

## U.S.-SOVIET RELATIONS DURING WORLD WAR II

The United States and the Soviet Union became wartime allies on December 11, 1941, when Nazi Germany declared war on the United States. Germany had invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. The German attack on the Soviet Union had come as a shock to the Soviet leaders. Two years earlier, the Soviets had signed a treaty with Germany, the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in which leaders of both countries committed themselves to peaceful relations.

For Americans, the U.S. alliance with the Soviet Union raised troubling questions. The United States had opposed the Soviet system since the communists had come to power in 1917. Even after Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, most Americans remained wary of helping Moscow. The U.S. entry into World War II compelled American leaders to put aside their differences in the common struggle against Adolf Hitler. President Franklin D. Roosevelt took care to emphasize the cohesion of the anti-Nazi alliance.

*"In an attempt to ward off the inevitable disaster, the Axis propagandists are trying all of their old tricks in order to divide the United Nations [the name for the coalition of nations fighting Germany]. They seek to create the idea that if we win this war, Russia, England, China, and the United States are going to get into a cat-and-dog fight. This is their final effort to turn one nation against another.... To these panicky attempts to escape the consequences of their crimes we say—all the United Nations say—...'Unconditional Surrender'.... The Nazis must be frantic indeed if they believe that they can devise any propaganda which would turn the British and American and Chinese governments and peoples against Russia—or Russia against the rest of us."*

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt

### Note to Students

The period from 1947 to 1990, generally labeled the "Cold War" by historians, was a time in which the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union dominated U.S. foreign policy, U.S. domestic politics, and international relations. Frequently, this rivalry took on the appearance of a crusade, with the United States leading the forces of the "free world" against the threat of "international communism" directed by the Soviet Union. An understanding of the critical period from 1945, when the United States and the Soviet Union were still wartime allies, to 1947, when the Cold War had clearly begun, is necessary to grasp the events of the second half of the twentieth century. The attitudes formed and the decisions made during this three-year period defined the character of the following four decades.

This unit is built around selections from letters, speeches, interviews, and memoranda written while the events you will be studying were happening. These documents, composed by the people who were shaping the decisions, express their values, perceptions, and recommendations. These primary sources are the raw material that historians work with when they write history and they should be read very carefully. Notice not only the ideas expressed, but also the words and phrases chosen to express them. What are the values and perceptions behind these opinions and what are the implications of the recommendations? Major differences of opinion frequently lie behind relatively minor differences in expression.

In these readings, you will be taken back to the 1945 to 1947 period. You will participate with those who actually shaped U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union by deciding what strategy the United States should adopt to ensure its security and world peace in the postwar period. You will have available much of the information that these decision-makers possessed at the time. For the next few days, please forget everything that you might know about the events after 1947. Just take yourself back to the time of your grandparents' schooling, before television, when a new car could be purchased for under \$500.

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## U.S.-SOVIET TENSIONS

In spite of the necessity of maintaining the alliance against the Axis powers, areas of U.S.-Soviet friction emerged. These hidden points of conflict would influence U.S.-Soviet relations after the war.

### ***How did Soviet aggression influence relations with the United States?***

The Soviet Union took advantage of Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939 to reassert its control over the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These countries had been part of the Russian Empire before the communist revolution of 1917. The Soviet Union also attacked Finland in late 1939. Like the Baltic states, Finland had been part of the Russian Empire. After 1939, however, it was not completely incorporated into the Soviet Union. While the peace treaty of 1940 gave the Soviet Union several slices of Finnish territory, the Finns retained their independence. The American public admired the valiant defense of the Finns against their larger and stronger neighbor.

Another example of Soviet aggression was found in the secret provisions of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Under the treaty, Germany and the Soviet Union agreed to divide up Poland, which lay between them. A few weeks after Germany invaded Poland from the west in 1939, the Soviets entered the country from the east.

### ***Why was the "second front" a point of contention?***

President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had promised the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, that they would launch a second front against the Axis powers before the end of 1942. Stalin wanted the Allies to invade western Europe to relieve some of the pressure that the Soviet armies were facing on the eastern front. However, Churchill, like Roosevelt, feared the enormous battlefield casualties that a premature second front might produce. He strongly opposed the frontal assault on the entrenched German positions in western France, and instead urged Roosevelt to launch the Allied blow through the

Balkans, the area extending northward into Europe from Greece. This strategy, according to Churchill, would accomplish three things. First, the casualties would be lower. Second, British influence in Greece, an area of historical British concern, would be guaranteed. Third, the Allied armies would be positioned much closer to Eastern Europe, leaving British and U.S. leaders in a much stronger position to influence postwar developments in this area. Although President Roosevelt, acting upon the advice of his military leaders, rejected Churchill's specific strategy, the U.S. plan to invade North Africa in late 1942 indicated that U.S. leaders were also eager to avoid a premature second front in western Europe.

The Allied invasion of North Africa had virtually no impact upon the huge German armies in the east. Roosevelt and Churchill again promised a second front—this time landing troops on the island of Sicily and then the Italian peninsula in 1943. The invasion of Italy, while putting an Allied army on the European continent, again did not significantly lessen the Axis powers' pressure on the Soviet Red Army. The geography of the Italian peninsula made it possible for the Germans to delay the Allied armies with only a fraction of those forces used on the Russian front. The long-awaited invasion of western Europe did not come until D-Day in June 1944, by which time the Soviet armies already had inflicted costly defeats upon the Germans and had begun to force them back toward the prewar boundaries. Since the Red Army bore the brunt of the fighting in Europe during most of World War II, Soviet battlefield casualties exceeded the combined battlefield casualties of all of the other Allies in the European theater. In fact, Soviet casualties were more than fifty times those of the U.S. armies in Europe.

### ***What role did Poland play?***

Because of the absence of natural barriers such as mountain ranges and large rivers Russia historically has been very vulnerable to invasion from the west through Poland. This was the route taken by Napoleon's armies in 1812, Kaiser Wilhelm's armies in 1914, and Hitler's armies in 1941. One of Stalin's principal wartime objectives was to establish security

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for the Soviet Union in this area. First, Stalin wanted to move the borders of the Soviet Union westward. Under this plan, the territory that Poland would lose to the Soviet Union would be offset by giving postwar Poland territory taken from eastern Germany. Second, the Soviets demanded a “friendly” government in Poland. To achieve this, the Soviets installed a provisional government in areas of eastern Poland liberated by the Red Army. The provisional government, based in Lublin, was staffed by pro-Russian and pro-communist Poles who had spent the war years in Moscow. Excluded initially were members of the Polish government-in-exile in London, which Stalin viewed as anti-Soviet and anti-Russian.

Two wartime incidents served to complicate the Polish issue even further. When the German armies entered the section of Poland that had been occupied by the Soviets in 1939, they discovered in the Katyn Forest mass graves containing bodies of thousands of executed Polish army officers. Although Moscow blamed this atrocity on the Germans, the Polish government-in-exile in London had no doubt about who was really to blame. As the Red Army pushed the Germans out of occupied Poland in January 1945, the Polish government-in-exile ordered the underground forces in Warsaw to rise up, to expel the Germans, and to establish their own Polish authority before the Soviet forces could take the city. Although initially somewhat successful, the underground forces soon were overwhelmed by German reinforcements. British and U.S. appeals to Moscow to send the Red Army, which was just across the Vistula River, to the aid of the underground fighters were ignored. Instead, the Soviet army waited until the uprising had been crushed before it resumed its attack on the Germans.

#### ***How did differing ideologies contribute to mutual suspicion and dislike?***

Many Americans disliked the Soviet government’s policies and philosophy. In particular, the Soviet regime’s official atheism and abolition of private property violated two fundamental American values. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union prior to the U.S. entry into the war, many Americans could find little sympathy for the Soviets. Senator

Harry Truman told a reporter in June 1941: “If we see that Germany is winning the war we ought to help the Russians, and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany and in that way let them kill as many as possible.”

Soviet leaders were likewise deeply suspicious of the United States. As communists, they considered conflict with the world’s most prosperous capitalist nation inevitable. Moreover, Soviet leaders had not forgotten that shortly after the new Bolshevik (communist) government pulled Russia out of World War I in 1918, the United States sent troops onto Russian territory. While the stated purpose of this joint British-French-Japanese-American intervention was to prevent war supplies from falling into the hands of the Germans, the Soviets believed that these troops were actually assisting the Russian “White” armies—those Russians fighting the Bolsheviks in a bloody civil war. During the 1920s, the United States supported the efforts of the British and French to isolate the new Soviet regime. In fact, the United States did not extend diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union until 1933.

#### ***What role did aid to the Soviet Union play?***

In March 1941, Congress approved the Lend-Lease Act, enabling the Allies to “lend” or “lease” military equipment. Although the Lend-Lease program was originally designed to help cash-starved Great Britain, the United States also began sending military supplies to the Soviets after the Nazi invasion. During the course of the war, the Soviets received about \$11 billion worth of aid. Most of these supplies had to be transported by the dangerous northern sea route, which was subject to German air and U-boat attacks. When shipments were delayed because of these dangers, the Soviets became distrustful of U.S. motives. As soon as Japan surrendered, aid was abruptly terminated by the U.S. government. The Soviet Union had suffered more physical damage than any of the other Allies, and Stalin had hoped to use Lend-Lease aid, which included trucks and railroad equipment, to help rebuild his country.

At the Big Three conference held at Yalta in February 1945, Stalin requested \$10 billion in reparations from Germany. (To appreciate the buying power

of \$10 billion in the 1940s, remember that a new car cost under \$500.) These reparations would not be actual currency, but rather machinery, goods, food, and anything of value that could be physically transported back to the Soviet Union. Both Roosevelt and Churchill were reluctant to approve this figure. At Yalta, Stalin also requested a postwar loan from the United States of \$1 billion—\$5 billion lower than his request of 1944. Rather than granting a loan, Washington would consider only a “credit,” which the Soviets could use to purchase American goods. The administration of President Harry S Truman also delayed action on the request until March 1946, tying the granting of the credit to the resolution of political and economic issues that had arisen.

#### ***How did the Allies divide post-war Germany?***

During the war, joint plans for postwar Germany did not progress much beyond the designation of areas that the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain would occupy. These three zones (a fourth zone was created later for France) were intended to correspond roughly to areas that the victorious armies expected to occupy at the conclusion of the war. Berlin, located well to the east, would be under joint administration. Roosevelt and Churchill agreed reluctantly to the redrawn German-Polish border. Beyond agreeing that the Nazi influence had to be purged from Germany, and that in practice each occupying power could deal with the reparation issue within its own zone, the Western Allies and the Soviets seemed unable to overcome their suspicions concerning the other’s intentions. The Soviets, in particular, feared a Germany rebuilt along capitalist lines that could again threaten Soviet security.

#### ***Why did the United States want the Soviet Union to commit to war against Japan?***

The United States wanted commitments from the Soviets that after Germany’s defeat the Soviet Union would join the war against Japan. The Japanese were fighting tenaciously in the Pacific war, and the weight of the huge Red Army was seen as an effective weapon to shorten the war and limit

American casualties. In return for Stalin’s promise to enter the war against Japan after the defeat of Germany, Roosevelt and Churchill agreed at Yalta to a number of territorial concessions that would strengthen the Soviet position in the Far East. These concessions involved not only Japanese-controlled areas, but also areas that historically had been under Chinese control. China, of course, was an ally of the United States in the war against Japan.

#### ***What did the Soviet Union think about the new United Nations?***

The Soviets were suspicious of President Roosevelt’s plan for a postwar international organization with the ability to enforce peace terms imposed on the defeated Axis powers, and to deal with future threats. Moscow feared that the United Nations (UN) would be controlled by capitalist, and potentially hostile, states. The Soviets insisted that each of the five major victors (Great Britain, United States, Soviet Union, China, and France) have the right to veto UN decisions. The Soviets also demanded that each of the Soviet republics be given representation in the world organization. Similarly, the establishment of the



*The Big Three shape the postwar world*

World Bank, with powers to coordinate trade and economic development, was seen as a threat to the Soviet socialist system.

### **What was the importance of the atom bomb?**

The secret joint U.S.-British project to develop the military potential of atomic energy (code named the "Manhattan Project") involved more than 100,000 workers and cost more than \$1 billion. The Soviets were not officially informed of the existence of this new, immensely powerful weapon until the Potsdam Conference in July 1945. President Truman described the atomic bomb in general terms to Stalin, who already knew of its existence through unofficial sources. Since the weapon was not tested until after Germany had surrendered, it was to be used on Japan to hasten the end of the Pacific war. Although the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki would, in fact, bring about a quick end to the war the following month, Truman did not withdraw the long-standing U.S. request that the Soviet Union enter the war against Japan. The concessions promised

to the Soviets also were not withdrawn.

### **How did the Soviets regard Winston Churchill?**

The British wartime leader's opposition to Soviet communism was well-known and extended back to the days of the Bolshevik revolution, when Churchill expressed the desire to strangle it at birth. His close friendship with Roosevelt and his ability to influence U.S. policy was resented by the Soviet leaders. Throughout much of the war Moscow feared that the British and the Americans would come to terms with the Nazis at Soviet expense. Churchill's opposition to establishing an early second front in France and his advocacy of a Balkan strategy were known to the Soviets. Unlike Roosevelt, who thought that he could employ his considerable political skills to persuade Stalin to behave and cooperate, Churchill held no illusions about the tactics or long-term objectives of the Soviet dictator. Harry Truman, Roosevelt's successor, respected Churchill's opinions and was strongly influenced by Churchill's passionate anti-communism.

## Extra Challenge

Some of the perils of wartime alliances were discussed intelligently in mid-1943 by Walter Lippmann, probably the most influential American newspaper columnist at that time. Read carefully the following selection, think about Lippmann's predictions, and ask yourself whether the predictions made more sense than the expectations of those who hoped that the wartime cooperation would continue after the defeat of the Axis powers.

*"We must begin by remembering that Britain, Russia, and America are allies, not by conscious choice, but under the compulsion of their common enemies. They have been compelled, as I have tried to show, to become allies whenever a really formidable aggressive power emerged which threatened to break out of Europe into the outer world. Nevertheless, when there is no such enemy which threatens their national existence, the need for their alliance becomes submerged. Their lesser, their separate and conflicting interests are then free to assert themselves. The greater the peril from the outside, the closer is their union: the greater their security, the more their differences come to the surface.*

*"The unconditional surrender of Germany and of Japan is bound, therefore, to leave all the Allies with an immediate sense of mortal peril averted; and this will reduce the compulsion that binds the alliance together. There will then be opened up disputable secondary questions which push apart the members of the alliance.... These fissures will tend to become wider and deeper the more any one of the great powers seeks to aggrandize itself either at the expense of one of the other great powers, or at the expense of their smaller allies.... A Russian policy of aggrandizement in Europe, one which threatened the national liberties of her neighbors, would inexorably be regarded as such a threat to Britain and America that they would begin to encourage the nations which resisted Russia.... On the other hand, an anti-Russian policy in which Britain, America, and the European states sought, as they did in 1919, to blockade and even to disrupt Russia would provoke Russian communist intervention to counteract it."*

