

# Prologue

## Cold Sweat

Just past midnight on September 26, 1983, Lieutenant-Colonel Stanislav Petrov settled into a chair in a secret bunker hidden deep beneath the woods some fifty kilometers outside of Moscow. Petrov was the duty commander in charge of monitoring the Soviet early-warning satellites positioned to detect an American missile attack.

The one hundred and twenty people working with Petrov that night were on tenterhooks as military tensions between the Soviets and the Americans had not run so high since the peak of the Cuban Missile Crisis, twenty-one years earlier. After Reagan became president in 1981, the Americans had been attempting to systematically undermine Soviet confidence in their own defenses. Moscow had raised tensions even higher in early September 1983 by shooting down a Korean passenger aircraft that had inadvertently entered Soviet airspace. And in just two months' time, the Americans would begin deploying in Germany their new Pershing-II missiles, which many Soviet experts believed could reach targets in Moscow in around ten minutes, thus denying the Soviet leadership any chance of retaliating.

At 00.40, the alarms roared into action. "For 15 seconds," Petrov later recalled, "we were all in a state of shock." On the panel in front of him, the word "Launch" pulsed in red letters. For the next few minutes, one of the satellites reported the launch of one missile after another—five missiles in total, all heading towards the Soviet Union. Suddenly, the warning flashing in front of Petrov's eyes read "Missile Attack."

Automatically, this information had been flashed to the top military commanders, the chiefs of the Soviet General Staff. Petrov now had seven minutes to verify whether the attack was real, as that would leave just enough time for Yuri Andropov, the Soviet leader who was on a dialysis machine in a Moscow

sanatorium, to order Soviet missiles to be launched against America. Under enormous strain, Petrov and his staff raced to complete the technical cross-checks in hopes of finding that it was a false alarm. To their horror, everything they checked confirmed that an attack had begun.

Petrov should now have pressed the button in front of him to confirm to Andropov that an attack was underway. But he did not do so. "I had a funny feeling in my gut," Petrov recalled years later. "I didn't want to make a mistake." He was certain that the Americans would never attack with just five missiles and suspicious that the Soviet ground-based radars had not detected them ten minutes later as they should have done. "I declared that it was a false alarm, but I did not know for sure."

Months later, Soviet investigators determined that bursts of sunlight reflecting off clouds above Montana had caused a faulty satellite computer to report the missile launches. This incident remained secret for another fifteen years.<sup>1</sup>

We can't know for certain what the Soviet response would have been had Petrov not declared the false alarm. Andropov was dead within six months of this event, and other high-ranking people who would have been involved in a decision to launch a retaliatory strike died not long thereafter. How close the world was to an accidental nuclear war, then and in the weeks that followed, remains a hotly debated issue. What is clear, however, is that this was just one of several incidents during the Cold War that might have triggered a nuclear conflict.

Despite the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union never engaged in direct military conflict, the Cold War was much more serious than most people imagine. It was a toxic mix of history, ideology, geography and strategy. There was, however, no real equivalence between the two systems. The Soviet Union had soon overwhelmed the idealism of communism with violence, oppression and lies. The Cold War was a struggle, not a game of chess, though certain episodes might give that impression.

Both the Soviets and the Americans were extraordinarily innovative in developing weapons and designing strategies meant to "deter" the other side—spurring the most intense and costly arms race in history. In Europe, the casualties of the Cold War were relatively low, and number in the thousands—but millions of people died in related conflicts elsewhere: Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Africa and Central America. It was not just a war of military confrontation, but one fought on many fronts—ideology, economics, culture and espionage. In many respects it was "The Great Cold War."

One reason the true gravity of this period is not more widely appreciated is

that few people on either side had the full picture. In 1994, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, explained: "From the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 through until the confrontation over Euro-missiles began in the late seventies, most people did not expect war to break out between the Soviet Union and the United States. It was those who knew most about the rivalry who were the most concerned."<sup>2</sup>

## A New Look

Yet even those "who knew most" had a less than perfect understanding of what was happening.

During the last years of the Cold War, I was Chief of the Assessments Staff in the Cabinet Office in London and, as such, a member of the Joint Intelligence Committee of the Cabinet (the JIC). Every week, the JIC brought together the most senior people responsible for the collection and assessment of intelligence, along with those dealing with policy on foreign affairs, defense and security etc. Using the intelligence we had, the Assessments Staff drafted the papers that, after discussion at the JIC, were then sent to the prime minister, members of the government and senior officials.<sup>3</sup> We often had reliable information about what the Russians had done, but at times we were not sure of their motivation.

When I joined the Diplomatic Service in the mid-sixties, the Cold War dominated international affairs. In trying to figure out what was going on, I sometimes felt as though I were in a hall of mirrors, where nothing was quite what it seemed to be. The revelations that have emerged over the past two decades—from the opening of previously locked archives, the declassification of documents and the publication of memoirs—have shown that this was, in fact, often the case. That is why the subtitle of this book is *A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors*.

The details now available about key meetings at both the Kremlin and the White House, for example, have made it possible for us to have a more complete and balanced picture of how the two sides viewed each other, and of the complex mix of factors that led them into the Cold War and eventually out of it. The new material has also made it easier to address the three big questions that need to be considered in examining any long confrontation: "Why did it start?" "Why did it last as long as it did?" and "Why did it end the way it did?"

I also wanted to explore several strategic issues. For example, why, by the mid-eighties, had the two sides amassed between them over 60,000 nuclear warheads and in Europe more powerful conventional forces than at any time

since the end of the Second World War? What determined how far each side was willing to go to try to win the Cold War? Why did it take so long for the Soviet Union to realize how fundamentally weak it was and, on the other side, for the far richer and far more technologically advanced United States to grasp how strong it was? And, finally, what impact did secret intelligence have on the development and ending of the Cold War?

To begin to answer these questions, I traveled to Washington, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Warsaw and Moscow to interview nearly a hundred people who were involved in the events that transpired between the forties and the end of 1991. They included top policy makers, strategists, military commanders and key figures in the world of intelligence. Together these interviews provided some eye-opening accounts of what was going on behind the scenes, as well as many valuable insights into the mixture of insecurity, ignorance and ambition that drove the rivalry between the two opposing forces.

The interviews I conducted with those on the “Eastern side” of the conflict made clear the extent to which the harrowing experiences of many Easterners during the Second World War and its aftermath shaped their outlook on the world, and defined the roles they would play within their own countries. It was a reminder to those of us who have grown up in open societies not to be too hasty in judging those who have not. Within the communist regimes, there were sane and moral people who wisely kept their true thoughts to themselves, until an opportunity for greater honesty presented itself.

## Entering the Hall

As I embarked on this project, I discussed it at some length with my friend Ernst Gombrich, a renowned art historian. During the Second World War, Ernst had shown a flair for “getting inside the mind” of the Germans through their radio broadcasts, which he and others were helping the British government monitor from a manor house in the English countryside.

In later years, Ernst would often remind his students: “When you look at a painting, the question you should be asking is not whether you like it or not, but ‘What was the artist trying to do and why did he do it that way?’” Because of his fascination with perception, he liked the idea of a book that tries to envision how both sides saw things.

“When did the Cold War begin?” Ernst asked. “Do you think it started in ’47 or with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917?”

“Nineteen seventeen,” I replied, “but if you really want to understand what happened, I think, you need to look back much further. But should it be to 1847, the year before Karl Marx launched his *Communist Manifesto*; or 1747, as events began to unfold towards the first clash of arms for centuries between Russians and the Germans; or even a century earlier, to 1647—when the views of the Puritans were beginning to shape America and Russian explorers of the new Romanov dynasty had reached as far as the Pacific?”

“Go for 1647!” Ernst said. “Over a period of three hundred years the main trends can be seen more clearly; so too can the influence of geography.” His response was not unexpected. Over sixty years earlier he had written *A Little History of the World*, a fine children’s book that is still educating many adults—and not only when they are reading it to their children at bed-time.

Although it is widely believed that the Cold War can be understood by starting the story after the Second World War, I think Gombrich was right—and so this book begins by looking briefly at those earlier years. It is here that we see some of the prominent features of the Cold War begin to emerge.

As we track the evolution of the Cold War through to its end, I believe we should bear in mind President Kennedy’s warning to graduates of Yale in 1962:

For the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought. Mythology distracts us everywhere—in government as in business, in politics as in economics, in foreign affairs as in domestic affairs.<sup>4</sup>

I mention this because a number of myths now surround the history of the Great Cold War: the assumption that the Soviet Union posed no real threat to the West; the belief that détente could have worked; the idea that the West prevailed because America was strong, its people united and its allies supportive; that the Soviet collapse had nothing to do with outside pressure; and that the real lesson of the Cold War is that victory was achieved by Reagan’s toughness, with Gorbachev’s contribution being of far less significance.

These myths need to be looked at carefully because they are dangerous. They not only distort history; they also distort the lessons to be learned from it. And while the Cold War was in many respects unique, those lessons have tremendous relevance to the issues we face in the 21st century.