By mid-1944, the end of the war was finally within sight. After the great battle of Kursk and the D-Day invasion of Normandy, the Axis powers were in retreat. Soviet leaders began to look ahead, sorting out their agenda and priorities for the postwar period.

The war losses of the USSR were staggering: the country lost at least 27 million people and about a quarter of its reproducible wealth; over 1,700 cities and towns were destroyed and more than 31,000 industrial enterprises demolished. With its human resources depleted and much of its productive capacity destroyed, the country faced a huge task of postwar reconstruction. Yet there was also a new sense of optimism and self-confidence among the populace proud of defeating the Nazi juggernaut which the rest of the world could not stop. The Stalinist system survived the test, having proved its ability to concentrate resources, maintain internal discipline, and act decisively under enormous pressure. The Great Patriotic War (as World War II came to be called in the USSR) endowed the Communist regime with broader legitimacy and brought Iosif Stalin to the peak of his popularity.

Externally, the Soviet position was also marked by contradictions. On the one hand, the coming victory was bound to bring the USSR to new heights of strategic and political influence. Its two mortal enemies—Germany and Japan—laid prostrate; its military predominance over the Eurasian landmass seemed assured along with a new status as a great power and a key member of the victorious Grand Alliance. The Soviet model gained new prestige, while the growth of Communist and Left parties in Europe and national liberation movements in Asia opened new avenues for expanding Soviet influence. On the other hand, the war graphically exposed the country’s critical strategic liabilities: easily penetrable borders, lack of ready access to key seaways, and the absence of power-projection capabilities. The narrow escape from a shattering defeat at the hands of a much smaller but technologically more advanced Germany was the best proof of the regime’s vulnerability and backwardness.

"Lenin left us a great estate and we made shit out of it," was Stalin’s dictum to his lieutenants in the first weeks of the war.¹ No wonder security concerns remained paramount in the Kremlin’s thinking about the postwar world.

Postwar plans and intentions

In Bolshevik strategic culture, shaped by Stalin’s concept of “socialism in one country,” the Soviet state was surrounded by a hostile world and its survival and enhancement were overriding goals to which all other interests—those of temporary allies, foreign Communists, and its own people—were to be subordinated. This fusion of Soviet national interests with those of the world revolution freed the Kremlin’s hands for the most cynical Realpolitik, justified, ultimately, by allegedly noble utopian ends. Having identified himself with the system of his creation, Stalin was determined not “to make shit out of it” again; his aim was to turn the USSR into an invincible fortress against foreign enemies. Now was the time to restore Russia’s historical rights, lost in the previous ill-fated wars of the twentieth century, and to convert the gigantic losses and victories into lasting security for the Soviet Union and its ruling circle.

¹ Anastas Mikoian, Tak Bylo [That Is How It Was] (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), 396.
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One key precondition for so doing was building up its national military-industrial base. The other had to do with space. Quite conventional in his geopolitical rationality, Stalin, as Maxim Litvinov observed, had "an outmoded concept of security in terms of territory – the more you have got, the safer you are." Inherited from the Russian tsars, this concept was given extra credence by the experience of the war, which had proved the importance of defense in depth. Bolshevik ideology reinforced this "defensive expansion." Haunted by the "Barbarossa syndrome," Stalin and his circle were determined to keep Germany enfeebled and to extend the Soviet borders to the line of 1941 (i.e., to retain control over the Baltic states, Western Ukraine, and Belorussia, plus Bessarabia, all of which Russia had lost after World War I and repossessed in 1939–41, as well as Northern Bukovina). To further increase the depth of its defense, a glaision of "friendly states" was envisioned along the USSR's western borders. In addition, postwar plans of Soviet diplomats and navy commanders mapped out a chain of strategic strongholds along the seaways adjacent to Soviet borders in the northwest: Bornholm and Spitzbergen, as well as Bear Island.

The same logic applied in the Far East where twice in the twentieth century Japan had gravely threatened Russia's security. There, in addition to enfeeblement and demilitarization of the old enemy, Soviet planners wanted to regain territories and privileges lost to Japan in 1904–05: southern Sakhalin and control over strategic railroads and seaports in Manchuria, plus the militarily important Kurile Islands (see map i, p. 89).

In the southwest, the Kremlin's tentative agenda included building up a Soviet enclave in northern Iran, along with acquiring a controlling influence over the Turkish straits, and strongholds in the Mediterranean via trusteeship over former Italian colonies. This expanded version of the old tsarist aspirations was to protect Russia's "soft underbelly," a region that also contained most of the known Soviet oil deposits.

Although this very ambitious program was not conceived in absolutist terms of world revolution or global hegemony, it was in line with traditional Russian imperial policy. The leading Soviet diplomats involved in policy planning – Litvinov, Ivan Maisky, and Andrei Gromyko – believed that vital security interests of their country were largely compatible with those of the United States and Britain. This optimism was based in part on a revised image of Western democracies which during the war came to be seen as staunch opponents of German Fascism and Japanese militarism and respectful of the USSR's newly gained status, interests, and rights.

Another assumption behind this optimism was a traditional notion of the United States as a distant giant, posing no direct military threat, and likely to withdraw from Europe after the war. Thus, postwar Europe, in Maisky's words, would "have only one great land power – the USSR – and only one great sea power – England" which would help "to prevent the formation in Europe of any power or combination of power, with powerful armies." Besides, the Bolshevik theory of imperialism led the Soviets to expect a new round of "interimperialist contradictions" which would pose a rising United States against a declining Britain, and would incline both Anglo-Saxon powers to keep Germany and Japan weak. If discord existed between Britain and the United States, and if Japan and Germany were enfeebled, the likelihood of a hostile Western coalition – fear of which had haunted Soviet leaders since the October Revolution – would be minimized.

Thus Soviet planners could hope to reach some modus vivendi with the Western allies based on mutually demarcated spheres of influence. The United States would dominate the western hemisphere and the Pacific, while Britain and the Soviet Union would (in Litvinov's words) reach "an accord," based on an "amicable separation of security spheres in Europe according to the principle of geographic proximity." Stalin and Foreign Minister Viacheslav Molotov were hardly prone to the "revisionism" about the West that affected their more impressionable diplomats. The wartime experience of cooperation did not change their basic Bolshevik view of the bourgeois allies as selfish and cunning hypocrites, anti-Soviet at heart. Britain's and the United States' procrastination on the second front and secretly developing atomic weapons helped to sustain this view. The Kremlin's general ideological vision – of a hostile capitalist world, aggressive but inherently unstable, doomed to repeated cycles of depression, war, and revolution – also remained intact, along with a belief in the need for postwar cooperation alive. Soviet diplomats were instructed to play an active role in founding the Bretton Woods system and creating the United Nations.

3 I. Maisky to V. Molotov, January 11, 1944, Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Federation (hereafter AVP RF), fond 06, opis' 6, p. 14, delo 147, list 8.
4 M. Litvinov, "On the Prospects and Possible Basis of Soviet-British Cooperation," November 15, 1944, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 6, p. 14, d. 149, l. 54.
In 1942–43, Stalin was so impressed with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “four policemen” idea that he vainly tried to flesh it out at the Teheran Conference. During the war Stalin also refrained from direct interference in the western sphere. In 1943, he grudgingly accepted British–American dominance in the occupation of Italy, while in 1944–45, he restrained French and Italian Communists from attempting to seize power. He also refused to support actively Communist military campaigns against the British-backed government in Greece and the American-backed Nationalist government in China.

Even within his own sphere Stalin was in no rush to impose the Soviet system. His “popular front” strategy boiled down to an incremental buildup of Soviet influence behind a facade of multiparty parliamentary democracy and a mixed economy. Whether this strategy was from the outset a cynical cover-up for creeping Sovietization, or whether Stalin had real hopes for a “peaceful” and “national” road to socialism, is still a matter of historical debate. But, in any case, the strategy served both options by developing the sinews of Sovietization (especially inside the military and security apparatus) as insurance should the “peaceful” way falter. No less importantly, this strategy, as Eduard Mark argues, “was the vehicle for temporarily harmonizing” the conflicting goals of preservation of the Big Three alliance and consolidation of the Soviet sphere of influence.

Stalin wanted to preserve stable relations with the West for a number of reasons, including preventing the resurgence of German and Japanese power as well as legitimizing the new borders of the Soviet Union and confirming its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. In Stalin’s view, an amicable division of war spoils was clearly preferable to a confrontation with his wartime allies. In addition, cooperation was necessary to secure economic assistance for reconstruction and allowed time for British–American differences to surface. Finally, because Stalin and his aides were fully aware of the military–industrial preponderance of the British–American world, they wanted to prevent a conflict they could not win at that point, or postpone it until shifts in overall correlation of forces were forthcoming. In short, the Kremlin hoped to combine its geopolitical agenda with cooperation from the West – at least for a transitional period during the settlement of postwar problems – but between these two tasks the former clearly assumed a priority.

This agenda, in Stalin’s view, was a moderate interpretation of his country’s security requirements. What was strategically justifiable also seemed morally right to Soviet leaders, who saw their demands as a just distribution of the spoils of war, a war won by great sacrifice from the Soviet people. This sense of entitlement was reinforced by a deeply felt need to be recognized as a legitimate great power.

Stalin realized that it would be difficult to achieve his goals. Well versed in Russian history and mythology, he expected sinister Western imperialists to follow their usual pattern of behavior: use Russians as cannon fodder, lure them with promises of major strategic gains, and then leave them empty-handed in the end. In his words, cited by Molotov at the war’s end, tsarist Russia used “to win wars but was unable to enjoy the fruits of its victories ... Russians are remarkable warriors, but they do not know how to make peace: they are deceived, underpaid.” Stalin knew that he had been deceived by Hitler, with whom he had tried to strike a similar deal in 1939–40. Determined not to be outsmarted again, Stalin and Molotov braced for tough bargaining with their allies. They were determined to seek their primary security agenda with their allies’ consent, if possible, and without it, if necessary.

Toward the policy of “tenacity and steadfastness”

The sudden death of President Roosevelt in April 1945 – Stalin’s favorite Western partner – dealt the first blow to Soviet calculations. The Kremlin’s misgivings about Harry S. Truman were soon confirmed by his pointedly cool reception of Molotov during their April 23 meeting. This change of mood was also evident at the San Francisco Conference, where Molotov and his Western counterparts dashed over the admission of Poland and Argentina. With his armies conquering Berlin, Stalin fully approved Molotov’s combative stand. “I must say that you [are handling] the conference very well,” he cabled his foreign minister on May 2.

A few days later, the White House abruptly terminated lend-lease shipments to the Soviet Union. In Moscow this step was perceived as an act of political pressure. The Kremlin’s real feelings were apparent when Molotov instructed the Soviet trade representative in New York “to stop ... begging American authorities for deliveries; if Americans want to end deliveries, so

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7 Sto sorok besed s Molotovym: iz Pamatnik F. Chueva [140 Talks with Molotov: From F. Chuev’s Diary] (Moscow: Terra, 1991), 78.

8 I. Stalin to V. Molotov, May 2, 1945, Presidential Archive of the Russian Federation (hereafter PA RF), f. 45, op. 1, d. 770, l. 3.
much the worse for them.” In his talks with Harry Hopkins, Truman’s personal envoy, in June 1945, Stalin condemned this “insulting and brutal” act.

From the Soviet perspective, the reasons for this American “toughening” were obvious. Once Germany was defeated, Stalin believed, the Americans would think that the Soviets were no longer necessary. The dictator had a point, but the tension was eased when Truman sent Hopkins to Moscow to resolve the contentious issues regarding the recognition of the provisional Polish government and the voting procedures in the UN Security Council. In June, Secretary of State Edward Stettinius agreed in principle to the Soviet request for a share in the trusteeship over the former Italian colonies. Kremlin leaders were also encouraged by the initial American response to Soviet requests for German reparations and for the internationalization of the Ruhr.

But, as the appetite of the Kremlin grew, the Americans and the British became more intransigent. At the Potsdam Conference, the Allies rebuffed Soviet reparation demands as well as Soviet requests for internationalization of the Ruhr, for a trusteeship in the Mediterranean, and for bases in the Turkish straits. Yet Soviet leaders were able to achieve much of what they wanted regarding the occupation regime in Germany, the new borders of Poland, and the preparations of the peace treaties for Germany’s European satellites. Stalin also succeeded in blocking Western attempts to monitor elections in Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Talking to Georgi Dimitrov, Molotov said that this step “in effect recognized the Balkans as a [Soviet] sphere of influence.” So the overall balance of the Potsdam agreements looked quite satisfactory.

The Kremlin’s satisfaction did not last long, however. The US decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki constituted a dramatic new challenge to Soviet strategic assumptions. It shattered the previous image of the United States as a distant power unable to present a direct military threat to the USSR. It also foreshadowed a shift in the global balance of power in Stalin’s thinking was contained in his assessment of Secretary Byrnes’s proposal on Germany’s demilitarization, which in Stalin’s view had the following hidden agenda: “First, to direct our attention from the Far East, where the United States assumed a role of tomorrow’s friend of Japan ... second, to receive from the USSR a formal acceptance of the United States’ playing the same role in European affairs as the USSR, so that the United States may hereafter, in league with Britain, take the future of Europe into its own hands; third, to devalue the treaties of alliance that the USSR has already reached with European states; fourth, to pull the rug out from under any future treaties of alliance between the USSR and Romania, Finland, etc.”

Stalin was clearly beginning to see the United States as a potential rival for hegemony over the European continent. As a grand strategist, he realized that demanded basing rights in the Soviet-occupied Kuriles, and secretly ordered his military to capture the port of Dalian where the Soviet side was to enjoy special rights according to the Yalta decisions. There is little doubt that Stalin saw these actions as an American effort both to lock the Soviet Union out of Japan and to penetrate the Soviet sphere in the Far East.

At about the same time, Washington and London vowed not to recognize Soviet-sponsored governments in Bulgaria and Romania until they included pro-Western candidates from the opposition parties. In the Kremlin’s eyes, this challenge to Soviet control in the crucial security zone on their western frontier, coupled with the events in the Far East, constituted a new American offensive, supported by atomic leverage. Stalin’s response was to accelerate his country’s own atomic project and to demonstrate new toughness in negotiations.

The dictator’s main priorities at the London meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers were to consolidate Soviet control over the Balkans and to acquire a foothold in Japan. Molotov was instructed “to stand firm and make no concessions to our allies on Romania.” Supporting local anti-Soviet forces, added Stalin, was “incompatible with our allied relations.” The categorical refusal of the United States to consider the Soviet proposal on a control mechanism for Japan, Stalin called “the height of impudence,” which demonstrated that the Americans lacked even “a minimal sense of respect for their ally.” The same fate befell the Soviet request for Tripolitania, even though Molotov strictly followed Stalin’s instructions “to remind Americans about their promise.” This retraction could only confirm the Soviet impression of American drift away from Yalta-Potsdam. But the most revealing glimpse into Stalin’s thinking was contained in his assessment of Secretary Byrnes’s proposal on Germany’s demilitarization, which in Stalin’s view had the following hidden agenda: “First, to direct our attention from the Far East, where the United States assumes a role of tomorrow’s friend of Japan ...; second, to receive from the USSR a formal acceptance of the United States’ playing the same role in European affairs as the USSR, so that the United States may hereafter, in league with Britain, take the future of Europe into its own hands; third, to devalue the treaties of alliance that the USSR has already reached with European states; fourth, to pull the rug out from under any future treaties of alliance between the USSR and Romania, Finland, etc.”

Stalin to V. Molotov, September 22, 1945, PA RF, f. 49, op. 1, d. 247, l. 57-58.

9 V. Molotov to the Soviet ambassador, May 16, 1945, PA RF, f. 1, op. 66, d. 296, l. 13.
11 I. Stalin to V. Molotov, September 26, 1945, PA RF, f. 49, op. 1, d. 418, l. 84.
12 I. Stalin to V. Molotov, September 22, 1945, PA RF, f. 49, op. 1, d. 247, l. 57-58.
American dominance in both Europe and Japan would mean a drastic shift in the global balance of power. Also, Stalin did not intend to withdraw his troops from the lands they occupied in exchange for accepting a problematic US proposal to demilitarize Germany; if he did so, he would lose his main geo-strategic ace – the Red Army’s presence in the heart of Europe. He was, moreover, concerned with the corrosive effect such a treaty might have on building a system of bilateral security guarantees with his clients in Eastern Europe, since the specter of German revanchism bound them together. Faced with firm Western resistance, Stalin preferred to disrupt the London meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers in September 1945 rather than make concessions.

Internal developments also complicated Stalin’s efforts to balance his desire to preserve East-West relations with his determination to fulfill his geopolitical agenda. The Red Army was in ferment; a crime wave was spreading through urban centers; workers and peasants, exhausted from the war, wanted the regime to soften its demands on them; even Stalin’s own lieutenants, having tasted greater authority during the war, were displaying more autonomy. Yet in the dictator’s view the country had to be mobilized for a gigantic new effort to reconstruct its economy and its military-industrial base. The external threat calling for discipline and sacrifice seemed to justify the goal and the specter of such a threat was credible enough, given growing Western obstructionism.

By the fall of 1945, Soviet propaganda began to remind people about “capitalist encirclement” and “reactionary tendencies” in the West. In November, Stalin sternly rebuked Molotov for relaxing censorship of foreign correspondents and summoned his Politburo colleagues for the “tooth and nail struggle against servility before foreign figures.” To amplify his message, Stalin staged a humiliating indictment of Molotov before the Politburo for his alleged “liberalism” and for “placating the Anglo-Americans.” The lesson for top Soviet officials could not be clearer: the time for pandering to the Allies was over and from now on the premium was on anti-Western toughness.

Yet Stalin still kept his options open. In China, he avoided any direct conflict with American forces; he subsequently withdrew Soviet troops from Manchuria. In December 1945, the Red Army left Czechoslovakia, much to Truman’s surprise. Soviet propaganda described the outcome of the London meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers as a temporary setback. Stalin clearly saw the London meeting as an exploratory operation and wanted to continue bargaining from a position of strength in order to restrain the overconfident Western Allies.

The success of pro-Soviet forces in Bulgaria’s and Yugoslavia’s parliamentary elections and Byrnes’s initiative to hold a meeting of the Big Three foreign ministers seemed to confirm the efficacy of Stalin’s tactics. That, at least, is how he himself saw the situation in a message to his Politburo colleagues on the eve of the Moscow conference: “We won the struggle in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia ... It is obvious that in dealing with such partners as the United States and Britain we cannot achieve anything serious if we begin to give in to intimidation or to betray uncertainty. To get anything from such partners, we must arm ourselves with the policy of tenacity and steadfastness.”


14 I. Stalin to V. Molotov, G. Malenkov, L. Beria, and A. Mikoian, December 9, 1945, PA RF, f. 45, op. 1, d. 771, l. 3.
The Soviet drift toward the Cold War

The spring of 1946 was an important turning point in the unraveling of the Grand Alliance. In his speech on February 9, Stalin presented his mobilization strategy: since capitalism remained a main source of wars, the Soviet people must steel themselves for a new and strenuous effort to insure their hard-won security "against any eventuality." That insurance was to be provided by accelerated economic development with the emphasis on heavy industry envisioned in the new Five-Year Plan. Targeted at a domestic audience, the speech was interpreted in the West as a call for a renewed ideological struggle and for revolutionary expansion. When Western policies hardened, for example, demanding that the Soviets leave Iran — as they were obligated to do — and when former British prime minister Winston Churchill delivered a stinging attack on Soviet policies in Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946, Stalin was further angered. Churchill's speech — given with Truman at his side — sent a powerful signal to the Kremlin conveying the impression that the United States was, at best, conniving and, at worst, plotting with Churchill in a new anti-Soviet ideological offensive. The Soviet people now needed to be more vigilant than ever, and, accordingly, Stalin launched his famous propaganda campaign to guard against Western encirclement.

Stalin's efforts to prevent further British-American collusion against the USSR were undermined by his own actions in Iran and Turkey. Determined to strengthen his vulnerable southern flank and get access to Iranian oil, he went to great lengths to create a pro-Soviet enclave in northern Iran, an area occupied by the Red Army and populated by ethnic Azeris and Kurds. By delaying the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran and by instigating a local Communist-led separatist movement, Stalin hoped at a minimum to wrest a favorable oil deal from Teheran. Faced with firm resolve on the part of the Iranian government, backed by the United States and Britain, he settled for a compromise (troop withdrawal followed by an oil deal), only to be outfoxed in the end by the Majlis's refusal to approve it. Moscow did nothing to defend its Azeri clients in northern Iran as Teheran forces brutally crushed their resistance. Giving up this very expensive and promising investment while running no risk of serious military resistance from Iran and the West could be explained only by the dictator's inner caution and reluctance to turn the British and the Americans against himself too soon.

The crisis regarding Turkey followed a similar pattern. Doubtful of Western support for Russia's historical claim to the straits, Stalin first demanded their "joint defense," coupled with a request to regain small chunks of territory in Kars and Ardahan that had belonged to Armenia and Georgia before 1921. In August 1946, this scheme was repackaged into a proposal to secure control over the straits for the Black Sea powers. The Soviet position in this war of nerves was backed up by troop concentrations along Turkey's northern borders. The Kremlin's calculation that Ankara would yield to Soviet pressure while the Allies would stand aside proved to be wrong. Both crises revealed a lack of long-term strategic planning on the part of Stalin, who essentially was "knocking at the doors" in search of weak points around the Soviet periphery. He provoked the consolidation of an British-American bloc against the USSR and pushed Iran and Turkey toward the West.

By the summer of 1946, Stalin and his aides had made the key decisions about Soviet national priorities that would shape Soviet foreign policy for years to come. Postwar reconstruction was to be combined with massive rearmament, which included the acceleration of the atomic project plus crash programs in rocketry and air defense. Their achievement had to be a bootstrapping operation since all potential sources of outside assistance (except for industrial dismantling in the occupied territories) had failed to materialize. Greater reparations from Germany were blocked by the Allies. The Soviet request for a reconstruction loan was at first "lost" in Washington and then became encumbered with unacceptable political conditions. Soviet membership in the Bretton Woods system was ultimately prevented by the Kremlin's own fears of opening up the Soviet economy. As a result, economic incentives to cooperate with the West were reduced to almost zero, making it much easier for latent ideological and political hostility to take hold. With its returns diminishing, the Big Three alliance was losing its former attraction to Stalin and his subordinates.

In Soviet internal assessments, the United States began to emerge as the main adversary, set on an aggressive course: resurrecting Russia's old enemies, surrounding the Soviet state with military bases, and threatening it with atomic bombs. A vivid example of this new thinking was apparent in a long
analytical report written by the Soviet ambassador in Washington, Nikolai Novikov, and supervised by Molotov himself. The essence was that the United States was pursuing “world supremacy.”

High-ranking officials in Moscow who did not share this black-and-white picture of the world lost influence. Maisky’s departure in 1946 was soon followed by the expulsion of Litvinov, who had the nerve to criticize Soviet policy (in an interview with a US news correspondent) as being overly offensive and ideological.

Growing international tensions provided a fitting background for tightening screws at home. The official campaign against “fawning” on the West, launched in August 1946, was a crude but effective way to extinguish the residual respect for Western culture and ideas by appealing to Russian national pride and a traditional sense of moral superiority over the “rotten West.” The anti-Western ideological indoctrination was accompanied by a crackdown on British-American propaganda, curtailing subscriptions to foreign books and periodicals, and banning informal contacts with foreigners.

Busy with erecting the Iron Curtain at home, Stalin was still engaged in pragmatic bargaining with his former allies over a peace settlement in Europe. At the Council of Foreign Ministers sessions in Paris and New York, hard-nosed Soviet diplomacy was able to achieve most of its aims. The peace treaties with former German satellites confirmed the new Soviet borders with Finland and Romania, provided reparations to the USSR and its new allies (or eased their burden), and in general contributed to Soviet dominance over the Balkans and Eastern Europe. At the same time, Molotov failed to get a foothold in the Mediterranean; he also had to compromise on the status of Trieste and the Italy–Yugoslavia border — much to the frustration of Moscow’s new ally, the government of Josip Broz Tito. The latter concession was personally approved by Stalin who instructed Molotov “not to derail the conference because of the issue of Trieste.”

There could be adjustments on secondary issues, but not on the main ones. Creating a glacis of pro-Soviet states along the western border remained at the top of the Kremlin’s agenda. Stalin’s overt strategy in Eastern Europe was to support “people’s democracies,” a framework that postulated peaceful ways to socialism pursued by coalition governments in the various countries of the region. In Poland, through 1946, Stalin instructed local Communists to tolerate a legal opposition and not to alienate the country’s Roman Catholic Church.

In Hungary and Czechoslovakia, Moscow continued to deal with non-Communist leaders. Communist control was more obvious in Romania and Bulgaria, but even there non-Communist political parties continued to function. Yet the “people’s democracy” formula faced mounting difficulties: harsh methods of “creeping Sovietization” were setting local populations against the USSR and its indigenous agents; Western-backed nationalist opponents would not give up; and local Communists were increasingly resentful of having to put up with their opponents, which Moscow instructed them to do.

At the same time, diminishing returns of cooperation with the West were loosening external constraints on Soviet policy regarding compliance with democratic appearances. In early 1947, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union began to prepare plans for a forcible imposition of the Soviet model.

Germany was another top priority for the Kremlin, and the situation there did not look promising either. Soviet diplomats perceived the consolidation of the American and British zones as a means to undermine the influence of the USSR in Germany and to resurrect its power on a reactionary basis. Denial of reparation transfers from the American zone in 1946 reinforced this impression.

Stalin’s plans for postwar Germany still arouse considerable historical debate, but he appears to have pursued several contradictory options at the same time. The most tempting one was a united pro-Soviet Germany. He told Georgi Dimitrov, “All of Germany must be ours, Soviet.” He also directed German Communists to merge with the Social Democrats to establish a nationwide Socialist Unity Party and to expand their influence westward, even with the help of former rank-and-file Nazis. But making the whole of Germany “ours” was too problematic, considering the Allies’ firm control over its larger and richer part. The middle option could be a demilitarized and neutral Germany serving as a buffer between Western and Soviet spheres of influence. Finally, there was always a minimum program designed to set up a client state in the Soviet zone of occupation which would at least preserve the Soviet presence in the heart of Europe. Stalin was establishing the material preconditions for this scenario by secretly Sovietizing the eastern zone, but he did not abandon his larger aims.

Growing international tensions notwithstanding, the USSR was not preparing for a major showdown with the West. By 1948, the Red Army was reduced to one-quarter of its 1945 strength, and the military budget of 1946–47 was only

16 “On the USA’s Foreign Policy,” AVP RF, f. 06, op. 8, p. 45, d. 759, ll. 21–39.
17 Druzhkov (Stalin’s alias) to V. Molotov, June 23, 1946, PA RF, f. 45, op. 1, d. 249, l. 1.
half of its wartime peak. The scarce documentation available on Soviet military planning reveals that, contrary to American assumptions, Soviet contingency plans did not envision any offensive operations in Western Europe, concentrating instead on holding the line of defense in Germany. Soviet naval commanders’ requests for a major buildup of an ocean-going navy were rejected by Stalin as too expensive and unnecessary for coastal defense.

Rediscovering the enemy

While the Soviet reaction to the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine was rather muted, Moscow’s response to the Marshall Plan proved to be much more consequential. Originally, the overture by the US secretary of state was met with a mixture of mistrust, interest, and uncertainty, but the main Soviet line was to gather more information from its former Western partners and to use the proposal to Soviet advantage. Soviet diplomats were instructed to clarify the scale and conditions of the proposed plan and to insist that it be organized on a national basis and not as an integrated program, which the Kremlin feared would come under US control. Neither did the Kremlin want German resources to be used in the program unless outstanding Soviet demands for reparations and for supervision of the industries of the Ruhr were met. What the Soviets feared most was that Eastern Europe would fall under the West’s economic hegemony and that Germany would become integrated into a US-led orbit.

Those fears were quickly confirmed at the very beginning of the Paris Conference. The British and the French insisted on an all-European plan using German economic resources. They displayed little desire to modify the American proposal. Molotov wrote Stalin that it was clear that the Western partners “are eager to use this opportunity to break in to the internal economies of European countries and especially to redirect the flows of European trade in their own interests.” The Soviet leaders knew only too well that in an open competition they stood little chance against US economic power, and that Western economic penetration would soon be followed by political inroads. The Marshall Plan, in the Kremlin’s view, would prove to be a Trojan horse, designed to undermine the centerpiece of its postwar strategic desiderata – the security zone in Eastern and Central Europe.

20 V. Molotov to I. Stalin, June 29, 1947, PA RF, f. 3, op. 63, d. 370, l. 43-44.
The Soviet camp’s weakest link remained Czechoslovakia, where Communists still shared power with other parties. In the post-Marshall Plan environment, this exception could not be tolerated, and in February 1948 Moscow exploited a political crisis to orchestrate a final showdown. As Czechoslovakia was being transformed, Stalin dissolved the Soviet–Yugoslav alliance. He was infuriated by Tito’s unsanctioned preparations for military intervention in Albania and by the signing of a separate treaty with Bulgaria. When, in addition, Yugoslavia refused in March 1948 to share sensitive information about its economy with Moscow, the Soviet government recalled its military and civilian advisers, declined to grant Belgrade a loan, refused to sign a trade treaty, and launched a vitriolic campaign against Tito’s leadership. Stalin wanted to remove or intimidate Tito, thereby teaching his other new allies an important lesson about deference to the Kremlin’s leadership. Failing to achieve this, Stalin used the conflict to tighten his grip over other countries in Eastern Europe. Purges took place everywhere in the region, deepening the alienation between the Communist regimes and the peoples they governed.

The political unification of the Soviet bloc called for similar steps in the economic sphere. The growing economic integration of Western Europe impelled the Kremlin to increase the coordination of trade and economic policies throughout Eastern Europe and to promote its dependence on the Soviet Union. Moscow also curtailed trade and economic ties between those countries and the West. In December 1948, the Politburo laid the basis for the establishment of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (formally established in January 1949).

But the most dangerous crisis of the early Cold War arose over the crucial issue of Germany. The Soviets were alarmed by the decisive turn of Western policy in late 1947–early 1948. Western decisions to unify the French and British–American zones, end de-Nazification, rebuild German industrial power, and establish a separate West German state were seen in Moscow as a threat to the very existence of the Soviet state—a resurrected lethal enemy, backed by the world’s strongest economy. Analyzing developments, the Soviet Foreign Ministry concluded that “the Western powers are transforming Germany into their stronghold and including it in the newly formed military-political bloc, directed against the Soviet Union and the new democracies.”

In a desperate attempt to stop what was happening, Stalin struck back at the Allies’ weakest point—their positions in West Berlin, deep inside the Soviet occupation zone. When Stalin closed the communication routes between the western zones of Germany and the western zones of Berlin, his main aim was to force the allies to reverse their decisions regarding western Germany. Yet, even while undertaking such a dangerous gamble, Stalin was careful to avoid a direct military confrontation. There were no troop movements or other signs of military preparations, and when the allies introduced a massive airlift to West Berlin there was no attempt to disrupt it. Faced with the failure of his strategy, Stalin was ready to negotiate, but the Western powers took this as a sign of weakness and refused to bargain. Again, as with Turkey and Iran, Stalin’s heavy-handedness proved to be counterproductive and he was forced to retreat. The Berlin blockade provided a stronger impetus than had ever existed for the Western powers to establish a separate West German state and to effect closer military cooperation.

Soviet diplomats and intelligence analysts closely followed the negotiations in Washington that led to the North Atlantic Treaty. Particularly troubling from the Soviet viewpoint were US plans to expand its strategic reach by including Italy and Portugal in the emerging alliance, along with at least one Scandinavian country. Still, there was little Moscow could do other than verbally protest and instigate Communist-led anti-NATO campaigns in countries such as Italy and France.

Inside the Soviet Union, there were also mounting tensions in 1948–49. The earlier postwar trends of demobilization and defense cuts were reversed. The anti-Western xenophobic campaign was intensified and turned into a witch-hunt against “rootless cosmopolitans”—mostly Jewish professionals and other allegedly disloyal individuals. In so doing, grassroots anti-Semitism was fomented to eliminate the remnants of Western influence and to rally the Soviet mob against foreign enemies as well as their “domestic agents.”

While being cynically manipulative, this mania also reflected the Kremlin’s real anxieties. Stalin and his lieutenants were certain that the West would redouble its efforts to organize a “fifth column” inside the Soviet bloc, and there was enough evidence to feed those suspicions—covert operations by the newly established Central Intelligence Agency, the use of émigré groups to prepare anti-Soviet revolts in Eastern Europe should war erupt, growing contacts between anti-Soviet Russian immigrants and US government officials, and American usage of the former Nazi intelligence network specializing in Soviet affairs.

21 See Svetozar Rajak’s chapter in this volume.
22 A. Smirnov to V. Molotov, March 12, 1948, in G. Krynin and J. Laufer (eds.), SSSR i germanskii vopros, 1941-1949 [The USSR and the German Question], vol. II (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2000), 601.
Among ordinary Soviet citizens, the official anti-Western propaganda found some resonance. For them, the “hostile encirclement” was recognizable in US military bases around the Soviet Union, its atomic monopoly, its publicized war plans, and the saber-rattling rhetoric of American officials. The aggressive US posture, designed to destabilize the Soviet system, produced, at least in the short run, the opposite effect. It made Stalin’s charges more credible, allowing him to blame the West for his country’s postwar economic troubles; it also brought the regime and its people closer together instead of setting them apart. No less importantly, the hostile challenge from abroad provided a powerful catalyst for the system to develop its awesome mobilization potential and to justify unending sacrifices from the Soviet people.

Cheerfully fighting imperialism

The creation of NATO and a formal division of Germany solidified the split in Europe, leaving little room for further diplomatic bargaining. Yet there were two events in the fall of 1949 potent enough to change Soviet strategic calculations and the general Cold War stalemate. The first one was the end of the US atomic monopoly, publicly acknowledged by President Truman on September 23. The Kremlin was greatly relieved by this breakthrough, which provided much-needed reassurance against the American atomic ace, but the bomb was neither integrated into Soviet military doctrine nor assigned to troops until after Stalin’s death.

The second critical development of 1949 that redounded to the strategic advantage of the Kremlin was that it secured a giant new ally in the East. In 1945-47, Stalin carefully kept his options open, maintaining close contacts with both sides in the Chinese Civil War. This caution was in line with his general skepticism about revolutionary prospects in Asia. For Stalin, local Communists were too nationalistic, too immature, and too independent to be trusted. He paid little attention to their liberation struggles. Stalin’s constant message to Communist leaders of Indochina and Indonesia was to go slow, avoid revolutionary goals, and concentrate instead on an agenda for national liberation. But, as the tide in China’s Civil War turned against the American atomic ace, but the bomb was neither integrated into Soviet military doctrine nor assigned to troops until after Stalin’s death.

The momentous events of late 1949 and early 1950 prompted Stalin to endorse North Korea’s attack on South Korea. The main Soviet interest in the area was to prevent Japan and the United States from using the Korean peninsula to attack Manchuria and the Soviet Far East as Japan had done in the 1930s. Until the end of 1949, Moscow restrained Kim Il Sung from attempting to unite the country by military force. Such an attempt, warned Soviet diplomats, was likely to result in US military intervention under UN auspices and a renewed American occupation of the South.

But on January 30 – a week after his decisive meeting with Mao – Stalin changed his mind. Most likely the dictator was tempted to make up for the Soviet retreat in Europe and enlarge a territorial springboard from which to threaten Japan. Second, the emergence of the new ally in Asia with its huge manpower resources made it possible, if necessary, to assist Kim Il Sung and in the process to lock China firmly into the Soviet orbit by setting it against the United States. Finally, a continued denial of Kim Il Sung’s request in the presence of comrades from the new Communist China might have endangered the Kremlin’s leadership in the Communist world and encouraged Mao’s pretensions to that role.

23 PA RF, f. 45, op. 1, d. 331, ll. 29-32.
During his talks with Kim II Sung, Stalin gave a new estimate of the situation: the victorious Chinese Communists were now free to assist the North; furthermore, the Americans would have no stomach to fight China after it became a Soviet ally and would be reluctant to interfere in Korea now that the USSR had acquired the atomic bomb. Stalin’s miscalculations became obvious early on: the Americans intervened under the UN flag, the Chinese equivocated, and the North Koreans were soon on the run. By early October, Stalin contemplated a total defeat of Kim II Sung rather than a direct clash with the United States, but after intensive arm-twisting managed to encourage Mao to send his armies into battle. Pledging Soviet help in case of an American attack on China, Stalin hoped that the United States would not risk an all-out war against his main ally and did everything he could to avoid a direct superpower confrontation.

This hope proved to be justified once the war became stabilized. Stalin, then, was in no hurry to stop the bleeding of his ‘main enemy.’ “This war poisons Americans’ blood,” was his blunt remark to Zhou Enlai in August 1952. “Americans realize that the war is detrimental for them and will have to stop it.”24 Until he died in March 1953, Stalin encouraged Mao and Kim II Sung to stall ceasefire talks. But while the outcome of the Korean War looked like a draw, its long-term consequences were very negative for the Soviet Union. The conflict led to a massive rearmament of the United States and NATO’s transformation into a full-fledged military alliance; it also boosted the United States’ long-term military presence in the region.

Faced with a militarization of NATO, Moscow began to flesh out its own military alliance in Europe. During a January 1951 meeting with party leaders and defense ministers from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, Stalin laid out a crash program for building up their national armies and defense industries. To increase defense cooperation within the Soviet bloc, a Military Coordination Committee was set up. Participants’ accounts of that meeting point to a defensive rationale: Stalin wanted to repel any “aggression from the West,” which now looked increasingly likely to Moscow.25 By 1953, the Soviet military budget had doubled from its 1948 level.

Preparing for the worst, Stalin still tried to block the final moves toward West Germany’s integration into a West European army. The famous Soviet notes of March–April 1952 were a desperate last-minute attempt to torpedo Western agreements that envisioned the creation of a European Defense Community to include West Germany. Whether Stalin was truly ready to sacrifice his puppet state in East Germany for a neutral, united, and demilitarized Germany, or whether he pushed this scheme mostly for propaganda purposes, remains unclear. But the West did not test his intentions; their rejection of his démarche cleared the way for the final Soviet steps to set East Germany on a course of socialist construction, rearmament, and rapid integration into the Soviet bloc.

The Soviet Union and the world, 1944–1953

Stalin and the Cold War

Assessing the results of Soviet postwar strategy at the end of his life, Stalin must have had mixed feelings. On the one hand, he had managed to rebuild Soviet power and achieve his core security goals – expanded borders and control over Eastern Europe – without provoking a major war with the West. In 1953, the “socialist camp” encompassed one-third of the world’s population and territory. “Fighting imperialism has become more cheerful,” Stalin quipped at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 1952.26 On the other hand, Moscow was now faced with what it had feared and had tried to avoid: a hostile Western coalition under US auspices that embraced both old and new enemies of the USSR. From now on, the likely results of this confrontation were either a direct military collision between the two power blocs or, at best, a Cold War of attrition. Stalin and his circle entangled their worn-out country in a long twilight struggle against the preponderant West that the Soviet Union could not win. But, given the nature of the Soviet regime and external threats to its existence, they could hardly have done otherwise.27

24 Pravda, October 15, 1952.
25 For additional assessments of Stalin’s policies, see the chapters by Svetozar Rajak and Norman Naimark in this volume.