On the night of 6 March 1946, just as Stalin was preparing to leave for the dacha, Poskrebyshev hurried in and handed him a cipher from the Washington embassy reporting a speech made by Churchill at Fulton, Missouri, in the presence of President Truman, a native of that state. Despite the considerable respect Stalin had for Churchill’s encyclopedic knowledge, he had never trusted him, but even he was surprised by the harsh tone the former prime minister had used. While expressing his admiration for ‘the heroic Russian people and my war comrade Marshal Stalin’, Churchill went on to warn of a ‘Red threat’ hanging over the Western democracies. ‘From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.’

This was true. Soon after the war, Stalin had taken energetic measures to reduce all contact with the West and the rest of the world. A curtain, whether of iron or ideology, had decidedly come down, and henceforth for many years the Soviet people could know about the West only what officials, of Suslov’s ilk, thought they should know. The huge chasm of information that lay between the two worlds impoverished Soviet intellectual life and deprived the Soviet Union of contact with world culture.

Stalin pushed the report away and stared with unblinking eyes through the window into the dark March night. Churchill’s speech was both a signal and a challenge. Stalin telephoned Molotov, who was at his post – as a rule Politburo members waited until they were sure Stalin had left before themselves going home. Molotov arrived and the two architects of foreign policy talked for a good hour. They did not know that Churchill’s speech had been preceded by a long cable to Washington from George Kennan, the US chargé d’affaires in Moscow, giving a biased account of Stalin’s February speech. Kennan had reported that the Soviet leaders regarded a Third World War as ‘inevitable’. 57

Stalin was in a difficult position. The USA had become immeasurably stronger than the USSR. Besides possessing the atom bomb, America’s industrial poten-
tial had grown 50 per cent in the course of the war. This contrasted sharply with the position in the USSR, where thousands of centres of population lay in ruins, where the famine of 1946 was imminent, where virtually the entire western part of the country was engulfed in partisan warfare which threatened to spread to the surrounding territory. This aspect of modern Soviet history has yet to receive its due attention. After the expulsion of German forces from the Western Ukraine and the Baltic region, armed detachments carried on the fight against the Soviet régime. On several occasions, Stalin ordered Beria to finish off the ‘outlaws in the shortest possible time’, but he could not imagine that it would continue for a full five years after the end of the war, most vigorously in the western Ukraine.

On 12 April 1946, Interior Minister Kruglov sent a long account of events during March. It mentioned that in the western regions of the Ukraine 8,360 partisans had been either killed or captured, along with eight mortars, twenty machine-guns, 712 sub-machine-guns, 2,002 rifles, 600 pistols, 1,766 grenades, four printing presses and thirty-three typewriters. Also captured were a number of local leaders of the Ukrainian Nationalist Formation, while some 200 troops of the Interior and Security Ministries, as well as of the Red Army, had been killed. In Lithuania, 145 partisans had been killed and 1,500 captured. Forty-four machine-guns, 289 rifles, 122 pistols, 182 grenades and twelve duplicating machines had been seized, with the loss of 215 government troops. The report further recounted that armed clashes had taken place in Belorussia, Latvia and Estonia. 58 Stalin told Beria and Kruglov that he was most dissatisfied with the ineffectiveness of the regular forces.

Faced with multiple problems at home, the USSR was also totally isolated in the United Nations, although there at least it had the power of veto in the Security Council. Stalin felt that a difficult and unequal confrontation had begun, but he had no thought of yielding. He would turn the country into a fortress. In his view, the anti-Communist Truman Doctrine made it impossible for the USSR to accept the Marshall Plan. While the USSR was desperate for economic aid, and could have benefited under the Marshall Plan, it could have done so only at the cost of accepting virtual US control over the Soviet economy. Through Molotov, at the Paris conference of 27 June–2 July 1947, Stalin said no.

Stalin’s understanding of the Marshall Plan had not been mistaken. Truman later wrote frankly in his memoirs that ‘Marshall’s idea was to liberate Europe from the threat of enslavement which was being prepared for it by Russian Communism.’ 59 The long Cold War had begun. The only way out, Stalin believed, lay in terminating the American monopoly on the atom bomb. At the cost of enormous effort, by 1952 the USSR had doubled its pre-war output of steel, coal and cement, and sharply increased production of oil and electricity. Stalin never tired of asserting that the absolute priority of heavy industry was a ‘constant law’ of socialism. The redoubled efforts of heavy industry and science created the preconditions for a quantum leap in the nuclear sphere. As
we have mentioned above, Stalin entrusted the work of this secret enterprise to Beria and he demanded weekly progress reports from him. Soviet experience in this field had a solid background. Before the war the ideas of A. F. Ioffe, I. V. Kurchatov, G. N. Flerov, L. D. Landau and I. E. Tamm had made possible the construction of the first uranium reactor. The work had been halted and it was not until 1942 that it started again under Kurchatov’s supervision. Stalin pressed hard for results and urged that no expense be spared. Kruglov, M. Pervukhin and Kurchatov reported to Stalin in October 1946 that, on the instructions of the Special Committee of the Council of Ministers, Kurchatov and Kikoin had checked special sites and taken measures to step up the rate of construction by taking on up to 37,000 workers.60

At the same time, Kruglov and A. Zavenyagin reported to Stalin and Beria that the work would be speeded up by employing experts who were then serving ten-year sentences, among them S. A. Voznesensky, N. V. Timofeyev-Resovskiy, S. R. Tsarapkin, Ya. M. Fishman, B. V. Kiryan, I. F. Popov, A. S. Tkachev, A. A. Goryunov and I. Ya. Bashilov.61

In December 1946 Soviet scientists achieved their first chain reaction and commissioned their first nuclear reactor the following year, making it possible for Molotov to announce in November 1947 that the secret of the atom bomb was out. The first Soviet atomic bomb was tested in the summer of 1949, followed in 1953 by its first hydrogen bomb. Apart from the economy, Stalin now devoted his major energy to defence matters, and a substantial section of the Gulag was committed to this purpose. Ministers customarily now initiated their tasks with an approach to Beria.

For instance, an application dated July 1946 to build a camp within a camp in Siberia to house 1,000 prisoners engaged on scientific research.62 Or, still more cynically, a request from the minister in charge of fuel industry construction, A. Zademidko, for permission in March 1947 to relocate 5,000 prisoners from Siberian concentration camps plus an allocation of 30,000 metres of tarpaulin for tents and 50 tons of barbed wire.63 Such were the moral depths to which the Stalinist system had sunk, that scientists, already languishing in camps, must be kept in tents and behind barbed wire while working on the most advanced and important defence interests of the state.

Forty or so years after these events, I managed to find Zademidko and to show him the document bearing his signature – a common enough phenomenon of the period. I asked him how he felt now about his note. He replied: ‘That’s how things were … We were building socialism with the help of a vast army of prisoners. Now of course I think it was savage.’ He paused and then recounted an example of the ‘technology’ of force used in construction.

Once, late at night, I was summoned with my deputy to see Beria. His eyes glittering menacingly behind his pince-nez, he asked quietly, referring to a special construction: ‘Why aren’t you reporting that the workshop has been finished?’ I replied: ‘They haven’t finished installing the equipment.’

‘Who hasn’t finished?’ and, without waiting for my reply, he snapped at an assistant: ‘Call the manager of the plant.’

Three or four minutes later a distant voice came on the line from the Donbass. Beria at once barked into the phone: ‘Hello, this is Beria. Why hasn’t the job been done on time? Installation is to be completed by eight o’clock in the morning! Good night!’ One can imagine what sort of good night that plant manager had! Beria then told his assistant to get hold of the head of administration, to whom he said, ‘I’ve just ordered so-and-so (Zademidko couldn’t recall the name) to finish the work by eight in the morning. If he doesn’t, put him in your cellar. Good-bye!’

My deputy and I of course knew about Beria’s working methods, but hearing him give his quiet, terse instructions made our flesh creep. That’s how things were done in those days...

Despite the low productivity of forced labour, Stalin believed that the widespread use of prisoners on defence projects was not only a cheap way of increasing Soviet military potential, but also a tried and tested way of ‘re-educating’ hundreds of thousands of ‘enemies’ and ‘traitors’.

Whatever we may think of Stalin, by his pitiless determination and at enormous cost to the Soviet people he did accomplish the impossible leap forward: the American nuclear monopoly was broken and the foundation stone of strategic parity was laid. Stalin was prepared to use any means, including the international labour and Communist movements and the emerging peace movement, if it gained ground for the Soviet Union in its competitive struggle with the transatlantic colossus. After prolonged discussion with Molotov and Zhdanov, he decided on a move that was bound to be seen by the West in an extremely negative light. He resolved to establish an agency to coordinate the activities of the Communist Parties. In Europe and the US this step was interpreted as Stalin’s official acceptance of the challenge of Cold War.

He had been persuaded to dissolve Comintern right at the beginning of the war, but had had the tactical good sense to see that such a move would have been interpreted as weakness, and had therefore delayed and chosen a good moment to do so, namely the spring of 1943, hoping the Allies would thus be encouraged to open the second front. He knew perfectly well that Comintern was a purely Soviet agency and his personal mouthpiece, but its dissolution, he had calculated, would bring him more advantages than disadvantages. Now, suddenly, he was set on creating a new international Communist centre. What was he thinking?

When Comintern had been established in 1919, its leaders – notably Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev – believed in an imminent world revolution. But when the tidal wave of revolution had receded, the foundations of the old world had been shown to be intact. It was clear that Comintern’s rôle would be both limited and subordinate to the country where its headquarters were located, namely the Soviet Union. The fact that it was directed by one centre seriously undermined the Communist movement and permitted its critics and enemies to make the easy and justified charge that it was ‘the hand of Moscow’. Now,
however, given the emergence of a bi-polar, two-camp world, Stalin reasoned that collaboration between the Communist Parties was once again on the agenda, though not in the old style or form of organization.

On 22–27 September 1947, the Polish Communists, encouraged by Stalin, organized a meeting of nine European Communist parties in the Polish town of Szklarska Poreba. On the eve of the meeting, Zhdanov, who had been deputed by Stalin to represent the Soviet Communist Party, sent a coded telegram to Moscow outlining the preliminary results of a working party:

It was proposed to start with informational reports from all the participating Communist parties. Then to work out an agenda. We will suggest 1) the international situation, the speech to be made by us. 2) coordinating the parties' activities. The outcome should be a coordinating centre with its residence in Warsaw. I think special stress should be laid on voluntary principles in this matter. I await your instructions.64

Stalin gave his approval. As a result of the Szklarska meeting, and four years after the dissolution of Comintern, the Information Bureau of the Communist and Labour Parties came into being as Informburo, or Cominform in Western parlance. According to Zhdanov, the most active and positive participants were the Yugoslavs. For content, purposefulness and constructive approach, Zhdanov ranked as the best reports those of the Yugoslav Eduard Kardelj and the Czech Rudolf Slansky.65 Within a year he would describe Kardelj as an imperialist spy, in November 1949 Cominform would denounce the Yugoslav Communists as murderers and spies, and in 1951 Slansky would be tried and executed as the leader of a Zionist plot to overthrow the Czech state.

Zhdanov's speech on the international situation contained the thesis that would become virtually the cornerstone of Soviet propaganda, namely the division of the world into two opposing camps, in effect the response to the Truman Doctrine. The Marshall Plan was described as ‘a programme for the enslavement of Europe’. Zhdanov was especially scathing in his references to the social democratic parties, reflecting Stalin's lifelong hatred and the distrust which was responsible for weakening not only progressive forces in the West, but also the developing movement for peaceful East–West relations.

The next meeting was planned to take place in Belgrade, but events made this impossible. The peoples of Yugoslavia had made a major contribution to the defeat of Fascism, and the first Soviet treaty of friendship, mutual aid and post-war collaboration agreed with a new socialist country was that signed with Tito when he visited Moscow in April 1945. Stalin met him several times and they got on well together. It was agreed that the Soviet Union would give the Yugoslav army military technology and armaments for twelve rifle and two air divisions.66 The two countries seemed to have got off to a great start. A large contingent of Soviet military experts worked in Yugoslavia, while in the USSR thousands of Yugoslav military personnel were undergoing training. Then, suddenly it all went wrong.

A series of issues were debated without consulting Stalin first: for instance, a Bulgarian–Yugoslav treaty of friendship, the despatch of a Yugoslav air regiment to Albania, and Bulgarian leader Dimitrov's statement at a press conference to the effect that a federation of European socialist states was a possibility. Stalin was furious. The almighty dictator at home, he also believed himself to be the supreme arbiter over the lives of his allies.

A meeting of Soviet, Bulgarian and Yugoslav delegations took place on Stalin's suggestion in Moscow on 10 February 1949. Headed by Stalin, Dimitrov and Kardelj, the Soviet side included Molotov, Malenkov, Zhdanov and Suslov, while the Bulgarians included T. Kostov and V. Kolarov, and the Yugoslavs were represented by Milovan Djilas and V. Bokarić.

Stalin expressed his dissatisfaction in a plainly irritated manner, castigating the Yugoslavs and Bulgarians for 'following a particular foreign-policy line'. The Yugoslavs and Bulgarians were in the course of protesting that there were no grounds for such imprecactions and that the recriminations were of a personal nature, when Stalin suddenly declared the need for the creation of a federation of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. Accustomed to his utterances being taken as orders, Stalin now sensed a degree of resistance. Both Kardelj and Dimitrov, while not repudiating in principle the idea of federation, argued that the time was not ripe for such a move. Kardelj, moreover, said he could not give a definitive answer until the political leadership of his country had expressed a view. This was the first serious resistance Stalin had experienced in years, and it was coming moreover from Communists. He was not prepared for it. The rush of blind fury required an outlet.

Djilas later recalled, in his well-known memoirs, that Stalin jumped on Dimitrov and Kardelj for keeping their affairs from Moscow, and for doing so, moreover, on principle. 'We got away after three or four days. They took us at dawn to Vnukovo airport and shoved us into the plane without ceremony.'67 The meeting could hardly have been called a dialogue. Stalin had behaved as if his visitors were party leaders from one of his own republics. Sanctions followed quickly. The Soviet military advisers were recalled from Yugoslavia and a sharp letter, signed by Stalin and Molotov, was sent to the leaders in Belgrade. Tito replied with a measured response, rejecting the charges of unfriendly actions and Trotskyism, and adding: 'However much we all love the USSR as the land of socialism, none of us can love any less our own countries which are also building socialism.'

Stalin's reply was sent in May in the form of a twenty-five-page letter. Instead of a cool, collected response, which might have been expected, given Stalin's usual style, Yepishev recalled that Stalin's reaction was both crude and impulsive and that he gave it without pausing to analyse the reality of the situation. Beria's people had concocted a host of 'facts' which demonstrated the 'deviation' and 'treachery' of Tito and the entire Yugoslav leadership. Stalin did not yet realize that he had suffered his first post-war defeat.

He decided to bring Cominform into the conflict. Two notes were sent from