In 1945, Britain was an activist world power. It possessed the world's second-largest national navy, and its Empire-Commonwealth was genuinely global. The Dominions stretched from Canada to Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa; it had colonial possessions from the north to the south of the African continent, to the east of Suez, in South and Southeast Asia, as well as many scattered, and often strategic, island outposts. The 'jewel in the crown' of the Empire was India.

On VE Day, 8 May 1945, Britain and its loyal Empire-Commonwealth had 4 million troops serving overseas for the Allied cause. Wartime summit meetings had reinforced both the reality and the image of a Britain as a world power as Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States parleyed with the Soviet leader, Iosif Stalin, while the tide of fighting brought them all towards victory. It was therefore inevitable that the British would have a large role in shaping the untidy transition that was to come, and that would transform the world from war to an uncertain peace.

Leading British decision-makers assessed early on that they would have to base postwar foreign policy both on the threat from Communist ideology and on the consequences of the arrival of the Soviet Union as the new great power on the world stage. Britain would have to take a leading role to ensure that at least the western part of Germany – the motor of the European economy – was secured against Communism. It could then be revived for the Western and capitalist part of Europe through the Marshall aid programme. The British were also to play a major role in the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty (1949) which was to bind the other great global power, the United States, to the defence of the West against the Soviets and their allies. By 1955, the British had committed themselves to a military presence on the ground in West Germany.

Sustaining great power status in the face of these new ideological and power-political threats took other forms, too. First was the expensive but most secret decision to go nuclear. This was made less than two years after the end of the war, with a second generation of atomic weaponry then being developed by 1955. On the 'home front', a necessary part of the emerging Cold War strategy was to secure the hearts and minds of the population in Britain and the Empire against the baleful tenets of Communism. This strategy can be seen as an echo of the domestic politics of the Second World War that had successfully secured the British 'home front' against Nazism.

So for Labour (1945–51) and Conservative (1951–55) governments, the defining trait of foreign policy was to maintain Britain's place as a major global and imperial power in a rapidly changing period of fresh ideological and power-political challenges. It is fair to argue that this priority would still have existed in Britain even if the Soviet Union had withdrawn from active international politics immediately after the war. The quest to sustain the image and the reality of great powerdom through leadership, influence, and 'punching

above our weight' was part of the mentalité of British planners, the military, and the politicians.

Yet this was not a straightforward policy, because Britain's own weak financial position would now force an extraordinarily rapid process of decolonisation. Over this period Britain retreated from India, Ceylon, Burma, Palestine, Ireland, and the Suez Canal zone in Egypt, while preparations for the end of imperial management were begun in Malaya and in West, Central, and East Africa. While the nature of imperial rule varied from country to country, and each country presented different challenges and possible solutions, the fear always remained that the Soviet Union might move in to fill a power vacuum or to disrupt a defensive base. So British imperial policies did not come to an end just because Britain had divested itself of some of its possessions. The Middle East and Far East remained key bastions of empire, and Britain committed large numbers of troops to many areas, including Palestine, Malaya, and Kenya, over the decade. Indeed, the ending of empire was conceptualised and presented as a necessary modernisation. Adaptation to the new concept of commonwealth was conceived as nothing less than a 'world wide experiment in nation-building'. It was an attempt to create a set of global partnerships with new Commonwealth countries that would shore up the West, and that would be part of a 'global resistance to the "onrush" of communism influence', which was as much feared as was indigenous nationalism and communal violence.

Britain's Cold War strategy emerges

Well before the war ended military planners were determining the elements of this reasonably clear Cold War strategy. The first priority was the extent to which British national interests could be protected and perhaps even advanced after the war. What was to be its global strategy?

Strategic thinking involves not only geography, but also ideas. The British had wrestled - literally as well as intellectually - with both German nationalism and Communism in the first half of the twentieth century: how to live with Bolshevism had concerned Whitehall even as the First World War was coming to a close (the choice between the 'Boche or the Bolshie'). The effort of trying to compare the threat of Communism from 1917 onwards with that of the rise of Nazism and fascism had played havoc with traditional 'balancing' notions that dominated British thinking about the European continent and had contributed to the scarring debate about appeasement in the 1930s. The period of the Nazi–Soviet Pact between 1939 and 1941 confirmed Whitehall's distrust of both Germany and the Soviet Union, a distrust that was in reality not much mitigated by the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Thus anti-Communism and anti-Soviet thinking were already firmly part of the British cultural landscape in the 1940s.

It was the military chiefs and intelligence officers who were the main driving force of Britain's future Cold War strategy. New evidence confirms the extent to which intelligence, and those with access to intelligence material, played a central role and generated a mindset about Soviet intentions that was to dominate thinking for the next fifty years. The Joint Intelligence Committee was at the apex of the intelligence-gathering system, and was chaired by a senior Foreign Office official with a membership drawn from the Chiefs of Staff. In 1943, a Post Hostilities Planning Committee was established; its work was overseen by a ministerial Armistice and Postwar Committee, chaired by the deputy prime minister of the coalition government, Labour's Clement Attlee. This committee was at the centre of intense arguments about the extent to which the Soviet Union should be considered a postwar threat.

These committees were examining Soviet capabilities as well as behaviour. Assessments were based upon a mixture of ideological predisposition to distrust Soviet intentions, as well as geostategic analyses, although some thought that such radical debates should be off-limits while the war was still being fought, as any leaks to the Soviets might create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet planning had to be concerned with the balance of power rather than with nebulous indications of goodwill to the Soviet Union. An anti-Soviet mindset can be detected in the intelligence community from 1943 onwards, with racist

attitudes towards the ‘semi-oriental’ Soviet forces, and an appreciation on the ground of how the Soviets behaved which was confirmed from the very top of the military hierarchy, chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Alan Brooke himself. The Foreign Office was more ambivalent about seeing the Soviet Union as the next great challenge for British interests while the war was still on and while the Soviets remained an important military ally, although there was still considerable apprehension about Europe’s postwar future. In a revealing exchange of minutes as early as mid-1942, it was observed that the current trend of Soviet policy would amount to the extension of exclusive Soviet influence over the whole of Eastern Europe. Britain could not stop the establishment of Russian predominance in Eastern Europe if Germany is crushed and disarmed and Russia participates in the final victory. In this case, it would seem that the worst fears of the Poles, Yugoslavs, Greeks & Turks are justified, and their only hope for the future lies in a Germany strong enough to counteract Soviet predominance.

As the war drew to a close, strategic planning for the postwar world became more intense. Although Britain had gone to war in 1939 in defence of Poland, Poland’s fate was now the primary concern of British decision-makers. British national interests centred, first, on Germany, as it remained the fulcrum of the European continental balance of power; and, second, on the future of Britain’s imperial holdings, particularly in the Mediterranean region. Ostensibly, the coalition government sought a four-power plan and a United Nations; however, the military were sceptical about both ideas. They did not see how Britain could work constructively with the Soviet Union, did not like the idea of a United Nations, and thought China was ‘rather a joke’.

Yet this change was an uneven process. Churchill’s lack of serious consideration of postwar planning, and the uncomfortable coexistence of his own anti-Communism with his personal respect for Stalin, meant that wartime planning exercises within Whitehall were often incoherent. Opportunism rather than ideology framed Churchill’s attitude towards the Communists, although he wrote to his foreign secretary Anthony Eden in April 1944 that, though I have tried in every way to put myself in sympathy with these Communist leaders, I cannot feel the slightest trust or confidence in them.

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5 Aldrich, Hidden Hand, 43. Agencies also did not stop their work on Soviet code breaking after 1941.

6 UKNA, FO571/30835, R. Makins minute, 7 May 1942, W. Strang minutes, 13 and 14 May 1942. O. Sargent minutes, 13 and 14 May 1942. I am indebted to Vit Smetana for these references.

7 Lewis, Changing Direction, 69.
It is not surprising that the tough three-power Potsdam Conference was seen as a watershed in the politics of the wartime Grand Alliance. The British negotiators were reminded that Britain had earlier failed to heed warnings about Hitler's intentions and should not now repeat the error of appeasement, but should instead confront Stalin's 'ideological Lebensraum'. If the German question – what Germany would do next – had dominated the interwar years, now it was the question of what to do with a defeated and occupied Germany. For Germany was the geostrategic and economic powerhouse of Europe. If the Soviet Union was to be successfully contained, US support in securing the West German zones would be vital even if most of Eastern Europe was 'lost'. Worse, if proper attention was not given to western Germany, a new Rapallo mentality might emerge as Germans turned once again towards the Soviet Union.

Soon after the war, senior Foreign Office officials extrapolated from what they could see of Soviet behaviour in postwar Germany as well as in the Soviet Union itself, and they shifted closer to the Chiefs of Staff's wartime line of argument, accepting an anti-Communist Soviet agenda as the organising principle of British postwar foreign policy, arguing that 'in seeking a maximum degree of security Russian policy will be aggressive by all means short of war'. The diplomat Christopher Warner, who had been optimistic about the postwar world, now concluded that the UK had been chosen by the Soviets for a political and diplomatic onslaught. They have decided upon an aggressive policy, based upon militant communism and Russian chauvinism. They have launched an offensive against social democracy and against this country ... The Soviet Government makes coordinated use of military, economic, propaganda and political weapons and also of the Communist "religion". It is submitted, therefore, that we must at once organise and coordinate our defences against all these, and that we should not stop short of a defensive–offensive policy.'14

Labour's foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, was confronted with these perceived new realities in Soviet policy, and, in May 1946, Bevin himself warned the Labour Cabinet of the new dangers. A Russia Committee to lead policy was established in the Foreign Office.15 A rear-guard attempt by Prime Minister Clement Attlee at the end of the year to argue that the eastern Mediterranean was now essentially undefendable was overridden by Bevin, himself backed by the Chiefs who threatened to resign en masse if Attlee got his way.

This important row indicated that it was a Cold War mindset that now dominated Whitehall, even if some politicians were slower to grasp this: now 'Communism [was] the most important external political menace

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13 UKNA, CAB 81/132; JIC (46) 1 (0) (Final) (Revise), 1 March 1946. Recent Russian research reveals the uncertainty of Soviet policy at this time, and that UK planners also thought that the Soviet Union might fear an 'impending penetration by the Western Allies', but nevertheless based their assessments on worst-case analysis.
14 UKNA, FO371/5683, C. Warner memo, 2 April 1946. Warner was now head of the Northern Department of the Foreign Office.
15 UKNA, FO371/5689, 12 April 1946. The Archbishop of Canterbury was invited to join the committee.
confronting the British Commonwealth and Western democracies and [was] likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. The new mindset was also shaped by the dispatches of the Foreign Office diplomat, Frank Roberts, who thought that Britain had to show it was the champion of a progressive faith and way of life 'with an appeal to the world as least as great as those of the communist system'. The Communist menace was not yet simply or even primarily military, but was driven by a Marxist ideology that assumed expansion, caution, and the use of every political and economic trick. Communism was a form of religion that placed ideology even above national loyalty, so how the Soviets organised Communist Parties abroad – including that in Britain – was also of great importance. In short, as well as being a potential long-term challenge to territorial defence, the Cold War was conceived as a war of ideas, of loyalty to beliefs, and of all political mischief short of war.

The shift in Whitehall towards a Cold War mindset was momentous, if not unexpected. Now, suspicion of the Soviet Union, and of Communism in the UK, in Europe, and the Empire-Commonwealth would dominate policy planning and implementation for the next fifty years. But, over the next two years, while working out how to manage the new threat, the British government was also simultaneously involved in efforts to plan collectively for the postwar world through a United Nations organisation and the Bretton Woods institutions. This was the public, optimistic, and co-operative face of British diplomacy. The failure to establish effective institutions of collective security, and the retreat of the United States into isolationism during the interwar period were powerful reminders of the public responsibilities that the British had to bear to ensure that international institutions worked this time round. In the peace treaty talks, they also worked hard to retain their influence in the eastern Mediterranean in particular, where imperial and trusteeship interests were at stake, while access to oil and to strategic land and sea routes gave the area a special importance that continued to shape British policy. There was also some early optimism about the potential of France to act as a European and imperial partner in the creation of a third world force that would balance both US and Soviet power, but, although this notion was not formally abandoned until 1949, it seemed an increasingly weak strategic response to the new realities.

However, the logic of bipolarity became increasingly potent. Negotiations in the torrid atmosphere of successive Council of Foreign Ministers meetings brought to fruition a Cold War policy that predicated the need for a viable West Germany with first US, and then later French, backing to balance Soviet power in Central Europe. Then, over the summer of 1947, the outline of the Marshall Plan was laid down.

In British eyes, the Marshall Plan was an indication that the United States had finally realised that incremental help through loans to Britain and France was not of itself going to bring the economic revival of the western zones of the defeated Germany, or the wider West European economy. While some may have hoped for an all-Europe recovery programme, most people in the UK and the United States were by now working on the principle that an East-West breakdown was inevitable, but wanted to put the blame fairly and squarely upon the heads of the Soviet leaders, even as aid was given to the capitalist countries of Europe. As Bevin whispered to his principal private secretary, Pierson Dixon, in the crucial Paris meeting of June–July 1947, 'we are witnessing the birth of the Western bloc'. Shortly after this the Soviets stormed out. Britain's role was crucial in ensuring this breakdown, and then in persuading the United States that the organisation of the programme should meet UK expectations, and certainly not be the first step to a more politically integrated Western Europe. The Marshall aid programme did stimulate the wider West European economy and also served to assist domestic restructuring in Britain. Britain's financial problems were vast, however, and the quest for resources and the constant sterling crises were an uncomfortable backdrop to activist policies at home and overseas. Most important aid eventually provided a psychologically comforting basis from which to build 'the West'.

Within this seam of Cold War politics lay the issue of British-American relations. From 1945, it had been clear that the United States was essential to all Britain's international diplomacy. Without US leadership nothing would happen. Relations were frequently very close in areas such as intelligence, and informal contacts based upon Joint Service operations during the war were sustained into the postwar era by British-American co-operation.

16 UKNA, CAB 130/17, JIC (46) 70 (C) (Final), 23 September 1946, 'The spread of communism throughout the world and the extent of its direction from Moscow'. This was used as a reference text for the Cabinet working party on subversive activities (GEN 168) in early 1947.
17 UKNA, FO371/16569, F. Roberts to FO, 18 March 1946. He and his distinguished counterpart George Kennan were both reporting from Moscow in 1946.
20 Pierson Dixon diary, 2 July 1947, read with kind permission of Pierson Dixon.
over access to materials and the sharing of staff. However, tensions between the UK and the United States were considerable: they covered the management of Germany (the United States had even volunteered to swap German zones in 1946, if the British felt they could not do the job), bases, and nuclear politics, as well as aid and reconstruction funding. Indeed, the secret decision to build a British nuclear bomb had been in part the result of a breakdown between the British and the Americans over access to nuclear technology.

Part of the reason for the difficulties in the British-American partnership in the early postwar years resulted from suspicion about US intentions and its reliability that was widely held in the UK. While some Conservatives wanted to base British foreign policy upon old imperial precepts, others — particularly on the left of the Labour Party — feared that Bevin's hard line against Communism revealed him to be some kind of American lackey. In November 1946, some members of the Labour Party even sought in the House of Commons to bring a vote of no confidence in Bevin.

Yet 1947 saw a sea-change in British politics, in which the voices of opposition to its Cold War strategy were drowned out by evidence of the threatening behaviour of the Soviets in Eastern Europe and over Germany, and the real prospect of American financial aid for Western Europe through Marshall aid. However, the path to the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty was not easy, although after its signing Marshall aid and NATO were consented of as the two halves of the same walnut, delivering economic and military security, as the response to the Berlin blockade was already showing.

Yet, in 1948, Bevin had hoped instead for US backing for a security grouping that was West European, which would have given the British greater freedom of manoeuvre. The five-power Brussels Treaty of 1948 was, however, soon overtaken by the North Atlantic Treaty that was signed in April 1949 by twelve powers, including the United States itself and to which Greece and Turkey were admitted in 1952, and West Germany in 1955. It fulfilled Britain's need for an American guarantee to Europe against an outside threat, and met the obvious new reality of the late 1940s — the new balance of power was global, not just European.

21 Aldrich, Hidden Hand, 207–21.
22 The original members of the Brussels Treaty were Belgium, Britain, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. The signatories of the North Atlantic Treaty were the five Brussels Treaty signatories plus Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, and the United States. For the impact of the Marshall Plan, see also William I. Hitchcock's chapter in this volume.

Britain’s Cold War at home

Recently released archives now show that the Cold War ‘home front’ was also an integral part of Britain’s Cold War history, and domestic institutions were, in some respects, put back on to a war footing, as Communism represented a critical and ongoing threat to British values in particular and to Western democracy in general. In other words, Britain was at war, domestically and overseas, in the same way that it had been between 1939 and 1945 — militarily, economically, and spiritually. Cold War exigencies required efforts to monitor Communist activity and weed Communists out of public services and trades unions at home and abroad, given the perception of the menace to the interests and safety of the whole British Commonwealth. Assessments suggested that there could be Communist manipulation of domestic affairs, espionage, and fifth-column activity. The government had therefore to counter infiltration in the trades unions, and the influence of the Communist Party in industry, the armed forces, the police, and the civil service. Although the party itself was not banned, by the early 1950s those applying for public service appointments were vetted for their political affiliations, while Cabinet committees on home and overseas Communism were established to monitor these ongoing efforts.

Yet, it was not until the end of 1947 that the Labour government was ready to go public with an assault upon Communism at home. After Cabinet meetings in early January 1948, Bevin launched his social democratic crusade in the House of Commons. His career as a trades unionist in the 1920s and 1930s had left him with a deep-seated dislike of Communists in the unions; and in 1946 he had worked with trades union leaders to ensure that senior posts within the movement were denied to Communist Party members where possible. He would have agreed with the Joint Intelligence Committee analysis of 1947 that ‘the Soviet leaders were especially hostile to “reformist socialism” which they regard as a competitor for working-class support in many countries’. 27

23 This was the view of the Colonial Office Information Committee, UKNA. CAB 350/37/2. August 1949; GEN 211/4, 16 June 1949.
24 UKNA, CAB 130/17, JIC 467/70 (C) (Final), 23 September 1946. ‘The spread of communism throughout the world and the extent of its direction from Moscow’.
27 UKNA, CAB 158/1, JIC (47) 7/2.
A senior ministerial committee then was convened to oversee the implementation of anti-Communist measures at home. While it was agreed that Britain in 1948 was not in a state of war, quite extraordinarily, the committee then debated on how to use the Labour Party as a means for countering Communist activity at home and abroad. The British Council, the Central Office of Information, and the Foreign Office's Information Research Department were to be important players, tasked to promote a British way of life through social propaganda, and thereby encourage their audience to infer that the democratic way of life was to be preferred to the Communist way of living. Ministers wanted the full panoply of films, exhibitions, international conferences, and national and international youth groups to be used to promote social democracy, and this would be supported by ‘white’ and ‘grey’ propaganda initiatives and supported by the British film industry. The BBC itself was the focus of much discussion, and although Bevin sought not to undermine its famed independence, he did also note that there were already very close informal contacts between the head of the BBC Overseas Service and the Foreign Office. Trades unions were seen as being in the front line in the struggle against Communist influence. The committee also assessed ways of drawing the churches into what was seen as a common action in defence of Western civilisation.

The nature of the Cold War and the level of fear about Communism at home as well as abroad are historically highly significant. If Britain managed to avoid the extremes of US McCarthyism, it is nevertheless clear that the means used came close to undermining the very way of life that was being protected, although Bevin was at pains to rein in the more extravagant proposals of his advisers. Yet it has to be said that, by the mid-1950s, such activity no doubt contributed to the creation in Britain of a remarkable elite and working-class consensus about Britain’s place and role in the world. It has been argued that this consensus was largely manufactured by the government to manage public opinion. This may overestimate both the competence and the cohesion of the covert agencies and of government departments. The notorious cases of the upper-middle-class ‘Cambridge Spies’, Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, and Donald Maclean, were deeply embarrassing for the government, although the Americans, too, had had their own spy scandals. There were deep disagreements between government departments, and even between ministers, on how to deal with the Cold War as a domestic as well as a foreign policy issue. Foreign Office minister Kenneth Younger, for example, deeply disagreed with the ‘virulent anti-Soviet slanging match’ that typified the propaganda work under the management of his fellow Labour Party office holders Christopher Mayhew and the reactionary Hector McNeill. It is also hard to measure the effectiveness of propaganda. Yet, it remains the fact that a fairly sustained public consensus did emerge on the subject: domestic dissent about Soviet policy was muted throughout the 1950s, and, for example, there was virtually no criticism of NATO in Britain throughout the Cold War.

Into the 1950s

Although it is an oversimplification, British foreign policy over this whole period can be characterised by Churchill’s iconic phrase ‘Three Interlocking Circles’ concept of Britain as the only country that acted as a link between the Empire-Commonwealth, the United States, and Europe. Yet in the 1950s the formula was challenged, and found to be wanting, for the UK could not secure leadership of the kind of Europe it wanted while at the same time preserving its leading role in the Empire-Commonwealth and all the while persuading the United States of the accuracy of the British position.

By the early 1950s, Britain had effectively abandoned its role as the principal partner of the United States in Europe. Marshall aid had generated considerable disagreement between the United States and the UK over European integration, for the British were not prepared to pursue economic and political
policies that extended beyond an intergovernmental, Commonwealth-type approach, although the United States had had early expectations that Britain would lead a West European grouping. British governments had also been unimpressed by continental European efforts to create a quasi-federal Council of Europe between 1948 and 1949, and were likewise hostile to the Schuman Plan proposals of June 1950 for a Coal and Steel Community that would be managed by a supra-national High Authority. They were prepared to support the October 1950 Pleven Plan project for a European Defence Community, which would have brought West German troops (rather than the West German state) into the Western defence equation, but neither Labour nor Conservative governments considered that Britain should join these French-inspired projects. Meanwhile, after the signature of the important North Atlantic Treaty, American policy-makers now struggled with Britain's attitude to Europe and turned to France, which was willing and increasingly able to play a stronger 'Western' role, and to support the newly created West German government under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer.

Yet by 1955 the British still thought they had secured a good compromise between the United States and Western Europe, with the transformation of the Brussels Treaty Organisation into the Western European Union, with Italy and West Germany as new members, and with a token commitment of British forces to German soil, but with West Germany also in NATO. They thought that this settlement ensured that a 'Western Europe is now emerging, which, resting on the close association of the United Kingdom with the Continent ... will reinforce the Atlantic Community'. Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden was able to reassure his Conservative Party MPs that the United States now had new confidence in the 'stability of her European allies under British leadership', and was hopeful that the settlement had put an end to supra-national initiatives that would disrupt the agreement. This was an aspiration about British identity and its role in the world, as well as about the Cold War balance of power, and the way in which European

supra-national integration was related to Cold War politics. The British thought that the military and psychological results of US membership in NATO were sufficient to ensure a favourable balance of power on the European continent. Institutions for continental West European integration could be useful, but they were not more than 'nested' institutions under the military security umbrella. It would not be necessary or even helpful for the UK to participate in them. The UK remained a global power with imperial responsibilities that extended well beyond the West European landmass.

Yet, ironically, by the 1950s Britain had also lost some of these imperial responsibilities, including India, Ceylon, and Burma. The link between the Cold War and decolonisation was not one of cause and effect; far from it, for by the turn of the decade both the British and the Americans had come to see Britain's imperial possessions as having strategic utility for a global balance that was favourable to the West. Indeed, in strategically valuable areas the bogey of Communism could be invoked, even if it was not already present. Thus, the developing Cold War environment actually pointed to the continued utility of imperial possessions and strategic bases for British and American foreign policy, although the economic burden of empire was becoming intolerable.

Bevin had also invested considerable energy in the Middle East with efforts to construct a new set of defence and associative relationships in the region because of its strategic and resource value and the fear of Soviet penetration. However, the infamous 'scuttle' from Palestine had sullied Britain's reputation not only in the Arab world, but also with the United States, too. In East Africa, an attempt to establish a new base in Kenya failed, when Whitehall decided that the strategic threat from the Soviet Union was greater in the Middle East. The importance of this latter area also meant that the United States was playing an increasingly significant role. Malaya, an early success story for the flexibility of British imperial policy, then witnessed an insurrection in 1948 which was seen in London as part of a larger Communist-inspired challenge in Asia. It required more than 40,000 troops to be deployed there to sustain a British presence in the region with the co-operation of like-minded Malays, and to convince the

Americans that Britain was still pulling its weight in the Cold War. Likewise in the Gold Coast, the Accra riots of 1948 had been seen as evidence of the spreading influence of Communism to Africa, and were harshly suppressed. By 1955, pressures for decolonisation had nevertheless grown and this challenged Britain’s position as an imperial power, although it was not until after the Suez fiasco that Britain’s weakness became blatantly evident.

The 1950s were also marked by increasing alarm in Britain about the United States, the third of Churchill’s Three Interlocking Circles. US Cold War policy was becoming increasingly belligerent and provocative, and the British now struggled to contain the policy gap over how the Cold War should be fought. In 1950, war broke out over Korea, and it was here that cold war turned to an unwanted and unwelcome hot war. Although Korea was a UN operation, the war marked the clear arrival of the United States as a global Cold War actor and, with this, the relative diminution of the UK’s role. Early on, the war had been presented as a chance to show the Americans the UK’s ‘capacity to act as a world power with the support of the Commonwealth’, and thereby to convince them not to reduce Marshall aid grants to the UK as part of the Anglo-American spat about European integration. Yet British decision-makers soon found a number of worrying aspects to the United States’ pursuit of the Korean War. There was concern that the Soviets might overreact to American pressure and destabilise Europe while all eyes were focused upon Asia. There was a panic that the Americans might use nuclear weapons: this impelled Attlee to visit Harry S. Truman in December 1950 to plead for a more temperate approach. Fears that the war might spill over into other parts of the region were increased when the United States insisted on branding China as an aggressor in early 1951, after UN troops had crossed the thirty-eighth parallel and headed towards the Chinese border. The war meant a huge rise in British defence expenditures (which rose to nearly £1,500 million), and this inevitably brought sections of the Labour Party into open revolt about the priorities of the government.

To make matters worse, joint planning and intelligence operations also indicated that the United States was taking a path that was alarming to senior decision-makers in Britain: some in the United States were increasingly contemplating ‘winning’ the Cold War, and doing this by force if necessary. ‘Roll-back’ and talk of a preventative war could spell disaster for the territorial status quo that the British thought they had secured with the NATO pact. A general world war was not one that could be won in any meaningful sense, and British decision-makers also knew that the country would be very exposed if there was ever to be a Soviet nuclear attack, both because of geography and because of the presence of US atomic weapons in the UK.

The response in Britain to the blatant arrival of American power and activism on the world stage was a cautious one. It was not considered appropriate to push the Soviets too roughly into a diplomatic corner; so, conforming to all aspects of US policy, in particular those relating to controls on exports from OEEC countries to the Eastern bloc, was resisted, even if this...
seemed like a revival of an appeasement mentality. How to manage the coming of age of an activist American Cold War policy also affected the politicians. Churchill returned to office in 1951, although he was by now ailing, and not really suited to the demands of high office. After the death of Stalin in 1953, Churchill made it his personal crusade to reinvent the summitry of the war years. If, by 1955, the Geneva Summit was projected as a serious step away from the first years of the 1950s, its achievements were actually limited.

Interpreting Britain's Cold War

Historians have moved on from the debate about who started the Cold War. Yet it is inadequate to talk of the Cold War simply as just one phase of foreign policy, or as a period of history from roughly 1945 to 1989. Since the end of the Cold War, more archival access and fresh, often interdisciplinary thinking that is taking place in a new political environment have transformed the ways in which we understand the Cold War. The Cold War emerged in different ways in each country and its characterisation is still essentially shaped by national political environments. For this reason, the rise of interest in the importance of Commonwealth and colonies, decolonisation, and the 'Third World' in the Cold War is especially relevant for the UK, whose own imperial footprint lay across the world, and whose Cold War arena was genuinely global.

The intelligence strand of the Cold War was also more important than was previously realised. Intelligence information was vital for both domestic and foreign policy, and it also became a very expensive subset of a Cold War game in itself. Information was at a premium. Much work remains to be done on how intelligence was fed into specific Cold War decisions: some intelligence assessments were wrong; other assessments did not exist when they should have. Intelligence sources failed to anticipate the explosion of the first Soviet bomb in 1949; the Malaya crisis was not well served by intelligence information; neither the Berlin crisis of 1948-49 nor the invasion of South Korea were accurately anticipated; and British and American estimates on the size of the North Korean army were wildly inaccurate. Yet the steady drip-feed of intelligence material formed an important environment in which spending, planning, and operational decisions were made in the UK. Peter Hennessy calls this the creation of a 'Secret State' within existing structures in Whitehall. Democratic control, such as there was, came only from ministerial decisions, not parliament.

Another interpretation of Britain's Cold War is more sociological, investing it with a domestic and social dimension that historians can unearth by reconstructing its 'lived experience'. In this interpretation, understanding the institutions of civil society, including trades unions, churches, and private networks, and their penetration by domestic and US intelligence becomes part of the fabric of a new history. This allows for a different kind of historical narrative that spills into hitherto-unexplored aspects of the Cold War, but which is also linked to the study of the rise of new forms of mass communications, and of national and transnational networks.

The prosecution of the Cold War was very effectively carried out in Britain. There are many reasons as to why a Cold War mentality became so successfully internalised: the validity of the cause perhaps; but also a deeply rooted reflex of activism and international leadership that still dominated Whitehall and Westminster during these years, despite the privations that this might mean for the general public. These reasons were reinforced by the positive experiences of victory gleaned from the Second World War, for the wartime mentality that had delivered victory in 1945 did not then disappear completely. As they changed enemies, decision-makers saw that the intelligence and manipulative propaganda in domestic as well as overseas strategies were necessary to counter Communism, in the same way that they had been deployed against Nazism.

46 In 1948, intelligence is estimated to have cost 7.1 per cent of GNP. Michael Dockrill, British Defence since 1945 (London: Blackwell, 1988), 91-92. The huge popularity of the novels of John Le Carré is evidence of British fascination with this dimension of the Cold War.
47 Aldrich, Hidden Hand, 500-03, 272.
48 Hennessy, Secret State. Recent scholarship has been possible only because of the changes in UK legislation relating to hitherto-unreleased primary documents about intelligence and security: David Vincent, The Culture of Secrecy: Britain, 1812-1998 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 195-203.
Party-political dissent was kept to a minimum, as there was also fairly robust political bipartisanship that dominated foreign policy making and minimised public disagreement if the national interest was said to be at stake. British elite groups were socially and ideologically coherent, not diverse, while intelligence monitoring and white propaganda encouraged the public notion of Britain as a responsible and moral great power. It remains the case that, as Britain settled down for the long haul of the Cold War, there was virtually no sustained questioning or opposition from the British masses or elites about British relations with the Soviet Union and Communism.

It is therefore impossible to disagree with the remark of the former permanent under secretary of state at the Foreign Office, Sir Michael Palliser, that 'the cold war is a thread that has run through everything'. The sense that there was an emerging Soviet and Communist threat obliged successive British governments to keep their people on an expensive semi-war footing at home and abroad. At home, vigilance and controls were nevertheless combined with welfare reforms and a greater state role in the management of the economy. Abroad, Britain had again to play a major part to create a favourable balance of power. As the Soviet Union was both a European and a global power, the support of the United States was also essential. Going nuclear strengthened Britain's world power position and image, and it also helped the UK to deal with the United States as more of an equal partner, at least in the short term. By 1949, NATO was also in place to provide the security that would allow Communism to be contained at least behind the Iron Curtain. Soviet encroachment in the eastern Mediterranean and Iran, as well as in Asia, had to be stalled. A defence barrier across strategic parts of the Empire-Commonwealth was essential and, with American support, and despite early postwar decolonisation, this allowed 'the British Empire to revive before it collapsed'. These were policy objectives that were perceived to be both necessary and of strategic benefit to Britain. They quickly became Cold War policy imperatives that were continually to trump the debilitating economic weakness of Britain itself.

The German problem

"Germany is our problem," wrote Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau in 1945. The measures to curb German power were many and they seemed justified: military government and an unlimited period of occupation; abolition of the German armed forces and elimination of the country's industrial war potential; de-Nazification and punishment of all Germans involved in Nazi crimes; reparations to the Soviet Union on a gigantic scale as well as to the Western countries in order to restore at least partly the damages caused by Germany. In addition to occupation and security controls, radical structural changes seemed necessary. All sorts of recipes were on the table: "dismemberment" of the German Reich that, since its founding by Bismarck, in 1866 and 1871, had played a semi-hegemonic role in Europe and had ruled...