

Stalin and Roosevelt

“The *combination of Russian revolutionary sweep* [emphasis added] with American efficiency is the essence of Leninism,” declared Joseph Stalin in 1924, the year of Lenin’s death.¹ Stalin’s fascination with American culture and business ethic was shared by many Bolsheviks of the 1920s. The last words read by Lenin’s wife to her dying husband came from a short novel by American author Jack London. While the United States was among the last countries to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, American companies were open for business with the Soviets earlier than their European competitors, supplying expertise and equipment for Soviet construction sites from Magnitogorsk in the Urals to the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station in Ukraine.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s speedy recognition of Stalin’s government in Moscow soon after his inauguration, along with his New Deal policies, helped create in the Soviet media an image of the American president as the kind of capitalist with whom one could do business. With Stalin fearing encirclement by Germany and Japan and mistrusting Britain and France, the United States emerged in Soviet public discourse of the 1930s as the least hostile, if not the friendliest, capitalist country in the world. U.S. military intervention in the Far East during the Russian Civil War was largely forgotten, if not forgiven, by the Europe-obsessed Bolshevik leadership in the Kremlin.

When Hitler turned against Stalin in 1941, the Soviet leader found it much easier in historical, political, and psychological terms to ally himself with Roosevelt than with Winston Churchill—in Bolshevik eyes, the embodiment of British imperialism since the 1917 Revolution. Until Roosevelt’s death in April 1945, he remained Stalin’s favorite capitalist leader. The United States was not only the country on which the Soviet Union most relied during the war with Germany but also the one with which it was most comfortable when it came to building the post-war future: unlike the British, the Americans were not going to stay in Europe. In the Far East they were willing to accommodate Soviet territorial claims, and in the newly created United Nations Organization they treated the Soviets as equals, extending to them the right of veto reserved for major powers.

What went wrong in Soviet-American relations after 1945? This question, central to the debate on the causes of the Cold War, has been answered in

1. Joseph Stalin, “Foundations of Leninism,” in *Works*, idem, vol. 6 (Moscow, 1953), 196.

various ways. Without dismissing the historical, cultural, and personal factors that led to the dramatic change in Soviet-American relations after World War II, I put the main emphasis on geopolitical factors. In the summary that follows I propose that it was Soviet expansion, or rather the return of Russia to Eastern and Central Europe, and direct American involvement in that part of the European subcontinent with the goal of protecting Western Europe and British positions in the region that spelled the end not only of the Grand Alliance but also of the relative friendliness of the interwar years, and eventually led to the Cold War.

Interwar Eastern Europe was comprised of several young states that emerged on the ruins of the Ottoman, Habsburg, and (in part) Russian empires. The new states aspired to be national but grabbed more territory, settled by minorities, than they could assimilate to their titular nationalities. France and then Britain saw the region as a *cordon sanitaire* against the spread of communism. Stalin viewed it as a launch pad for capitalist attack not unlike that of 1920, when Polish and Ukrainian troops supported by the Entente captured Kyiv.

When in 1939 the French and British refused to allow Stalin to enter Eastern Europe militarily to deal with the German threat, the Soviet leader did so anyway on the basis of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. At the Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam meetings with his new Western allies, Stalin insisted on keeping his gains of 1939 and claimed an East European sphere of influence that went beyond the one arranged with Churchill in 1944. At the Yalta conference, Roosevelt refused to recognize Stalin's claim to determine the political future of Eastern Europe, shifting the problem of spheres of influence to the arena of diplomatic negotiations, but at Potsdam Truman bowed to the seemingly inevitable Soviet control of the region.

Stalin had no clear idea of what to do with his new sphere of influence—whether to Sovietize it completely or leave some elements of democracy and free enterprise in place. He insisted, however, that it had to be part of the Soviet “sphere of security,” as he called it in negotiations with Roosevelt and Churchill. He once went on record saying that the Russians knew how to fight but not how to negotiate. Stalin was determined to maintain Soviet political control over the territory taken by the Red Army during the war. He would compromise on Iran and Turkey, or even retreat from them, but dig in his heels on Eastern Europe.

After Britain's unexpected postwar implosion as a world superpower, American involvement in European affairs threatened Stalin's position in Eastern Europe. The threat, however, came not from U.S. military power but from its economic potential, embodied in the Marshall Plan. Stalin could not compete economically. He responded militarily, as in the Berlin blockade, and politically, as in the communist coup in Czechoslovakia. One way or another, he sealed off Eastern Europe from the West to maintain his control over the region. The Cold War would eventually become global, but its beginnings and official end in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 attest to the paramount importance of that region in Soviet-American Cold War rivalry.

Presuming that this reading of the fall of the Grand Alliance and the start of the Cold War correctly reflects Stalin's attitudes toward Eastern Europe and

American involvement there, what lessons, if any, can be drawn for the new round of Moscow-Washington rivalry, often called Cold War II?

There are numerous parallels with the events of seventy years ago. Although the new rivalry seems to be global in scope, once again involving the Middle East, the eye of the new international relations hurricane is in the area known today as the “new Eastern Europe.” It covers some former Soviet republics and extends from the Baltics through Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova to the Trans-Caucasus. Like most of the states that emerged on the ruins of the old empires in 1918, most of the newly independent states of extended Eastern Europe are economically and militarily weak, have major problems with democracy, and include significant ethnic minorities. Like their interwar predecessors, they are viewed in Moscow as a launch pad for Western aggression but are perceived in the West as the *antemurale* where Russian expansion into Europe can and should be stopped.

Putin’s Russia is staging a return to its “near abroad” in a way that parallels the “return” of Stalin’s Soviet Union to the lands that had been part of the Russian Empire or its sphere of interest. Some territories are being annexed outright, while others are being claimed as part of the Moscow-run economic and military union. As at the beginning of the Cold War, the main threat to Moscow’s ambitions in the region is American economic power and the appeal of its democratic institutions rather than its military might. And, as before, Moscow’s response to that economic and ideological challenge usually comes in military form. The Russians want a “new Yalta”—a division of Europe into spheres of influence. The Americans are resisting, as they did at Yalta.

There are differences as well. The most obvious one is that with the exception of parts of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, the rest of the new Eastern Europe is not occupied or controlled by Russian troops, as most of Eastern Europe was seventy years ago. The countries in question are basically free to make their own choices regarding their form of government and participation in economic and even military alliances. This “openness” of the region creates both opportunities and challenges for the development of U.S.-Russian relations, but challenges prevail as the dangers of open confrontation and proxy wars increase.

Can the history of the early Cold War help us understand the present-day problems of Russo-American relations? Yes, it can. The American political establishment spent a good part of the Cold War trying to answer the question of whether President Roosevelt had sold out Eastern Europe to Stalin at Yalta. However one answered that not very productive question, there was general agreement that “losing” Eastern Europe was a bad idea, and that ceding it to the Soviet sphere of influence did not prevent the Cold War. Another lesson drawn from those events was that the great powers could not decide the fate of the East European nations without inviting them to the negotiating table. These valuable takeaways from the past can be very useful today as the United States and Russia face new tensions in the part of the world that sparked the Cold War seventy-five years ago.