

World War II, Soviet Power and International Communism

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It is self-evident that, with the victory of Lenin's October Revolution of 1917, Soviet Russia became the epicenter of international communism. However, despite its sprawling land mass and large population, and despite hopes in the immediate post-1918 period for a European-wide revolution, the new state and its ruling communist party were for the better part of two decades a marginal factor in world affairs. Even at the end of the 1930s the USSR was only one of seven or eight major powers, and it was not generally regarded as among the strongest. The fraternal foreign communist parties were also only on the fringes of political life. Most were illegal; the small minority that could function openly almost never had the chance to take part in government.

A decade later, at the end of the 1940s, the USSR was one of two global superpowers. Three independent Baltic countries had been reannexed. Pro-Soviet, communist-led governments controlled most of the states of East Central Europe, as well as China and half of Korea; this was the global expanse of the "Sino-Soviet bloc." Moreover, the communist parties now had strong electoral support in Western Europe, and communism had become a significant element in the growing anti-colonial movement.

There are detailed chapters within this volume on the communists in the European wartime resistance, on the "Sovietization" of Eastern Europe, on the Cominform and Titoism and on the Chinese Revolution. The intention of the present chapter, however, is to relate these phenomena to World War II, to the ideological framework of Stalin and the Soviet leadership, and to the initiatives they took.

The Sources of Soviet Conduct

The motivation of the communist leaders of the USSR and the formulation of Soviet policy in this crucial period remain the subject of debate. Joseph Stalin

was obviously the preeminent figure. Final decisions were made by him, although he took advice, and there were limitations to his power, especially overseas. The unique status of Stalin, as a revolutionary activist, companion of Lenin, civil war leader, theorist, industrializer and wartime commander, was an undoubted asset both at home and abroad – even if his achievements were inflated by propaganda. Nevertheless, I will refer here to policies being from the Soviet government, rather than simply from Stalin. He was not all-knowing, all-powerful or all-correct – although neither can he be dismissed as a “colossal blunderer.”¹

It was aptly observed by Mark von Hagen that the nature of the prolonged Russian Civil War of 1917–20 was to develop something new, a “militarized socialism” which resulted from “an interpenetration of militarist and socialist values.” Stalin shared this perspective; he did not create it. Eric van Ree, in a seminal discussion of Stalin’s political thought, argued that his main foreign-policy goal was “patriotism, in the sense of the preservation of the Soviet state.” David Brandenberger attributed similar ideas to Stalin and his “team,” although he saw those ideas not so much as a product of the civil war years as a tool of the 1930s, “a russo-centric form of etatism” which was the “most effective way to promote state-building and popular loyalty to the regime.”²

I argue here that Stalin, as the ultimate formulator of external policy and leader of the war effort, was neither a pragmatic expansionist nor a revolutionary firebrand. To qualify the well-known “revolutionary-imperial paradigm” of Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, Stalin was neither a simple revolutionary nor a simple imperialist.³ Basic to the worldview of Stalin and the Stalinist elite, and predating both the stresses of the civil war and the cultural transformation of the 1930s, was an ideologized Leninist conception of the outside world. It was made more complex by an assumption both of the deep hostility of all capitalist states to Soviet Russia and of inherent tension *between* capitalist states.

1 Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power, 1928–1941: The Revolution from Above* (New York: Norton, 1990), 624.

2 Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 331–36; Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 211; David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

3 Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 4–5, 13–19.

The first strand related to the “two camps” doctrine. This doctrine is often associated with the policy declaration of September 1947, at a Cold War turning point: The Soviet ideologist A. A. Zhdanov, then one of Stalin’s closest associates, declared that “the political forces operating in the world arena” had been divided “into two basic camps [*na dva osnovnykh lageria*],” the imperialist and anti-democratic camp on one hand, and the anti-imperialist and democratic camp, on the other. But this was not essentially a post-1945 perspective. It had first been adopted by Stalin – following Lenin – in an article published in *Izvestiia* in February 1919. “The world,” Stalin noted then, “has definitely and irrevocably split into two camps: the camp of imperialism and the camp of socialism.”⁴

In the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s this polarized worldview was complicated, and muted, by the other “Leninist” conflict, between rival imperialist powers or groupings. This latter conflict became more evident with the Japanese annexation of Manchuria in 1931 and the rise to power of the revisionist Hitler government in Germany. In the mid 1930s these developments affected the policy of Stalin’s government and the Soviet-dominated Communist International (Comintern). The USSR joined the League of Nations (hitherto despised by Moscow) in September 1934, following a policy of “collective security.” It moved toward one of the competing groupings, with measures including the May 1935 Franco-Soviet Pact of Mutual Assistance. The Comintern, meanwhile, endorsed at its Seventh Congress in July–August 1935 the policy of the “popular front,” within which a range of parties would work together on an anti-fascist program.

This external rivalry between imperialists represented, in the late 1930s, both threats and opportunities for the leaders of the USSR. A war might spill over into Soviet territory, as had certainly happened in 1917–18. On the other hand, conflict between imperialists had the advantage that it might deflect attention from an anti-communist crusade. Furthermore, its social consequences might lead, as they had in 1917–19, to a revolutionary situation in one or more of the capitalist states.

In any event, as applied concretely to the international situation, the communist line was that by 1937 this conflict between capitalist groupings had degenerated into a “new imperialist war” (the first “imperialist war” being World War I). As the massively circulated Stalinist party history, the

4 G. Procacci (ed.), *The Cominform: Minutes of the Three Conferences 1947/1948/1949* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994), 226 (25 Sep. 1947); I. V. Stalin, “Dva lageria,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. IV (Moscow: OGIZ, 1947), 232 (22 Feb. 1919).

Short Course (Kratkii kurs), put it in September 1938, the object of the new imperialist war was “a redivision of the world and of the spheres of influence in favor of the aggressor [*agressivnye*] countries [i.e. Germany, Japan and Italy] and at the expense of the so-called democratic [*demokraticeskie*] states [i.e. Britain, France and the USA].”⁵

The 1919/1947 concept of the “two camps” (socialist vs. imperialist) was not explicitly used in the late 1930s, but the Soviet government was increasingly critical of the apparent lack of resistance by the “nonaggressive” states to the aggressors, especially after the Munich agreement. In the September 1938 *Short Course* it was stated that the democracies, although stronger than the fascists/aggressors, were afraid to confront them (in Manchuria, Abyssinia or Spain), because their governments feared working-class revolution in Europe and colonial rebellion in Asia. Stalin’s important Party Congress address in March 1939 attributed more sinister motives to the Western democracies, beyond fear of revolution. The nonaggressive (*neagressivnye*) countries, particularly Britain and France, had moved from a position of collective security to one of non-intervention (*nevmeshatel’stvo*), i.e. neutrality. Their aim, Stalin alleged, was to “entangle” (*vputat’sia*) the “aggressor states” (*gosudarstva-agressory*) and by this means to avoid a direct threat to themselves. Germany would be “entangled” in an East European conflict, “better still” a war with the USSR, and would not attack Britain and France; the Japanese would be “entangled” in the ongoing war in China or with the USSR and would leave the colonies of the West European states alone.⁶

Soviet Communism and the “New Imperialist War”

1939–1941

The signing of the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact on 23 August 1939 and the abrupt and decisive change of the orientation of the USSR and the Comintern in Europe can at least partly be understood in ideological terms, as the USSR maneuvering between two rival groups of capitalist states. The outbreak of a major European war on 3 September, only a week after the signing of the pact, could perhaps not have been predicted in Moscow, nor could the very rapid destruction of Poland – within five weeks. When the

5 *Istoriia Vsesoiuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii (bol’shevikov): kratkii kurs* (Moscow: Izd. Pravda, 1938), 318.

6 *Ibid.*, 319; *XVIII s’ezd Vsesoiuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii (b): 10–21 marta 1939 g.: stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: GIPL, 1939), 13 (10 Mar.).

fighting began, however, Stalin saw the benefits for the USSR and communism in general. Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian general secretary of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI), noted down Stalin's words in a conversation on 7 September 1939:

A war is on between two groups of capitalist countries . . . for the redivision of the world, for the domination of the world. We see nothing wrong in their having a good fight and weakening each other. It would be fine if at the hand of Germany the position of the capitalist countries (especially England) were shaken. Hitler, without understanding it or desiring it, is shaking and undermining the capitalist system.

Stalin was now embarked on exactly the same course of action he had accused the "nonaggressive" governments of planning – he was content to "entangle" them in a war with Germany. He also explained to Dimitrov that the USSR had unique opportunities: "We can maneuver, pit one side against the other to set them fighting with each other as fiercely as possible. The non-aggression pact is to a certain degree helping Germany. Next time we'll urge on the other side."⁷

The German–Soviet Pact of August 1939 involved secret agreements to divide up parts of East Central Europe. The eventual result for the Soviets of this agreement, brought to fruition in 1939 and 1940, could be portrayed by them as part of a process of national liberation. The final (secret) terms, after all, gave Moscow freedom of action with respect to the large Belarusian and Ukrainian population of what had been eastern Poland.

Stalin privately justified use of the Red Army for spreading socialism (much as Lenin had in 1920, with relation to Poland). The army was used without full-scale combat to assert Soviet influence in the eastern territories of Poland, and in the Baltic states and Moldova, but real operations – the extremely costly Winter War – were required in 1939–40 to force the Finnish government to make strategic territorial concessions. At the time, Stalin stressed the validity of using the Red Army to extend the "socialist camp." "The Red Army activities," he told Dimitrov in January 1940, "are also a matter of world revolution." In a secret post-mortem, justifying the winter attack on Finland, Stalin made a telling comment about timing and opportunism, which could apply to a range of initiatives then and later. Soviet action, he argued, depended on the "international situation":

7 Ivo Banac (ed.), *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933–1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 115 (7 Sep. 1939).

There, in the West, the three biggest powers were locked in deadly combat – this was the most opportune moment [November–December 1939] to settle the Leningrad problem; it was the time when other countries were busy elsewhere, so this was the best moment for us to strike . . . A delay of a couple of months would have meant a delay of 20 years, because you can't predict political developments . . . One could not exclude the possibility of a sudden peace.⁸

The problem with the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact for the Soviet leaders was that it did not produce the military “balance” that they had originally anticipated. The two imperialist groups were not wearing one another out; instead one group gained a quick victory in June 1940, and now dominated continental Europe. The wartime spring of 1941 saw a confused evolution of Soviet policy. Hitler had turned his attention to the Balkans at the beginning of April, with not only a planned intervention in Greece on 6 April, but also a hastily arranged attack on Yugoslavia. This Balkan Blitzkrieg coincided with the visit to Moscow of the Japanese foreign minister, and the signing (on 13 April) of a Japanese–Soviet five-year Neutrality Pact. Each signatory agreed to remain neutral should the other “become the object of military action.” The two powers also agreed to respect the territorial integrity and inviolability of Manchukuo and the Mongolian People's Republic; the USSR with this accepted the Japanese 1931 annexation of northeastern China, one of the first acts of the “new imperialist war.”

It was at this critical juncture that Stalin suddenly began taking active steps toward the dissolution of the Comintern. On 20 April 1940, after a rare public appearance, he intimated this line of thought to Dimitrov and others. Stalin's motives are not altogether clear. He had never favored a strong independent Comintern. What he told the ECCI leaders was that the communist movement was important, but that the national parties were seen too much as subservient sections of the Comintern.⁹ The dissolution might also be seen as an act of appeasement to prevent an attack by Germany and Japan; those two powers had first been bound together in 1936 as founding members of the Anti-Comintern Pact.

The next event, and one of the last before the German attack, was a semi-public series of speeches Stalin made to army leaders and military cadets at

8 *Ibid.*, 124 (21 Jan. 1940); E. N. Kulkov and O. A. Rzheshvskii, *Stalin and the Soviet–Finnish War 1939–1940* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 264 (17 Apr. 1940).

The “Leningrad problem” involved moving the Finnish border away from the city.

9 Banac (ed.), *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, 155–56 (20 Apr. 1940).

the Kremlin on 5 May 1941.¹⁰ These speeches are sometimes linked to plans for a preemptive attack on Germany which, had it happened, would have been an extreme case of using military force to achieve Soviet objectives. While I would not interpret the speech as a call for aggressive war, there were a number of important elements in it. First of all, some of Stalin's comments were about the relative strength of rival imperialist groupings. Second, he stated that since September 1939 the German army had changed from a progressive army fighting "under the slogan of the liberation from the yoke of the peace of Versailles" into one fighting "under the slogans of an aggressive war, of conquest." Finally, while at this time he was moving toward the liquidation of the Comintern, Stalin did not forget the role of resistance: "[T]he German army . . . has antagonized many countries which have been occupied by it. An army is in serious danger which has to fight having in its rear hostile territory and masses."¹¹

Passing the "Examination": The Soviet State Fights and Wins World War II

In many respects the situation was transformed by the German attack on 22 June 1941. The initial military campaign was, for the Soviets, a catastrophe. In political terms, however, it did return the ideology of the USSR to an anti-fascist stance, both at home and abroad. Although apathy and collaboration existed, and the human cost was terribly high, the population rallied around the patriotic/socialist orientation which had been developing since the mid 1930s. This coming together was much furthered by the cruel behavior of the invaders and by the eventual Red Army victories.

Stalin genuinely had a most important role as a military executive during the war. He had had a limited formal position in the prewar armed forces, but became people's commissar of defense and then supreme commander-in-chief. He did make several general comments about military strategy and the course of the war, of which the most important was perhaps his Order of the Day of 23 February 1942 (Red Army Day) in which he stressed long-term material factors ("permanently operating factors") in successful warfare.¹²

10 Jürgen Förster and Evan Mawdsley, "Hitler and Stalin in Perspective: Secret Speeches on the Eve of Barbarossa," *War in History* 11, 1 (Jan. 2004), 61–103.

11 *Ibid.*, 97.

12 I. V. Stalin, *O Velikoi otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo soiuza* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1946), 37–43.

One feature of Soviet communism in wartime (and in Stalin's later years) was a disregarding of party "norms." There was no congress of the All-Union Communist Party – VKP(b) – between the Eighteenth Congress in March 1939 and the Nineteenth in October 1952 (a party conference met in February 1941). There were very few plenums of the party Central Committee. Stalin relied on patriotism rather than communism in his wartime speeches, especially in the first half of the war. It was not until November 1943 that he referred publicly at length to the "party of Lenin, the party of the Bolsheviks."¹³ Nevertheless, party membership grew strikingly, mostly through military party organizations. On 1 July 1941 the communist party had included 2,600,000 full members and 1,210,000 candidates. During the war no fewer than 5,320,000 individuals were admitted as full members, and 3,620,000 as candidates. Remaining in July 1945 were 4,290,000 full members and 1,660,000 candidates; these figures taken together also indicate a high level of loss to enemy action.¹⁴

This is not the place to discuss in detail military operations or Soviet diplomacy. By December of 1941 the defenders had been driven back to the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow and beyond Rostov. The successful counterattacks against overextended German armies in front of Moscow and Rostov in early December 1941 were events of great importance. Having failed to achieve an overall victory in a short war of movement, Germany could never defeat the USSR (and its allies) in a prolonged war of attrition. More broadly, the Moscow battle showed, despite previous triumphs, that Hitler's forces were not invincible. The Red Army was, for the moment, the most potent force on the Allied side.

The Soviet leaders expected, after the Battle of Moscow, something along the lines of Napoleon's 1812 defeat. But although the front lines in the north and center, in front of Leningrad and Moscow, were now relatively stable, battles fought in May–June 1942 enabled the Wehrmacht to drive deep into southern Russia, toward the Caucasus and Stalingrad. However, the outcome of Hitler's so-called second campaign was arguably of greater significance even than the Battle of Moscow. The counterattack at Stalingrad, which began in November 1942, was followed at the start of February by the surrender of the entire German Sixth Army, entombed in the city.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 119 (16 Nov. 1943).

¹⁴ "Iz istorii Velikoi otechestvennoi voiny," *Izvestiia TsK* 5 (1991), 213–17.

Entry into World War II, alongside Britain and later the USA, did not change the basic Leninist–Stalinist conception of two rival imperialist blocs, even if the Soviet state was essentially part of one of them. The USSR was now bearing the brunt of the war with Germany and undoubtedly paying the highest cost in human lives. This could be seen as an extreme example of the imperialists “entangling” the USSR in a war with Germany. Stalin and Viacheslav Molotov complained about the failure of the Western Allies to commit to a “second front” in northwestern Europe and at delays in delivery of military supplies under Lend-Lease. An extreme version (possibly intentionally hyperbolic) was Stalin’s comment to Ambassador Ivan M. Maiskii in London in October 1942 that he “had the impression that Churchill was aiming for the defeat [*porazhenie*] of the USSR so that he could then come to terms with the Germany of Hitler or [Heinrich] Brüning at the expense of our country”:

Without such an assumption it is hard to explain the conduct of Churchill with respect to the question of the second front in Europe, to the question of the delivery of arms to the USSR, which is becoming progressively smaller and smaller . . . to the question of [Rudolf] Hess, whom Churchill is evidently holding in reserve and, finally, to the question of the [failure to carry out promised] systematic bombing by the British of Berlin.¹⁵

By the second half of 1943, however, Soviet relations with the Western Allies had improved. The USSR was no longer threatened by military defeat, the British and Americans were winning victories in the Mediterranean (albeit not in a full-scale cross-Channel “second front”) and Lend-Lease supplies were arriving on a much larger scale. The Moscow conference of Allied foreign ministers in October–November 1943 had productive discussions regarding the postwar world. At the Tehran conference in November–December 1943 Stalin finally met Churchill and Roosevelt and had a considerable influence on alliance strategy.

The last two years of the war, from June 1943 and the Battle of Kursk, were a time of steady advance by the Red Army. June 1944 was a decisive moment, as both sets of Allies were finally able to deploy massive armies in countries occupied by the Third Reich and forming its outer defenses. The Wehrmacht

15 O. A. Rzheshhevskii, *Stalin i Cherkhill'. Vstrechi. Besedy. Diskussii* (Moscow: Nauka, 2004), 376 (19 Oct. 1942). Brüning was chancellor of Germany from 1930 to 1932; in 1942 he was living in exile in the USA. Hess, Hitler’s deputy, had flown to Britain in mysterious circumstances.

could not hold these areas for more than a few months, and by the end of the 1944 Greater Germany itself was under direct attack. Clutching at straws, the Nazi regime hoped for a breakup of the Grand Alliance. Stalin, however, realized that “entanglement” and the sort of “maneuver” he had described to Dimitrov in September 1939 – pitting “one side against the other” – no longer had any utility.

The Far East was the region where, until the late 1930s, the territorial integrity of the USSR had seemed most threatened. After the signature of the April 1941 Japanese–Soviet Neutrality Pact, Moscow observed a cautious policy for four years. Then, on 9 August 1945, the Red Army entered the war against Japan. This involvement had a limited effect on the outcome of the fighting, but abundant political significance; Soviet forces occupied Manchuria and northern Korea. Considering that Stalin had been a revolutionary who had violently opposed the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, his September 1945 broadcast commemorating the Japanese surrender was extraordinary: “For forty years we of the older generation waited for this day, and now this day has arrived.”¹⁶

The USSR and the International Communist Movement During the War Years

The anti-fascist political line of the various communist parties won considerable support in the late 1930s. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 abruptly changed this. In September the Comintern instructed members of the French and British Communist Parties not to support the war effort against Nazi Germany, in factories or within the armed forces. The line reversed again with the German invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941. In the Allied countries there was to be an all-out effort to support the war effort and especially that of the USSR; in the occupied countries and Germany itself everything possible was to be done to bring about defeat.

On the day of the German attack Stalin made his approach clear to Dimitrov: “For now the Comintern is not to take any overt action . . . The issue of socialist revolution is not to be raised.” The stress was on resistance. In a speech of November 1941 Stalin spoke of the “instability of the European rear of imperial Germany.” “[T]he ‘new order’ in Europe,” he

16 I. V. Stalin, *Sochineniia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), vol. II [XV], 214 (3 Sep. 1945).

declared, “is a volcano which is ready to explode at any time and to bury the Hitlerite adventurers.” Three months later, with the Red Army temporarily taking the offensive after the Battle of Moscow, Stalin delivered an overview of the war in which he brought out “stability of the rear” as one of the “permanently operating factors” in modern war, and one which put Germany – with its supposedly unstable rear – at a disadvantage.¹⁷

However, there was little that the USSR could do in practical terms to set off the “volcano.” Even before the war, Soviet territory had been distant from Central Europe, to say nothing of the western or southern parts of the continent. Now the Soviets had retreated 600 miles further east. Available in Europe, however, were the remnants of the prewar communist parties, which in their illegal or semi-legal situation had developed a degree of conspiratorial expertise. Meanwhile, existing governments on the right were increasingly discredited in the eyes of their people by defeat or by military failure. In addition, the resistance of the Red Army and Soviet partisans, followed by the beginning of the expulsion of the German occupiers, was an inspiration to many of those living in Axis-dominated areas in Europe and Asia.

Yugoslavia was, from the first, an active area of resistance and on both sides of the Grand Alliance came to be seen as a model. This success of the communist-led partisan movement in 1941 and 1942 owed as much to ethnic divisions, traditions of insurgency and rugged terrain as it did to the abilities of Tito and his comrades. Nevertheless, unlike all the other countries brought under German control, a numerically significant resistance movement was created, and one with enclaves outside the control of the occupying forces.

Soviet policy at this stage, expressed through the Comintern, endorsed direct action. At several points in 1941 and 1942 the Red Army seemed on the edge of military defeat, and the highest priority was attached to distracting German troops. Unlike the governments-in-exile set up under British control, the Comintern and local communist leaders were not concerned about maintaining the prewar social and political order. Indeed, from this point of view it was an advantage if resistance led to fierce reprisals; a cycle of violence in occupied territories would suck in and tie down more enemy troops.

¹⁷ Banac (ed.), *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, 167 (22 Jun. 1941); Stalin, *O Velikoi otechestvennoi voiny*, 30 (6 Nov. 1941), 42 (23 Feb. 1942).

However, eleven months later, in May 1943, came the disbandment of the Comintern. As already noted, Stalin had contemplated such action in April 1941, and his motives now were similarly complex. The Soviet leader explained the decision to the Politburo on two related bases: First, it was impractical to direct “the working-class movement” from one center and, second, disbandment strengthened the local communists by demonstrating that communist parties were not “agents of a foreign state.”¹⁸ At the same time there must also have been a desire to smooth relations with the leaders of the Western Allies, especially by eliminating an institution which was not central to Stalin’s concerns.

The various national communist parties did not become free agents after May 1943. An important role was taken by the secret International Information Department (Otdel mezhdunarodnoi informatsii, OMI) within the VKP(b) Central Committee apparatus. A survey of the wartime activities of the Comintern and its leaders, published in 1998, noted that the OMI helped initiate a (communist-led) partisan staff in Poland in the spring of 1944, sending weapons and communications equipment; the organization, it was noted, “also led [*rukovodil*] the anti-fascist struggle in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and partly in Finland.”¹⁹

The formal end of the Comintern was indeed followed by the enhanced success of foreign communists. This was not at first *directly* related to Red Army advances, although these certainly enhanced the prestige of the USSR. Most important were the advances of the British and Americans in the West, leading in mid 1943 to control of all North Africa and then the occupation of southern Italy. The changing situation strengthened French resistance forces in occupied France and overseas, and in both areas the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français, PCF) played a role. Then the British–American invasion of Sicily in July 1943 was followed by the overthrow of Mussolini. The new Italian government under Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio agreed to an armistice in early September, as Allied forces landed in Italy. The Wehrmacht was able to keep control of the northern two-thirds of the peninsula, but an armed resistance movement began in which the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) took an important role. Allied naval and air bases in southern Italy also allowed greater contact with resistance forces in Yugoslavia and Greece.

18 Banac (ed.), *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, 275–76 (21 May 1943).

19 N. S. Lebedeva and M. M. Narinskii (eds.), *Komintern i Vtoraiia mirovaia voina* (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 1994–98), vol. II, 74–75. No claims were made for the OMI leading the “anti-fascist struggle” in France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece or China.

The communists were instructed by Moscow to take part in liberation governments set up in the West. In October 1943 Britain and the United States recognized the Badoglio government, which was associated with King Vittorio Emanuele III. Dimitrov and PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti (also a prominent figure in the Comintern) opposed supporting this government, which they – correctly – perceived as reactionary, incompetent and unpopular. In March 1944, however, Stalin made it clear in a secret Kremlin meeting with Togliatti that the PCI was to support Badoglio and the king. Stalin's argument was that in-fighting would weaken the anti-German cause; if the king was prepared to fight the Germans there was no point in demanding his abdication.²⁰ When Togliatti arrived in Italy he made a speech at Salerno (near Naples), in which he endorsed communist participation in the government. The *svolta di Salerno* (Salerno turning point) was a major event in the history of the Italian left.

In the case of France, too, the USSR fostered cooperation with the broader resistance. In the occupied mainland the communist-led Front National worked, at least on paper, under the Gaullist Conseil National de la Résistance (CNR), and communist resistance forces cooperated with other underground fighters. In April 1944 the PCF took posts in de Gaulle's Algiers-based Comité français de Libération nationale (CFLN). It then played a major part in the Provisional Government set up in June 1944 and based in liberated Paris from August. In November 1944 as the French Comintern leader Maurice Thorez prepared to follow Togliatti home from Moscow, Stalin personally urged him to maintain a cautious policy, in particular opposing the maintenance of separate armed detachments by the communists. As Stalin put it,

The communists are behaving brashly [*braviruiut*] and are continuing to follow the former line at a time when the situation is different . . . The Communist Party is not strong enough to bash the government over the head. It must accumulate forces and seek out allies . . . If the situation changes for the better, then the forces rallying around the party will be useful to it for the offensive.²¹

Stalin evidently believed that accepting Allied preferences in Italy and France would strengthen the Soviet bargaining position with respect to the countries of Eastern Europe when the Red Army finally arrived there.

²⁰ Banac (ed.), *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, 304–05 (5 Mar. 1944).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 342–43 (19 Nov. 1944); “Anglichane i Amerikantsy khotiat vezde sozdat’ reaktivnyye pravitel’sstva,” *Istochnik* 4 (1995), 155–56 (19 Nov. 1944).

Of course, the eventual advance of the Soviet armed forces, when it came in the second half of 1944, was of even greater importance for the spread of communist power than were developments in Western Europe. For two decades Stalin had looked on the Red Army as an instrument for spreading communist influence. He realized that ultimately physical control could determine the political complexion of neighboring territories. His 1939 comment to Dimitrov that “[t]he Red Army activities are also a matter of world revolution” has already been mentioned. When the British in 1941–42 refused formal recognition of the prewar border of the USSR – with the recently annexed Baltic states, eastern Poland and Bessarabia/Moldova – Stalin reassured Molotov that he need not worry about diplomatic setbacks: “[t]he question of borders . . . in one or other part of our country will be decided by force.” Milovan Djilas, one of the leaders of the Yugoslav communists, recalled that in a private conversation in April 1945 Stalin expanded on the connection between military strategy and “revolutionary” politics: “This war is not as in the past; whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system. Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army has power to do so. It cannot be otherwise.”²²

The Red Army counteroffensive developed more slowly than Stalin and his advisors had originally expected. The Soviet war in Europe lasted some forty-six months, and only in the last eleven (from July 1944) was the Red Army fighting in territory beyond even the August 1939 borders. The details of occupation varied but there were, as we will see, underlying similarities.

Reached first was the belt of territory annexed between September 1939 and July 1940. The Red Army, and “internal” security forces, entered what had been eastern Poland (first western Ukraine and then western Belarus) in the summer of 1944. Most of the territory of the three former Baltic states was reoccupied in the autumn of 1944. Moscow had insisted to the other Allies since 1941 on the reincorporation of these areas into the USSR, despite the provisions of the Atlantic Charter; the British and Americans had accepted at least the Curzon line (in Poland) at the Tehran conference. These regions were rapidly integrated into the Soviet state, regaining their former (short-lived) “union republic” status, or becoming part of expanded versions of the Ukrainian SSR or the Belorussian SSR.

²² Banac (ed.), *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, 124 (21 Jan. 1940); Rzheshkevskii, *Stalin i Cherrill*, 157 (24 May 1942); Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1962), 90.

The next region to be captured was undeniably “foreign,” beyond even the Soviet frontiers of June 1941. The Red Army spearheads approached Warsaw in July 1944 and were met by a Polish national revolt mounted in the name of the government-in-exile in London. There was a contentious pause by the Red Army, which saw the Warsaw Uprising crushed by the Germans, and Poland temporarily split in half at the Vistula. The Soviet military and security organs consolidated their control over the eastern half, in the name of a new government (initially set up at Lublin), which had a leading communist element. Finland left the war in early September but kept a noncommunist government in place (although with some communist ministers). The country was not invaded or occupied – on condition that German forces were ejected. Romania, heretofore a very active German ally in the USSR, changed sides after a palace coup in the late summer. The Red Army quickly occupied the country, en route to the West, but unlike the situation in Poland the Soviets had to deal with a successor government under King Michael; this included a communist as minister of justice. In early March 1945, after a Soviet demonstration of force, a new cabinet was installed, with more pro-Soviet, left-wing ministers. Bulgaria had also been allied to Germany; once the Romanian domino fell, the Red Army occupied the country without meeting resistance in early September 1944. A new coalition government in which the communists played a large part took over in Sofia. Advances further west saw the flank of the advancing Red Army brush against Yugoslavia; Belgrade was captured in late September, but much of the rest of the country was under the control of Tito’s communist partisans. As with Finland – but for quite different reasons – there was in Yugoslavia no significant Soviet military or security service presence.

The government of Hungary did not change sides in the autumn of 1944, although the eastern part of the country was occupied by the Red Army, and an Allied-oriented authority, led by a general and with significant communist involvement, was formed there in December. The Red Army was then stalled outside Budapest until the middle of February 1945. The situation in Czechoslovakia was similar; before the last days of the war only the eastern part of pre-1938 territories of the country had been recaptured; a temporary government with a significant communist presence was set up at Košice in Slovakia in April.

In the first months of 1945 the remaining parts of Poland and Hungary (with Warsaw and Budapest) were taken by the Red Army, after fierce battles with the Wehrmacht. The final case, of course, was the conquest of eastern

Germany, which involved fighting for Berlin at the end of April 1945. The Allies by this time had made a number of agreements about Germany, including the marking out of occupation zones; at the Yalta conference of February 1945 they confirmed that Poland would occupy German territory as far west as the Oder–Neisse line and that East Prussia would be divided between Poland and the USSR. The capture of Berlin and Prague by Soviet troops (rather than by American or British ones) in the last days of the war had both military and political implications: The history of the “liberating mission” of the Red Army would be exploited politically by the USSR in the postwar years.

Despite a range of differences, developments in all these regions shared common features. Governments and elites had been compromised by prewar or wartime failures. They had failed to preserve their national independence or they had taken part in a very costly war as subalterns of the Third Reich. Their populations had made very heavy and apparently pointless sacrifices in the war, and they were often physically displaced. And, except for Finland and Yugoslavia, they had been captured or recaptured by invasions mounted by the Red Army.

Stalin’s April 1945 remark to Djilas, that “[e]veryone imposes his own system as far as his army has power to do so,” was not just about supporting communism with the Red Army; it also indicated the difficulty of installing communist-led governments where Soviet soldiers were *not* present. Churchill flew to Moscow in October 1944, and Stalin accepted his now well-known proposal for spheres of influence – the “percentages” agreement – in the Balkans and the Danubian lands. Britain and its Western Allies would have predominant influence in Greece, and the USSR a comparable position in Romania and Bulgaria; the share of influence in Yugoslavia and Hungary would be about equal. This division reflected military realities. In October 1944 Soviet occupation troops were already the predominant force in Romania and Bulgaria; there was no likelihood of British or American troops arriving. Almost simultaneously – in mid October 1944 – British forces were coming ashore in Greece on the heels of the retreating Wehrmacht.

The Greek communists had played an important part in the resistance, within ELAS (the Greek People’s National Army of Liberation). Dimitrov came to sympathize with ELAS, but his request in October 1944 that the USSR openly provide at least moral support was rejected by Molotov. At the start of December, the political wing of ELAS quit the national unity government of Georgios Papandreou over the issue of its

guerrilla fighters being disarmed. In mid January 1945, after five weeks of fighting in Athens between ELAS and its political opponents (the latter aided by the British), Stalin reminded Dimitrov of his opposition to the radical actions of the Greek communists: "I advised not starting this fighting in Greece. The ELAS people should not have resigned from the Papandreou government. They've taken on more than they can handle. They were evidently counting on the Red Army's coming down to the Aegean. We cannot do that. We cannot send our troops into Greece, either. The Greeks have acted foolishly."²³

In Europe the Soviet government did in 1944–45 exercise a high degree of caution (or patience) in spreading communism. Efforts were made to mask the influence of the USSR on foreign communist parties. Stalin was realistic about what could be achieved, and he could see the danger of precipitate political change, not least in his relations with his bourgeois alliance partners. The Red Army was still fighting very costly battles with the Wehrmacht, and a supreme effort might well be required to win the final campaign in Germany. Some areas had a higher military priority than a political one. Poland, Hungary and East Prussia were of central importance for a Red Army drive that was directed toward central Germany; Finland, Yugoslavia and Greece were on the distant flanks. Once victory was achieved in May 1945 the USSR gave high priority to its objectives in Germany; gaining a share in reparations and ensuring the complete suppression of Nazism required temporary cooperation with the British and Americans. At the same time seizure of power by Western communists without the direct presence of the Red Army was unlikely, given the political balance and continued presence of British and American troops.

In terms of the fraternal parties, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was a special case. The party had a long and complex history of conflict both with the Chinese central Guomindang (GMD) government and with the Japanese occupiers (after July 1937). From the mid 1930s instructions from Moscow to the CCP emphasized resistance to Japan and – after June 1937 – contribution to the overall Chinese war effort, which was led by the GMD. From Moscow's point of view, the Japanese annexation of Manchuria in 1931 presented a most serious danger to eastern Siberia; joint resistance by the GMD and the CCP would "entangle"

²³ Banac (ed.), *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, 291 (26 Dec. 1943), 352–53 (10 Jan. 1945); Lebedeva and Narinskii (eds.), *Komintern*, vol. II, 78, doc. 188 (21 Oct. 1944), 474.

Japanese forces and reduce the likelihood of a direct Japanese military attack against Soviet territory.

Although the Red Army had in the late 1930s deployed its strongest forces in eastern Siberia, the USSR did not during the Sino-Japanese War send military help to the communists. Nevertheless, under the leadership of Mao Zedong the land-reform programs of the CCP were increasingly popular among the peasantry. Successful guerrilla warfare had given the communists considerable strength in the countryside even of eastern China. And, more important, the authority of the GMD was weakened by the retreat of Chiang Kai-shek's government to Chongqing in 1938 and the continued failure of the GMD army, right through 1944.

The Consequences of World War II

And so, with the formal capitulation of Germany in May 1945 and the Japanese surrender in September, World War II was over. The government of the victorious USSR returned quickly to pre-1941 policies. On 9 February 1946 Stalin made a speech in connection with the Supreme Soviet elections; the war, he argued, had been an "examination" which had been passed with great credit by the Soviet government and the communist party, as well by its leaders. The success of the Red Army, as well as of the social, state and economic systems had been fully verified.

Not only did victory in the war supposedly validate Soviet prewar policies, it also showed the need to continue them. The concentration on heavy industry was to continue: "As to plans for a longer period, our party intends to organize a new powerful upsurge of the economy which will give us the possibility, for instance, to increase the level of our industry threefold as compared with the pre-war level . . . Only under such conditions can we regard our country as guaranteed *against any accidents* [emphasis added]. This will require perhaps three new five-year plans if not more."

The need to guarantee against "accidents" was certainly – in part – an entirely rational response to the 1941 invasion by a rapaciously aggressive foreign power and to the devastation that followed. It was also, however, indicative of an unchanging Leninist–Stalinist view of the outside world, one that stressed rival imperialists and inevitable conflict. "It would be wrong," Stalin said in his 1946 speech, "to think that World War II came about accidentally or as a result of mistakes of one statesman or other . . . In reality the war came about as the inevitable result of the development

of the world economic and political forces on the basis of modern monopoly capitalism.”²⁴ The Soviet leader had made the same point, more baldly, at an informal meeting with Yugoslav and Bulgarian communist leaders in January 1945:

The crisis of capitalism has manifested itself in the division of the capitalists into two factions – one *fascist*, the other *democratic*. The alliance between ourselves and the democratic faction of capitalists came about because the latter had a stake in preventing Hitler’s domination, for that brutal state would have driven the workers to extremes and to the overthrow of capitalism itself. We are currently allied with one faction against the other, but in future we will be against the first [*sic*] faction of capitalists, too.²⁵

By 1947, with the defeat and disarmament of Germany and Japan, rivalry *between* capitalists was less clear, and the emphasis was, as in 1919, on the bipolar conflict between imperialism and socialism. The “two camps” speech by Zhdanov in September 1947 – already mentioned – was the fullest public elaboration of this theme.

In the postwar years the leaders of the USSR had had to choose a position on a spectrum of action, all related to the war which had just been fought and won. They could maintain a positive relationship with Britain and the United States, their great-power allies. Alternatively, they could strive singlemindedly to consolidate their substantial hard-won territorial-strategic gains in Eastern Europe. Or they could support revolutionary movements on a global scale. The prospect of nuclear weapons had little impact on Soviet wartime policy (despite some knowledge – from espionage – of American and British developments), and Hiroshima did not change the Leninist precept that war was inevitable. Nevertheless, the Soviets had begun in the autumn of 1945 a rapid and expensive race to develop their own nuclear weapons, and there was a natural desire to put off a direct confrontation at least until the balance of nuclear forces was more favorable. The existence of choices did not mean that Stalin or anyone else had absolute control or was the sole cause of events. The pace of events in China in 1947–48 was certainly not dictated by Moscow. Moreover, the USSR did not become a superpower, and the communist parties did not gain influence, solely because of the personal decisions and ideology of Stalin; more than forty years of tension between East and West continued when the Georgian dictator was no longer on the scene.

²⁴ Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. III [XVI], 1–28 (9 Feb. 1946).

²⁵ Banac (ed.), *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, 357–58 (28 Jan. 1945).

The details of the changes of communist strength after 1945 are dealt with elsewhere in this volume. What might be said here is that it is insufficient to focus solely on Soviet (or Stalinist) manipulation or on imminent terror – although manipulation and terror were certainly evident. There were now strong communist parties in Western Europe, and they had a mass following. In France, in the 1945 legislative election and the first election of 1946, the PCF won 26 percent of the vote; in the second election of 1946 it won 28 percent and had the most seats. The PCI in 1946 won 21 percent of the vote, and in 1948, in coalition with the Partito Socialista Italiano, 31 percent.²⁶ Another important feature to bear in mind was the great variety of experience. Regional levels of long-term social development differed greatly, but the disparity in *wartime* events between 1937 and 1945 must also be stressed.

In any event the cycle of mistrust with the Western powers turned out to make a halfway house impossible in Eastern Europe. It led eventually to the open declaration of the “two camps,” the creation of a watered-down Comintern in the shape of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), the Czechoslovak takeover (March 1948) and the Berlin blockade (June 1948).

Postwar events in Yugoslavia and Greece deserve special mention. Neither had fought alongside the Axis, neither had a common border with the USSR and neither ended the war with a significant presence of Soviet troops or security police within its territory. The Yugoslav leadership, despite Tito’s prewar service with the Comintern, was unwilling to accept comprehensive Soviet guidance. When civil war flared up in Greece, the Yugoslavs offered more support to the communist insurgents than Moscow was prepared to give; Stalin wished to avoid a direct rupture with Britain and the USA over a secondary issue.

The situation in China and northern Korea was different again. In the immediate aftermath of the Japanese surrender the Soviet government doubted the early success of the CCP. It was impressed by the buildup of the GMD (Nationalist) army and sensitive to American support for Chiang Kai-shek’s government. In August 1945 the Soviet Union signed a treaty with the GMD government. The Soviet Army’s presence in Manchuria until May 1946 played a part, as the occupiers allowed CCP military forces to take control of the smaller towns in the region and transferred to them

²⁶ Chris Cook and John Paxton, *European Political Facts of the Twentieth Century* (5th edn., Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 227–28, 252.

a quantity of captured Japanese weapons, but Stalin kept the CCP at arm's length. Nevertheless, the success of the CCP in gaining control of most of China north of the Yangzi by the spring of 1949 was followed by the collapse of the GMD forces on the mainland and the creation of the People's Republic.

As a result of all these developments, the fortunes of the USSR and the international communist movement were at their height in about 1950. In April of that year, in the aftermath of the communist victory in China and the unexpectedly early Soviet atomic bomb test, the United States produced a secret assessment, the now well-known NSC-68:

During the span of one generation, the international distribution of power has been fundamentally altered. For several centuries it had proved impossible for any one nation to gain such preponderant strength that a coalition of other nations could not in time face it with greater strength . . . Two complex sets of factors have now basically altered [the] historical distribution of power. First, the defeat of Germany and Japan and the decline of the British and French Empires have interacted with the development of the United States and the Soviet Union in such a way that power has increasingly gravitated to these two centers. Second, the Soviet Union . . . is animated by a new fanatic faith . . . and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.²⁷

Numerous criticisms can be directed against NSC-68, but this outline of the two "sets of factors" is basically correct. The events and consequences of World War II were critical to the history of communism. The USSR had become stronger and – at least as important – its main regional rivals on both the Axis and Allied sides had become weaker or had been destroyed. And, unlike in previous conflicts, ideology played a central role. Moreover, the "fanatic faith" was for the moment, in the 1945–50 period, a global and unified one. There was also, as yet, no overt popular discontent evident in states under communist control.

Looking back from sixty-five years after NSC-68, we can see that the war's outcome would have a negative effect on the USSR and on the international communist movement. First of all, especially for the USSR, there was the huge loss of human life and resources. And then, in the postwar years, came high military expenditure and perpetuation of an unbalanced economy. The momentum of communist gains slowed. The "fanatic faith" shattered:

27 Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis (eds.), *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 385.

Yugoslavia was the first crack, in 1948, and then the alliance with the China could not be sustained, especially after the loss of Stalin's prestige. Control of Eastern Europe perpetuated Soviet conflict with the West and stifled reformers in the USSR; to make matter worse, Stalin's successors and Soviet clients could not in the end manage the region. The Western communist parties, although catapulted by the war into a position of unprecedented electoral strength, were excluded from political power. "Total" defeat of the former Axis states proved a limited event, as the noncommunist ones recovered economically (although not as first-rate military powers). The United States, also because of the war, unexpectedly became a nation of "preponderant strength," committed to Europe and Asia, economically successful on an unprecedented scale and now heavily armed in peacetime and with a head start in nuclear weapons. The victory of communism in 1945–50, gained at a very heavy price, proved unsustainable.

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