

11. The USSR as the New World Superpower

World War II came to an end with the surrender of Nazi Germany in Berlin in the late hours of May 8 in the early hours of May 9, 1945. With its surrender, the Soviet Union was definitively positioned as one of the three superpowers that had created the basis for the victorious anti-Hitler coalition, a surprising result when one considers the initial European and internal Soviet political and military situation as it had been in 1941. The Soviet Union was far from taking its new position for granted, but the decisive factors had been the country's size, the number of people within it, its toughness, and its ability to handle difficult situations. The crucial role the USSR had played in the European war became clear only in 1943, and the Western Allies could do little but to adjust, something visible in the minutes of the Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences and extensive correspondence involving Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill, dated 1941–45.

In recent years, some journalists and historians have accused the USSR of pursuing expansionist goals during the war and counting on the creation of the extensive Soviet bloc that came into being after the war.³⁶⁹ But prior to World War II, the USSR was not a recognized European superpower. The country had undergone a ten year period of intense industrial development, but was far from up to the task of overcoming its inherent backwardness, the losses it had sustained in World War I and the civil war, and the slow start-up of construction during the first decade of Soviet power. All this was accompanied by the losses of agricultural collectivization and the famine of the 1930s, and the systematic murder of the Soviet elite and a large share of the army command. Prior to 1941, the USSR had not been a popular choice for an ally against Nazi Germany, something shown convincingly during the Spanish Civil War and, particularly, the Munich Agreement of September 1938, in which British and French diplomats had a good chance to create a coalition to shield the Czechoslovak Republic and prevent the outbreak of World War II on the basis of an existing agreement with the USSR. But in Munich they decided otherwise: to agree with Hitler. Even

369 A statement made by Stalin and cited by Milovan Djilas has long been taken as testimony to this fact: "This war is not like the last one. Anyonewho occupies territory will also bring his state establishment wherever his army goes. There is no other way." (Djilas M., *Razgovory so Stalinym*. Frankfurt/M. Posev 1970, p. 108).

afterwards there was no intensive effort to sign the USSR on as an ally against Hitler and the Axis states.³⁷⁰

We have already noted the catastrophic consequences of Stalin's policies, of his poor estimation of the state of affairs on the eve of war, and his weakness in managing military operations. His ideas on the post-war organization of Central Europe and the Balkans thus began to take shape only after the USSR was attacked by Germany. Initially, Stalin had insisted that the Soviet Union's 1941 borders remain unchanged.³⁷¹ In other matters, his ideas did not take shape simply or in a single step. The war with Germany had developed unfavourably for the USSR, and even after Stalingrad it was far from clear whether the USSR would have the strength and the opportunity to end the war in Central Europe and the Balkans. It was equally unclear how the Western Allies would fare in their operations to the south and later in the West of Europe, and what inroads they would make into Central Europe and the Balkans. The greatest unknown came from the USA's intention to withdraw its military from Europe once the war was over.³⁷²

We have already said that the Soviet Union's ideas on post-war gains were not modest. But Stalin bargained without a strong hand. He resurrected his ideas during the preparations for the Tehran conference, when it became clear that the USSR would have a significant share in organizing post-war Europe. In developing his plans, Stalin took into account post-war collaboration between the USA and Great Britain; he also realised that he would have to respect the interests and notions of his allies. The effort to continue collaborating with them was based not solely on the distribution of power, but also on the scope of loss suffered by the USSR during the war, a loss which it could not adequately compensate without contributions from the USA and Britain. Stalin was also convinced that Germany would be able to regenerate its military potential relatively quickly and that collaboration between the USSR, the USA and Great Britain would thus be the guarantee of the German defeat the coming permanent.³⁷³ He accepted the

370 Axis – alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan.

371 I.e., the annexation of the Baltics, Western Ukraine, Western Byelorussia, Bukovina and Moldavia which, from Stalin's point of view, probably was meant to be a return of the "empire" of lands and nations "stolen" from Russia after World War I.

372 This was the basis for Maisky's notion of the USSR as a dominant ground superpower in Europe formulated in early 1944. See SSSR i germanski vopros, 1941–1949, Vol. I, pp. 338–339.

373 *Moskva i vostochnaya Evropa: Stanovlenie politicheskikh rezhimov sovet'skogo tipa 1949–1953* (Eds) T. V. Volokitina, G. P. Muraško, A. F. Noskova, T. A. Pokivajlova (Moscow: ROSSPEN 2002), 30–31.

composition of the UN Roosevelt put forward and the creation of the Security Council, which would anchor the superpower positions of the USA, USSR, and Great Britain even after the war.³⁷⁴

Thus, Soviet notions on the shape and objectives of superpower politics underwent significant changes that lasted the entire period from the Tehran conference until summer 1948, when the Allies faced a definitive conflict over the 'German issue'. Originally, a number of solutions had been put forward, although they were growing fewer in number over time. From Stalin's standpoint the decisive effort was to eliminate Germany as a power player and ensure its permanent neutralization within the European balance of power. He saw the creation of a Soviet bloc as a priority only when it became clear that an agreement among the allies on Germany was now impossible. The economic potential of this bloc did not seem substantial enough at the end of the war to be considered compensation (with the exception of Bohemia, Moravia, and Polish Silesia), although it did rise sharply later. Also problematic was the interpretation of the Soviet bloc in military terms—its chief function was as a buffer zone for the USSR should a military confrontation with the West occur.³⁷⁵

The biggest sticking point in forming the post-war Soviet zone of influence was Stalin's attitude on the Polish issue. Poland was of key importance for the USSR as the gateway that had allowed Soviet troops to remain in Germany; closing it would block an unexpected land invasion into the USSR from the West. Stalin had withdrawn his troops from the Czechoslovak Republic as early as the autumn of 1945. He originally agreed to maintain the plurality of economic and political life, something he also permitted in Poland and Hungary, though within a fairly limited political framework. Greater independence was also given to Tito's Yugoslavia, and the foreign policy that country subsequently adopted worsened relations between the USSR and the Western Allies and, in the end, gave rise to a disagreement between Yugoslavia and the USSR itself. On an explicit request made by Roosevelt in Yalta, probably for strategic reasons, Stalin did not occupy Finland but allowed a pluralist regime that was neutral militarily and gave up many justified claims toward the USSR.³⁷⁶

374 Permanent members also included China and France. It was primarily Roosevelt who insisted on China's membership and Churchill who insisted on France's membership.

375 Its significance, however, depended upon potential participation in a conflict with Germany to which neither Poland or the Czechoslovak Republic were indifferent.

376 An occupation of Finland would have entailed a significant military force which would then be missing for a head-on attack.

The novel situation of late 1943 in its own way surprised the Soviet leadership, as well. It counted on a leading role on the European mainland, but the changes that took place in the social systems of the European countries led to a protracted process whose outcome was unclear. Stalin recommended the European countries create governments out of the anti-fascist forces in combination with communists. Originally, they were to remain sovereign and opened contact with the Western Allies in spite of his intent to keep them under Soviet influence. He continued to differentiate between the defeated countries, where the occupying superpowers would determine the organization of post-war life, and countries of the anti-Hitler coalition, within which he counted on the significant role of internal political players. The abolition of Comintern in 1943 was testimony to this. It had been intended to provide foreign communist parties with more space for independent decision-making. Poland was the exception, and we have just discussed the reasons why.

These aspects of Soviet policy must be noted because they reveal the extent to which the Soviets were originally interested in collaborating with the USA and Great Britain. The real-life issues to which this collaboration and assistance provided by the Allies gave rise proved in the end to be larger and thornier than the parties had anticipated.

There was another facet of this same problem. It consisted in the fact that the USSR's share in the defeat of Nazi Germany had established it as a world superpower, but the country had never exhibited the signs one would expect of a superpower. It did not possess sufficient economic or cultural potential, and for this reason was unable to solidify its newly won position at the same time it maintained free and open relationships with the rest of the world. And its deficits were aggravated by the enormous extent of the country's wartime loss, something that has frequently been neglected in the politicized literature. 25 to 29 million people became casualties, not including those with permanent disabilities or who suffered the consequences of famine, disease, and the loss of their homes. The demographic issues were enormous: villages had been depopulated; the gender ratio had been altered and this was reflected for a long period in the birth rate; and there was a huge loss of educated people. And the loss of production facilities and cultural assets, not valued precisely but only in estimates, is another chapter altogether.

The USSR thus lacked the requisite standard of living, and proper social and cultural standards, and it therefore had no means to influence the development of countries within its interest zone over the long term. All this permanently provoked a lack of interest on the part of the USA and Great Britain in collaborating with the Soviets. The disputes that loomed so large between the USSR and the

Western superpowers were due, then, not simply to Soviet politics, but to its being 'otherwise' in character, with a different potential. Had the country given up its superpower position, it would have collapsed after the war was won—not only its political base, but its economic and social life, as well. The Soviet leadership could hardly permit that.

The potential of Soviet influence, however, was not exhausted. We have already noted the prestige that Stalin and the USSR had obtained by defeat of Nazi Germany. This prestige had brought the country great respect both internationally and within its own borders. Millions of soldiers were now returning home, an incredible relief to a great section of the population, particularly the families of the soldiers. No longer did they need worry about the lives of their loved ones or the fate of their country; they dared hope that the war's end would bring an overall improvement to their living conditions. The victory kindled the nationalist feelings of the Russians and many Slavs living in the USSR. Numerous speeches by foreign statesmen and the statements of Stalin and other Soviet officials lauded the Russians' performance. In this way, Soviet ideology opened itself to the influence of Russian patriotism, and this influenced the process of appointment to functions and positions in institutions and organizations of the regime.³⁷⁷ The population's vertical mobility significantly expanded, and some soldiers, particularly officers, found the opportunity to take economic, administrative, and political functions that had come open during the war. A new stratum of functionaries and officers came into being, strongly influencing political and civic life in ensuing years. Soldiers of peasant origin and those from small towns found the door to the cities, to industry, and to construction sites open. Many former soldiers were given the opportunity to complete their education.

In all this, the regime acquired a cushion of support from people who had fought Nazism during the war. But the role that some political sources have ascribed to remaining abroad is exaggerated. Some displaced persons and soldiers did decide to stay outside the USSR's borders, but this was not a prevailing trend. Germany, Austria, and Hungary were enemy states. Furthermore, their experience in Germany during the war was adequate deterrent for most people who had been abducted and for soldiers. With the partial exception of the Czechoslovak Republic, the countries to which Soviet soldiers had marched were not among the world's most developed areas. Setting aside issues related to language, qualification, and culture, it was difficult to remain abroad in an area controlled

377 See, e.g., Stalin, *O Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne Sovetskogo Soyuza*, Moscow: OGIZ, 1946), pp. 173–174.

by the Soviet authorities, and this was true not only for army deserters but also in terms of the forced repatriation of displaced persons to the USSR. The opportunity to remain abroad was open in particular to Soviet citizens who had gotten to Western Europe during the war or to zones administered by the Allied authorities.

Most citizens of the Soviet Union therefore looked for improvements in the situation in their own country. Deeper collaboration with the allies was anticipated. The Soviet government was itself inclined in this direction at the war's end, supporting it or at least tolerating it for some time. It backed off this open approach only in 1946–47, citing a need to fight 'the influence of Western ideologies', and later, 'cosmopolitanism'.

During the initial post-war years, similar factors were present as well in the countries within the Soviet zone of interest. Their newly created governments put their supporters in positions that had formerly been held by members or collaborators of the occupying fascist regimes. This was accompanied by the transfer of assets and social reforms that influenced the mood of the lower social classes. It is also essential to note the territorial changes that took place, along with changes in national demographics that resulted from novel state borders and displaced German inhabitants. Finally, the gates of the prisons and concentration camps were opened and the knowledge of what had gone on there became a significant influence.

The conflicting post-war developments that led to the mutual alienation of the USSR and its Western allies saw a big role played by the countries of western and southern Europe and of Asia, where politics shifted leftward and the mood became decidedly anti-colonial, leading to the increased influence of left-wing parties and organizations. In Europe, this was particularly true of France, Italy, and Greece. The USSR's wartime performance generated anxiety when the country's influence and potential was overestimated, and these worries were a substantial factor behind the Truman administration's decision not to withdraw the Americans who had stayed behind.

This forced the USA into a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the Soviets exerted strong pressure for the USA to help compensate their war loss. On the other, the populace wished to see the USA serve as a counterbalance to Soviet influence and allow European social systems to stabilize. These conflicting demands balanced by the Americans and to some extent the British were made more acute by the continuous clashes over approaches, systems, and mentality between the USSR and the Western Allies. These constant conflicts were aggravated by ingrained aversions and antagonisms that the Allies had accumulated during the pre-war, wartime, and post-war periods. Mutual distrust grew. Part of it stemmed

from the Soviets' unwillingness to reveal the actual state of the country to the Allies, who would then be able to see that the USSR's leaders lacked the wherewithal to back up their ambitions. Compromise became difficult; the unity which had been anticipated when the objectives were drawn up for post-war Allied policy was dissipating.

The new situation gave rise to new worries about Soviet expansion. Recent literature has made frequent note of the alleged threat posed by the Soviets to Greece and Turkey and later Soviet claims in the Mediterranean and Asia.³⁷⁸ Although Stalin introduced most of these claims and 'wishes' in his negotiations with the Allies, they touched on sensitive points in the mutual balance of power. The Soviet claims were mostly probes. The Soviet army was capable of maintaining its control over the territory it had occupied, but it had no means to enforce its acquisition against the clearly demonstrated will of the Western Allies. Evidence of this may be found in Stalin's May 1946 statement to a narrow circle of Soviet and Polish leaders: 'In my opinion, no war is now possible. Neither we nor the English and Americans can start a war. Everyone is sick of it. Nor do we have any objective for starting a war. We are not planning to invade England or America, and they will not risk it. No war is possible for at least twenty years.'³⁷⁹ This was no smoke screen. The USSR was hardly capable of any serious conflict at that point. During the war, up to 34.5 million people were in the Soviet army, many of whom did not return or were not capable of another military deployment. After the war, the USSR demobilized its army and reduced troop numbers from 11 million in 1945 to 3 million by the late 1940s.³⁸⁰ The scope of its wartime loss made it difficult for the USSR to maintain an enormous army. Population depletion left the Soviets wanting for recruits, and this is aside from the superior quality of the Western Allies' military technology and their progress in developing nuclear weapons and carriers. In February 1946, during the first post-war

378 They included the opening of the Black Sea straits to Soviet ships, modification of the eastern Soviet-Turkish border, and reinforcing the autonomy of Iranian Azerbaijan. Stalin indicated to Roosevelt his wish to acquire Libyan territory under his administration and made use of the Soviet obligation to enter the war with Japan to enforce his sovereignty over southern Sakhalin and the Kurile, as well as the restoration of Soviet participation in the administration of the Chinese Eastern Railway in Manchuria.

379 See *Vostochnaya Evropa v dokumentakh rossiiskikh arkhivov, 1944–1948 gg.* Vol. I, (Moscow/Novosibirsk: Sibirskiy chronograph, 1997), pp. 456–457.

380 Rossiya i SSSR v voynah XX veka, pp. 245–246, also, *Stalinovy války*, Roberts G.: *Stalin's War*, p. 433.

elections in the USSR, Stalin 'optimistically' reassured the electorate that within three or more five-year plans—fifteen years or more—he would be capable of handling 'all eventualities', by which he meant armed conflicts and wars.³⁸¹

Crucial is that these disagreements did not find resolution, but rather festered and came to a head. In early 1947, Truman appointed George C. Marshall Secretary of State, and he shifted American post-war politics in a new direction, abandoning the existing effort to create a common Allied policy in Germany and Europe, with the result that Europe and later Asia were divided into two antagonistic camps. This shift allowed for more rapid consolidation of the economic and political situation in Western Europe and West Germany. But in Eastern Europe, it strengthened the Stalinist regime, led to the elimination of any vestiges of pluralism and altered the social atmosphere. Contact with the Allies became a 'subversive', 'hostile' act.

But we do not wish to launch off on a theme to do with the post-war development of the USSR and its zone of interest. Soviet politics was frequently repugnant to the Western Allies and to their representatives in Moscow. With the hindsight of several decades, we may claim that the frequent worries of the Allies greatly exaggerated. The main issue faced by Western Europe and the USA was not so much the threat of Soviet expansion, but the instability present in a number of key European and Asian countries.

Even here, however, there is no need to conceive an 'alternative' solution for that time period. This lies outside the objective and the potential of historiography. The past cannot be changed retrospectively; historians may not succumb to the ambition to advise politicians what to do in a similar situation. The decision taken to shift American politics and to declare the Marshall Plan was not made simply upon the basis of the existing situation in Europe; it also reflected the internal political situation in the United States. Its result was gradual stabilization of the social and political situation in the countries of Western Europe, but for the countries of Central Europe and the Balkans, there were no immediate benefits. For the USSR, it was a call to pursue a radical course of socialism that ended up separating the European West from the European East for decades.

381 See Stalin I. V. *Rech na predvybornom sobranii izbirateley stalinskogo izbiratel'nogo okruga Moskvyy, 9. fevraľa 1946 g.*, p. 22.