

'Pandora's box' from Le Monde (25 September 1949)

Caption: On 25 September 1949, the French daily newspaper Le Monde considers the implications for the West of the Soviet Union's acquisition of atomic weapons and raises the issue of monitoring weapons of mass destruction.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 25.09.1949, n° 1.452; 6e année. Paris: Le Monde. "La boîte de Pandore", p. 1.

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Pandora's box

By making his disclosure a few hours before Andrey Vyshinsky's speech, was President Harry Truman trying to seize the initiative and lessen the shock to the American public that the announcement would have caused if it had been made by the Soviet Minister himself? Or was he trying to induce Mr Vyshinsky to confirm the news officially on behalf of his government? In the event, Mr Vyshinsky did not mention it: in his three-point resolution, he confined himself to proposing that the United Nations 'take practical measures to ban atomic weapons unconditionally and establish appropriate strict international control measures.'

The news, which has aroused strong feeling throughout the world, does not come as a surprise. The United States knew that it would be deprived of its monopoly sooner or later. That this has happened in 1949 rather than two or three years later hardly changes the problem. Besides, Washington and London had always based their plans since the end of the war on the assumption that the Soviet Union would, one day, acquire the atomic bomb, as well as other ultra-modern weapons.

What now concerns the peoples of the world more than ever is whether the fact that the Russians and Americans both have the bomb makes war more or less likely? The answer to this terrifying question depends on the wisdom of the two leaders and their governments.

In international Communist circles, it is argued that the American monopoly itself constituted a threat of war and that the loss of that monopoly can only encourage the United States Government to pursue a more cautious foreign policy. In American circles, on the other hand, it is hoped that possession of the bomb will give the Soviet Union a greater feeling of security and deprive it of the possibility of invoking the unjustified fears to which it has constantly referred in formulating its policy. On this view, the Soviet Union will be led to adopt a more reasonable attitude and revise its position on the international control of atomic energy.

What practical conclusions will the United States and Soviet Union draw from this development? Only time will tell. But international opinion is insisting almost unanimously that new and greater efforts be made to establish the efficient international control system to which Dean Acheson and Mr Vyshinsky referred in their speeches. That should now be the United Nations' main objective. Unless the Commission on Conventional Armaments breaks the deadlock, the admission of failure will be so great as to deprive the international organisation itself of any reason to exist.

In an article published on the opening day of the Assembly's session, the American Communist newspaper *The Daily Worker* reminded its readers of the proposals for simultaneous control and disarmament made last year by Mr Vyshinsky and hinted that, this year, the Soviet Delegation 'might go a little further'. Will the Soviet Minister really do so during this session or at the special conference of great powers that he is proposing with a view to the conclusion of a peace treaty? If so, is he about to agree to the creation of a supranational authority responsible for controlling all atomic activities, something which the Soviet Union has always hitherto rejected?

If the two antagonists do not reach agreement and banish the fears that currently dictate their defence policies, we shall inevitably see an accelerated arms race, frantic competition over uranium deposits and the search for weapons even more terrible than the atom bomb.

After which, any incident could spark a general conflagration.