and secondly to “deter aggression.” ‘It is significant,’ Stone comments, ‘that protection against “internal aggression” is put first. Thus the primary purpose is to muster sufficient military strength to cope with popular discontent.’

“Protecting the Free World” from Soviet agitation

The precise mission of NATO was never clearly stated by its founders, preferring to simply assign it the role of “protecting the Free World” one of the great Orwellian terms circulated by American propaganda during the Cold War. The phrase is still used everywhere in the US/Western media without much questioning.

From the earliest post-war years the United States and its subservient allies treated popular discontent in Europe as evidence of Soviet agitation. Communist parties and movements, particularly where they were strong, in France, Greece and Italy were regarded solely as agents of the USSR; industrial unrest, mass popular movements and strikes were treated as “internal

aggression” stirred up by Soviet agents. Fear was engendered of a “World Communist Conspiracy”, much in the manner of the Nazi “World Judeo-Bolshevik Conspiracy” nonsense that had preceded it several years earlier. This was the atmosphere in which NATO came into being. To understand it more fully it is necessary, however briefly, to consider the pivotal question of Germany. Here, a few simple facts, well established but almost always ignored in the western Cold War narrative, need repeating:

Between 1941 and 1944 the Soviet Union played by far the greatest part in the defeat of Nazi Germany, at a cost of between 20 and 25 million dead and about a third of its industrial base and units of human habitation destroyed. At the Yalta conference in February 1945 the allies agreed a plan to partition post-war Germany temporarily into zones of occupation and to carry through a thoroughgoing process of de-Nazification. In recognition of the immense sacrifices the Soviet Union had suffered in winning the war for the allies, it was agreed in principle that she should receive 50% (\$10 billion) of the \$20 billion in reparations Germany would be required to pay. Churchill objected, but Roosevelt accepted it as a basis for negotiation. Stalin was determined to stand firm on this. It was agreed to return Western Russia and the Ukraine to the Soviet Union.

At Potsdam in July/August 1945 it was agreed that the partition of Germany was not to be permanent and that the allies were to work together to achieve the de-Nazification of the country and the peaceful unification of the four occupation zones. In the two years that followed Potsdam it became clear that the Western powers had no intention of allowing the Soviets to claim \$10 billion in reparations in any form. In the Western zones the occupation powers interpreted “de-Nazification” very differently from the Soviets. In the West many former members of the Nazi or pro-Nazi ruling elite were allowed to return to public life, often in key positions, and had their property restored. Many who were imprisoned were released after having long sentences commuted. In the Soviet zone much of the industrial base was dismantled and despatched to the USSR as war reparations. Here de-Nazification resulted in the large-scale nationalisation of capitalist enterprises that had been owned by powerful Nazis. All members of the Nazi Party who had occupied influential positions in the Third Reich were dismissed and those guilty of crimes severely punished. These measures were denounced by the US and its allies as a Soviet attempt to “communize” East Germany as a first step to destabilising the Western zones as a prelude to taking over the whole of Germany and Western Europe.

In the anti-communist propaganda onslaught of the late 1940s, the Soviets were accused of violating the terms of the Potsdam agreement concerning the division of Germany. The record shows that on the contrary, it was the Western powers that were in breach of Potsdam. The agreement stipulated that the wartime allies should work together to establish a unified, neutral, de-militarized and de-Nazified Germany. No one occupying power, or exclusive grouping of such powers was permitted to set up a separate state in any part of Germany. In fact by 1948 that is precisely what the Western powers were planning to do in the three Western zones. Plans for this were being made at the London conference convened in 1948, from which the Soviet Union was excluded. A new currency (the Deutschmark) was being planned for the new West German state. It would also be introduced, without Soviet agreement, into Berlin. The Soviets took the view, which was perfectly logical, that if the Western powers were to tear up the Potsdam agreement by establishing a separate state in the West, they were thereby abrogating their right to

retain their occupation sectors in Berlin which lay 100 miles inside the Soviet zone of Germany, and to introduce the DM without their agreement . The Soviet Union was therefore entirely within its rights to close all land access from the Western zones into Berlin.



The Berlin Airlift was hailed throughout the world as a great triumph for “freedom.” It served to demonstrate, once again, that the United States had huge and powerful shoulders.

The blockade and airlift that lasted from June 1948 to May 1949 marked a critical intensification in the Cold War. Before the lifting of the blockade Britain and the other Atlantic Pact states had set up NATO. In October the Federal Republic of Germany had come into being with the full agreement and sponsorship of the US and NATO. This was followed almost immediately by the Soviet response – endorsement of a separate state in the East, the German Democratic Republic.

Thereafter NATO spearheaded US imperialist nuclear and military expansion on an ever-expanding scale. During the Eisenhower administration (1952-1960), under Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, this extended to the Middle East and South East Asia with the establishment of new military alliances CENTO and SEATO.

As is clear from Gromyko’s observations in 1955, the overriding Soviet concern for many years after the Second World War was with Germany. Stalin was desperate to prevent a German state, allied with a deeply hostile USA, once again becoming a strong military power. This preoccupation was crucial in his relations with his former wartime allies from 1945 until his death in 1953. One does not have to excuse his domestic record or his controversial treatment of

his East European satellites to recognise the validity of this concern and to understand his determination to maintain a reliable buffer zone of states on his Western flank. He had no intention of invading Western Europe. There was real fear of a rearmed Germany, hardly surprising after the Soviet experience during the war.



In *The Desert Fox* (1951), the formidable James Mason portrayed Marshall Erwin Rommel as a principled military man quietly opposed to the brutalities of Nazism and Hitler, in particular.

But the US and the NATO states were determined to rearm Western Germany after 1949. In Britain, for example, what was almost certainly a deliberate propaganda campaign was launched from the early 1950s to whitewash the Wehrmacht by romanticising the role of Erwin Rommel in two feature films. Documentary films about the Nazi concentration camps were withdrawn and the full horror of the Nazi genocide of the Jews was played down. Attempts to keep these horrors in the public domain were denounced as communist propaganda. The term “Holocaust” was never used, and it was implied that reference to it stirred up “anti-German” sentiment.

In March 1952, in another episode which has almost been written out of the history of the Cold War, Stalin offered the Western powers the possibility of German reunification on the basis of nation-wide democratic elections, *on condition that a unified Germany would be neutral and demilitarised*. The USSR proposed “a unified democratic and peace-loving German government in accordance with the Potsdam provisions – with all foreign troops withdrawn from its territory; it would be permitted armed forces on a scale “necessary for the defence of the country.”



Lionised by the West, Konrad Adenauer, “Der Alte,” was yet another eager pawn in America’s hypocritical game.

Chancellor Adenauer rejected the proposal out of hand. The US government also rejected it, dismissing it as a devious ploy that Stalin did not mean seriously. But there is every reason to suppose that Stalin meant it very seriously. He was ready to sacrifice the government of the German Democratic Republic in favour of a unified Germany of a very different political

character as long as it was neutral and demilitarised. One might refer to Gromyko's riposte to Dulles (above) on the Soviet Union's application to join NATO: "The Soviet Union does not make unserious proposals." James Warburg, a member of the US Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations testified on March 28, 1952 that while in his opinion the Soviet proposal might be a bluff, "that our government is afraid to call the bluff for fear that it may not be a bluff at all", and that it might lead to a "free, neutral and demilitarised Germany."

But what could possibly have been a major turning point in European history was not to be. Within a few years a rearmed Germany was in NATO and by 1957 a former Wehrmacht officer, General Hans Speidel (who had in 1944 saved his own life by betraying Rommel's minimal role in the officer's plot against Hitler) was appointed Commander in Chief of Allied NATO land forces in Europe.