On the Centennial of the Russian Revolution

The historical significance of the Russian Revolution of 1917 only grows with the passage of time. The collapse of the Russian Empire, the largest overland empire the world has ever seen, followed by the Bolsheviks’ overthrow of the parliamentary government that replaced the tsar’s regime, were truly shocking events in a year that also witnessed America’s entry into World War I on the side of the British and French, thus tipping the balance against Germany. But when Lenin’s Bolshevik government opted out of the war, declaring one side as bad as the other, and proceeded to establish a radical “Soviet Socialist” state in Russia, the leaders of the Western democracies had to grapple with a whole new threat: the advent of state-sponsored militant Communism, with its aim of world domination.

Looking back, we can see that the long, twilight struggle of the Cold War began there and then, in the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in place by the end of 1917, the temporary alliance of World War II notwithstanding. It was a war that pitted the supporters of a sweeping, absolutist ideology called Marxism against those favoring another, more permeable or pluralist set of liberal democratic values. Local nationalist, anti-colonialist, or “Third World” struggles were subsumed in this gigantic see-saw war mostly of propaganda and covert political maneuvering but also, at times, of overt military conflict. The saving of western Europe from Communism through the Marshall Plan marked a victory for the one side, the “fall of China” to Communism a triumph for the other. A “space race” between the rival “superpowers” was only one aspect of a costly arms buildup in the two camps, while the arrival of nuclear weapons capable of delivering massive destruction to their respective homelands introduced an enormous new element of terror into the conflict. Oddly enough, perhaps, the nuclear standoff brought an element of stability to the Cold War, which then entered, in the 1970s, a phase of intense economic as well as political and cultural competition.

The nearly century-long Cold War supposedly came to an end in the 1990s with the collapse of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe; except for North Korea, Soviet-style state socialism has survived, and then in much less militant, more narrowly nationalist and economically pragmatic forms, only in China, Cuba, and Viet Nam. On the other hand, as we enter 2017 the nuclear standoff between the two major nuclear powers, with its implied threat of mutually assured destruction, remains in force. And Russia is now in the grip of a nostalgic neo-Soviet nationalism that again threatens its neighbors even as the United States struggles to restore an equally nostalgic, uniquely American kind of lost national “greatness.”

The ideological baselines of the Cold War have certainly changed, especially on the Russian side; in that sense, the Cold War is gone. But will the succeeding, neo-nationalist conflict launched in 2017 match in its intensity and duration—in its historical significance—the Cold War begun in 1917? At this moment in time, almost exactly a hundred years since the start of the Russian Revolution, it seems very doubtful. History is replete with failed movements to turn back the clock—only consider, in this respect, the Churchillian efforts after World War II to save the British Empire.