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Analyse the effect that Ronald Reagan's policies had on bringing an end to the Cold War?

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Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This essay aims to answer the question “Analyse the effect that Ronald Reagan’s policies had on bringing an end to the Cold War?”. Two sources were crucial in giving the author an insight into the mind of the President and the people at that time. The first source is a speech given by Reagan at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, famous for the line “Tear down this wall!”. The second source is a cartoon created by Punch magazine. The cartoon, originally published in the 1980’s, shows Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher shooting at Yuri Andropov (the then Soviet leader), and complements the first source by emphasising the public perception of the threat of a nuclear war.

Source One¹:

The origin of the source is a speech that was given by the United States President Ronald Reagan on the 12th of June, 1987. This makes the source valuable because it gives a direct insight into how Reagan wanted his policies perceived by the public in 1987, a time in which he was attempting to put pressure on the Soviet Union. It is biased towards American policies, because his aim was to confirm the ideology and message of capitalism and put pressure on Communism. However, this bias within the source allows a more accurate perspective on American foreign policy, as the source reflects their simplified belief that the war was good versus evil. The purpose of Reagan’s speech at the time was to force Mikhail Gorbachev into opening up Eastern Europe and to give his people the freedom which Reagan demanded. It therefore provides a direct insight into the goals of the Reagan administration's foreign policy. However, it doesn’t go into the specific details that Reagan aims to combat Gorbachev against. It is a valuable source in historical discussion, due to its consequences, its delivery and to a

¹ Ronald Reagan, “*Remarks at the Brandenburg Gate*”, West Berlin, 12 June 1987, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreaganbrandenburggate.htm>

lesser extent its content. Unfortunately, it provides no insight into the Soviet perspective or foreign policy at the time, and it is heavily pro-American making the source highly subjective rather than objective.

Source Two:



"Say . . . You're beautiful when you're angry."

The origin of Source Two is Punch, which was a U.K. based, satirical magazine, which routinely mocked important issues of the day. Therefore, it is a valuable source because to sell the magazine, Punch had to accurately judge the mood of the public at the time, providing an insight into the thoughts of British political commentators and the British public. However, it is limited as an historical source because it is taken from a satirical magazine which is not considered to be entirely accurate due to its tendency to exaggerate events to create humour. The purpose of the cartoon also has an impact on its values and limitations. Specifically, its values lie in it showed the British public found the insanity of the situation funny and worth satirising. Yet this is contrasted by limitations inherent in the purpose. The source was created to be humorous through exaggeration and mocking which undermines the historical accuracy of the information provided. The valuable element of the content is that it conveys the threat and scale of a nuclear war by emphasising the number of weapons available and the devastation of

nuclear weapons. Limiting the content is an unfounded historical rumour that Thatcher and Reagan were linked romantically, a point which lacks evidence and makes historians question the accuracy and knowledge of the author.

Analyse the effect that Ronald Reagan's policies had on bringing an end to the Cold War?

The end of the Cold War in 1991 brought to a conclusion one of the most volatile, and divisive periods of history. However, it was the end of the war which is so controversial due to its unexpected nature. The important question that still remains is to what extent Ronald Reagan and his policies were responsible for bringing an end to the Cold War. Orthodox historians, mainly from America, took the view that Reagan's economic policy and sheer personality were the key factors which brought an end to the Cold War. However, revisionist historians such as Timothy Garton-Ash and Mikhail Gorbachev believe that Reagan had little effect and was merely a catalyst for what was already taking place. Post-revisionist historians, and this historian, take the analytical view that both leaders' policies had an equal role in bringing a conclusion to the war.

For orthodox historians like Paul Kengor, Reagan's policies were the key causal factor in ending the war, yet this argument isn't entirely supported by the evidence. Kengor, and other American historians, claim that his policies of increasing military spending, influencing the Soviet economy and providing inspiring, influential speeches were the keys to forcing the Soviet collapse.

Reagan believed that the policy of containment employed by previous governments was never going to destroy communism, therefore they needed a change of tact. The new policy was to "Encourage long-term political and military changes within the Soviet empire"². As far as the President was concerned, this meant trying to ruin the economy from the inside. Increasing

² Paul Kengor, *The Crusader - Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism*, Harper 2006

military spending to (adjusted for 2012 inflation levels) USD\$558 billion dollars³ was implemented because they thought it would give the US a military advantage. This would force an arms race which, the United States knew the command, Soviet economy was in no position to contend with. Reagan arrived into power to, supposedly, discover that the economy of his antagonistic superpower was in a "Worse shape than I'd realized"⁴ and had every intention of exposing the weakness. This would either cause a collapse of the Soviet economy through the pressure placed on it, or lead to a US military advantage which could be exploited at the negotiating table. This was aided, according to Kengor, by a silent economic war called the 'Roll Back' strategy⁵, which entailed a strict control over Soviet exports to squeeze the economy even further. Through pressure, Soviet hard-currency income was limited to \$32 billion in 1982⁶, mostly from oil and gas exports. Paul Kengor would argue that this pressure was the cause of the Soviet economic problems during the 1980's and they ultimately brought an end to communism. However, as it will be explored later, many historians believe that Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms were going to happen anyway, with or without the pressure Reagan supposedly placed on the economy. Kengor also holds the belief that his speech making ability had a great effect⁷ on the American people and put pressure on the Soviet government. Two of his most famous speeches, one justifying his defense budget⁸, and the other asking Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall were seen across the globe as rallying calls to the non-communist world. The line he delivered at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"⁹, is regarded by many to be one of the defining moments of the Cold War and the 20th

³ Lawrence J. Korb, "A Historical Perspective on Defense Budgets", Center for American Progress, (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2011/07/06/10041/a-historical-perspective-on-defense-budgets/>) (accessed on 20 January 2017)

⁴ Kengor, "The Crusader - Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism"

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Kengor, "The Crusader - Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism"

⁸ Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on Defense Spending", Oval Office, 19 February 1983

⁹ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Brandenburg Gate"

century. However, the effectiveness of the policy, is unquantifiable, which makes the historical perspective unreliable. It is impossible to prove that Reagan's speech making abilities put pressure on the Soviet government, which was already pressurised long before his arrival. Reagan may have galvanised the Western world, but claiming he had an effect on Soviet policies is a perspective which lacks historical support or evidence. The viewpoint of orthodox historians is weakened because of this stance. The economic and speech-making arguments lack solid evidence to support them. They rely on speculation of pressure, without proof, which makes this historian believe that their historiography is mostly opinion based rather than evidence based and therefore unreliable. Revisionist opposition similarly question their conclusion.

Revisionist historians, such as Timothy Garton-Ash and Mikhail Gorbachev, both believe that Reagan was a catalyst¹⁰, however, in their opinion the Soviet leader's policies had a much more significant role in bringing an end to the Cold War than Ronald Reagan. Garton-Ash proclaimed that without Gorbachev's willingness to speak to Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (the British Prime Minister at the time), Reagan's threatening policies could have led to a catastrophic escalation in tension¹¹. This, combined with Perestroika and Glasnov, undermined the communist principles which bound the USSR, bringing the empire to its death. Gorbachev planned to increase civil and economic liberties, which would allow a more capitalist economic approach (Perestroika)¹² and a reduction in media censorship (Glasnov)¹³. The economic decentralization loosened the grip over Soviet society, which communism relies upon, and

¹⁰ Peter Beaumont, "Mikhail Gorbachev - the forgotten hero of history", *The Guardian*, 8 November 2009, (<https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2009/nov/08/observer-profile-mikhail-gorbachev>) (accessed on 15.01.2017)

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Keely Rogers and Jo Thomas, *The Cold War: Superpower tensions and rivalries*, (Scott Foresman, 15 June 2015)

¹³ Ibid

combined with Glasnov, public awareness of political decisions increased, therefore causing a collapse¹⁴. The Gorbachev and Garton-Ash historiographical opinion¹⁵ is much more plausible than the Kengor viewpoint, as the link between the new Soviet policies and the collapse is established, however, it doesn't take into account the outside pressure which forced the policies in the first place, or the historian's innate bias. Without Reagan's military spending increase, it is unlikely that the Soviets would have spent so much on their own military when they knew the rest of the economy would suffer. The misallocation of resources forced Perestroika, and if not Perestroika, another radical economic policy, because the economy couldn't cope¹⁶. Furthermore, the revisionist viewpoint is dominated by two historians with ulterior motives. Gorbachev is biased towards his own policies and would like to be able to claim that he caused the end of the Cold War. Similarly, Timothy Garton-Ash is a left-wing and liberal historian, which is the antithesis of Ronald Reagan, the far-right conservative, making him more likely to support Gorbachev who has a similar ideology. Therefore the revisionist viewpoint is more evidence based than the orthodox stance, but it is influenced by authors who have a bias, and it doesn't take into account causal factors such as Reagan's economic policy.

The theory provided by John Lewis Gaddis, that both leaders combined to bring an end to the Cold War¹⁷, is the most balanced and thoughtful account of history. It is negligent to place the entire conclusion of the Cold War on the shoulders of one particular leader. Both Reagan and Gorbachev had distinct, but influential policies, which almost simultaneously brought down the USSR. Gaddis believes that Gorbachev's "malleability"¹⁸ and "dithering"¹⁹ combined with

¹⁴ Keely Rogers and Jo Thomas, *The Cold War: Superpower tensions and rivalries*

¹⁵ Peter Beaumont, "Mikhail Gorbachev - the forgotten hero of history"

¹⁶ Kengor, *The Crusader - Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism*

¹⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War*, Penguin 2005

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

Reagan's "rhetorical offensive"²⁰, essentially a combination of orthodox and revisionist historians perspectives, consequently brought an end to the war. Gaddis's post-revisionist stance is aided by the ability of hindsight, but also by objectiveness which is lacking in the other stances. He gave credit to both leaders, without being biased to one or the other due to his political or social views. His stance lacks the authority that the other historians have, it isn't as opinionated, preferring to present the evidence with an more implicit voice, however, this historian would argue that it is a more reliable and balanced way of presenting history.

In conclusion, the orthodox and revisionist historians provide valid theories when outlining the effect that Reagan's policies had on bringing an end to the Cold War. However, their points of view are limited by other factors. Orthodox historians were influenced by the general public perception of Reagan at the time, and their stance lacks quantifiable evidence, relying upon the historians subjective opinion that pressure was placed on the USSR. In contrast, the revisionist stance is more quantifiable and evidence based, but the presentation of information is devalued due to the political and personal biases of the authors Mikhail Gorbachev and Timothy Garton-Ash. John Lewis Gaddis and post-revisionist historians balance those arguments, and remove those biases, by presenting a more equitable conclusion that takes into account both sides: that the policies of Reagan and Gorbachev combined to end the Cold War.

²⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *"The Cold War"*

Reflection:

The three most difficult challenges facing this historian when writing this essay were trying to discover as many revisionist viewpoints as possible, trying to condense the level of information on Ronald Reagan into two or three points, and dealing with the unreliability of orthodox historians. Whilst it was easy to discover historians who support Ronald Reagan's policies, finding those who believed Gorbachev caused the conclusion of the Cold War was more difficult. Technically the Americans 'won' the Cold War, as the USSR collapsed, therefore, the majority of historians are relatively dismissive towards the impact that Gorbachev had. It took extensive research into Gorbachev himself, and into the historian Timothy Garton-Ash, to verify their beliefs. What this proves is that Winston Churchill was right, the victor always writes history²¹. The abundance of orthodox historians meant finding facts and viewpoints on the Reagan administration proved relatively easy, however, collecting a consensus on his most important policies was more difficult. The depth of research into the Reagan government meant that this author had to filter through most history books to find a key point.

American, orthodox historians appear to dominate the historical thinking in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. This does lead to questioning over the reliability of orthodox historians, as they have a bias towards their country and the victors, whereas revisionist and post-revisionist historians are more objective with the use of hindsight, and more accessible pieces of evidence. Orthodox historians represent public opinion at the time, but their personal opinions cannot be used as historical evidence. A historian should try to provide a balanced account of history

²¹ Max Hastings, "History as written by the victor", *The Telegraph*, 11.02.2004, (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3626376/History-as-written-by-the-victor.html>) (accessed on 02.16.2016)

before giving an objective review, however, evidence from this research shows that orthodox historians do not live up to those expectations.

Finally, this study has emphasised the importance of economic policy on politics and world affairs. Without turning the American economy into a capitalist empire, Reagan would not have been able to capitalise on the USSR's weaknesses, and gain support at home. This historian believes that the economic policies of leaders are the most influential and long-lasting decisions that politicians can make.

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