H-Diplo State of the Field Roundtable on the Eastern European Settlements during the Second World War: Making the Peace Amidst the War

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Introduction by Warren F. Kimball, Rutgers University, Emeritus

This H-Diplo Roundtable focuses on the nature and effects of the military and political decisions that resulted in the “settlements” in/for Eastern Europe after World War II. Why is this topic interesting and worth our time and effort? I would suggest that while counterfactual suppositions are more than just good fun for historians, examining them now that we have the bulk of the documentary evidence in hand gives us a chance to assess what I have clumsily labeled “The Second World War Sell-Out.”

David Reynolds helped prompt me to suggest this roundtable. The final phrases of his essay capture what I hope we all have tried to address: “A Sovietised eastern Europe was, in part, the price of how Allied victory was won. This remains one of the troubling moral questions about the ‘Good War’.”

Let me repeat a bit of what I originally wrote to the roundtablers:

“The Second World War Sell-Out.” Which meaning prevails? The Allies sold out Eastern Europe by honoring their alliance/promises and appeasing the Russians; OR, the Allies should have sold out the Russians by appeasing the Germans and thus (possibly) saved Eastern Europe from a half-century of Soviet subjugation, and the rest of the world from a Cold War? Could/should the Western Allies (UK, US, Canada) have sought peace during the war with Nazi Germany so as to prevent Soviet domination of Eastern Europe?

This has early echoes of the Cold War (USSR/Communism vs. the “West”) arguments that appeared in the 1930s, with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Soviet offers of joint efforts to restrain Germany’s Adolf Hitler, continued during World War Two, and burst into the public debate in the late 1940s with the publication by the US State Department of the Yalta documents.¹

The dispute has not died. Much of the current debate comes from quasi-scholarly studies, publications that, often admittedly, come from pre-determined interpretations in mostly non-academic presses.² A recent piece of scholarship, based on extensive work in archival sources, is Sean McMeekin, *Stalin’s War* (2022), which is the subject of an H-Diplo Roundtable.³ It raises, but does not really address, the very questions I pose. I should add that I suggested that the roundtablers focus on Eastern Europe, since the East Asian settlements warranted separate treatment. As you will read, fortunately a few participants disagreed, though not about the Asian settlements.

Perhaps Gen-X will come to confront and puzzle over what we have found so fascinating, and, hopefully, benefit from the challenge. After all, it is embodied in their language—the image below.

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We seek peace—enduring peace. More than an end to war, we want an end to the beginnings of all wars.4

“Memory is never static. After the Soviet Union collapsed and generations turned over, World War II was recast as a moral triumph and no longer a cautionary tale.”5 Roundtabler David Reynolds once wrote: President Franklin D. Roosevelt “—affable, conversational, deliberately imprecise—gradually enmeshed his interlocutors in a web of implicit agreements.”6 How wonderfully accurate. But my next question is what exactly those agreements were, whether they were written, implicit, or (sometimes) clear?

I recall having once dismissed Arthur Schlesinger’s argument that the Declaration on Liberated Europe was a shrewd, even practical victory for President Franklin Roosevelt. S. M. Plokhy, author of *Yalta: The Price of*
Perhaps Roosevelt really was that clever. Yes, he was practical and political, and famously kept his own counsel. But he held long-standing, frequently expressed convictions that cooperation amongst powerful nations was the sine qua non for peace and prosperity. When an advisor, Admiral William Leahy, warned that the agreements over Poland were so “elastic that the Russians can stretch it all the way from Yalta to Washington, [Roosevelt] replied “I know, Bill, I know it. But it’s the best I can do for Poland at this time.”

Plokhy concluded that “one of the testimonies to Roosevelt’s and Churchill’s sound strategy at Yalta is that decades after the conference, with the benefit of hindsight, new archival findings, and tons of research, it is still very difficult to suggest any practical alternative to the course that they took.”

And, thanks to Bill Miscamble’s essay, you know where I stand—”a Roosevelt defender.” So excuse me for exceeding my brief as the “introducer” to offer an explanation, if not a defense, of Roosevelt’s peacemaking amidst the Second World War.

Henry Kissinger, a self-confessed realist, used the Far Eastern settlement after World War II to disparage the apparent contradictions in Roosevelt’s actions, writing that “Roosevelt had granted Stalin a sphere of influence in northern China to encourage him to participate in a world order that would make spheres of influence irrelevant.” Roosevelt hoped to persuade Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to take part in a new world order, while knowing full well it would have spheres of influence. Why else his Four Policemen?

But Roosevelt’s spheres of influence were quite different from the coercive, military occupations and interventions that Stalin established in Eastern Europe. The president’s awkward, imprecise, poorly articulated distinction between “closed” or “exclusive” spheres of influence and what might be called “open” spheres, was the bridge he tried to construct between the structure proposed by Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Stalin, and the one suggested twenty-five years earlier by President Woodrow Wilson.

Roosevelt tried to make Wilsonian idealism practical. “Open spheres” would permit the flow of culture, trade, and the establishment of what he called “free ports of information.” He seems casually to have assumed that such openness would, in the fullness of time, expand American-style political and economic liberalism since those concepts worked. He had seen Wilson’s experiment collapse under the weight of nationalism and political insecurity. Why bother to recreate that system if it would only fail?

One of Roosevelt’s advisers, Adolf Berle, pointed to the “Good Neighbor Policy” as the way the Soviet Union could operate; “no threat to anyone” while the United States practiced “prompt and careful elimination of political responsibility,” particularly in Eastern Europe where it had no leverage, allowing Americans to take the moral high ground by remaining aloof from situations they did not like (reminiscent of what George Kennan would recommend in his “long telegram”).

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7 S.M. Plokhy, *Yalta: The Price of Peace* (New York: Viking, 2010), 271. He cites Kissinger on 263. The Declaration was the only formal written agreement to come out of the Yalta conference.
That position of aloof superiority was not at all what the President thought would work. Cooperation did not mean lecturing one’s partners, but working with them. Roosevelt’s Policemen would succeed or fail together. One could argue, as some of our essayists do, that Roosevelt’s vision was too Eurocentric and Atlanticist to work. He did recognize the dangers posed by colonialism, but assumed independence and decolonization would come at their own pace. A revived China would become a partner (i.e., policeman), initially with help from the United States. Roosevelt tried to begin that process, but too late with too little. A pacified Japan was too far in the future to imagine.

I would add that the word Yalta is often, all too casually, used as including the broad oral “agreements” regarding Eastern Europe made at the Teheran conference in late 1943. The Eastern European settlements discussed at Yalta, just over a year later, built on the Teheran talks. Best to refer to the Teheran and Yalta arrangements, or even just “conversations” since the only major formal agreement was the Declaration on Liberated Europe signed at Yalta. A classic Roosevelt touch; keep it vague, negotiate as you go along. A gentlemen’s agreement.

Interestingly and intriguingly, but not surprising, Roosevelt remains at the focus of this ongoing debate. His personal ideas and decisions made history. Even those who try to credit (or discredit) others with influencing him, keep returning to the question of what did Roosevelt do? Why did he do it?

I thank the essayists for enlightening us on the current state of assessments about that ever-moving target—Franklin Delano Roosevelt, making the peace amidst a war.

Contributors:


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1973), 460-68, emphasis added. On the Long Telegram, see Priscilla Roberts’ comments on Kennan in her essay in this forum.
David Reynolds, with Vladimir Pechatnov, is the author-editor of *The Kremlin Letters: Stalin’s Wartime Correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt* (London: Yale University Press, 2018) which was awarded the Link-Kuehl Prize by the Society for Historians of American Relations. He is Emeritus Professor of International History at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of the British Academy. Earlier books include *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2004—Wolfson Prize) and *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the 20th Century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014—Hessell-Tiltman Prize).

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The question under discussion in this roundtable, based on the above comment from David Reynolds’s essay “How the war was won,” contains a fundamental flaw. I don’t say that to criticize Reynolds, since his formulation accurately reflects the way in which this question is customarily conceptualized, both by apologists for the postwar settlement in Eastern Europe and by its critics. The latter, of course, include Sean McMeekin, whose 2021 *Stalin’s War* prompted this latest round of discussion. Yet discussion on the Sovietization of *Eastern* Europe implicitly suggests that the postwar settlement east of the Elbe can somehow be separated from the outcome of the war to the west of the rapidly emerging “iron curtain.” It cannot.

The fundamental unity of the postwar settlements in Eastern and Western Europe was established at the wartime conferences of the “Big Three” in Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam. At all three conferences, a great deal of the formal discussion centered on the coming Soviet domination of Poland and Eastern Europe, while very little of what was said about the emerging capitalist, democratic, and American-dominated West made it into the official record. Critical but unrecorded discussions and agreements are by their nature difficult to reconstruct with precision, but their outlines can be deduced from the subsequent actions of both the Soviet leadership and its West-European proxies in Italy, France, Greece and elsewhere. It is clear, moreover, that from Tehran onwards, the settlements in the two halves of Europe were intimately inter-related, bound not only by the necessity of finding a continent-wide solution to the problem of postwar order but also by the fact that while the western Allies had few levers with which to contest Soviet domination in the east, Moscow’s effective control over mass Communist parties in Italy and France enabled it to reach directly and forcefully into the politics in the west. This meant that a smooth transition from war to postwar in Western Europe required Soviet approval, expressed in the active cooperation of the national Communist parties that followed Moscow’s lead. As a result, while the recorded proceedings of these major wartime conferences featured Anglo-American recognition of Moscow’s emerging domination of Poland and Eastern Europe, the rapid, uncontested, and successful consolidation of capitalist nation-states in the west was equally reliant on tripartite allied cooperation.

As the opening phases of the postwar in Italy in summer 1943, Soviet officials assured their western counterparts that, as Soviet ambassador to London Ivan Maisky put it, Moscow wanted to see “progressive” rather than Communist governments established in Rome, Belgrade, and Athens. This stance was not simply a useful bargaining position, but reflected the fundamentally anti-revolutionary approach of the Stalinist regime, which feared the radical democratic possibilities of popular revolt quite as much as did the western

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1 David Reynolds, “How the war was won,” *New Statesman*, 15 June–July 1, 2023, 24.

2 There is an enormous literature on this question. The critical view of the settlement—and of the Yalta conference in particular—was given a presidential seal of approval by George W. Bush’s claim that it was “one of the greatest wrongs of history,” made in Latvia in 2005. See Elisabeth Bumiller, “60 Years Later, Debating Yalta All Over Again,” *New York Times* May 16, 2005. This view is now championed by the work under discussion here, Sean McMeekin’s *Stalin’s War: A New History of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2021). The contrary view, reflected in David Reynolds’s essay in this forum, “How the War Was Won,” has long been predominant among liberal academics.

3 McMeekin, *Stalin’s War*.


Allies. On this common ground, Soviet, American, and British officials maneuvered for advantage. Anglo-American leaders walked a fine line, seeking Soviet approval for the terms of the Italian surrender and working to involve Moscow in the Military-Political Commission for Italy that was set up in October 1943, while at the same time planning to deny Soviet officials any real say in Italian affairs. There was a significant degree of *quid pro quo* in these arrangements: the Allies hoped that agreeing to limited Soviet involvement in Italy—including entertaining Moscow’s claims on a share of the Italian fleet and on Rome’s colony in Libya—would in turn grant them a say in the postwar settlements in Eastern Europe.

The basic outlines of this coming partition of Europe were first sketched out at the Tehran conference in November 1943. After the conference, Moscow moved quickly and decisively to rein in popular insurrectionary sentiment in Italy and to champion the formation of the kind of “progressive” government announced by Maisky. In this project, Moscow found itself working with Washington and against London, which remained wedded to supporting the government of King Victor Emmanuel III and former Fascist Army Chief of Staff Pietro Badoglio. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) had a critical role to play in this process. After meeting with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in early March 1944, PCI General-Secretary Palmiro Togliatti returned to Italy from exile in Moscow ready to put this political line into practice. At a quickly convened Party congress, Togliatti pushed through the *Savolta di Salerno* or “Salerno Switch,” convincing activists to drop revolutionary agitation and calls for the immediate overthrow of the monarchy and instead to back the PCI’s entry into the Badoglio government.

These moves, which were directed from Moscow and executed on the ground by Togliatti and other PCI leaders, opened the way to the establishment of a more liberal—or “progressive”—Italian government under American sponsorship after the capture of Rome in June 1944. This, in turn, enabled the new government to exercise a significant degree of political control over the rapidly expanding partisan forces organized under the aegis of the National Committee for the Liberation of Upper Italy (CLNAI) in the northern part of the country. As a result, the sprawling popular insurrection that erupted as Anglo-American armies advanced into the Po Valley in spring 1945 was followed by the rapid handover of power to representatives of the Allied military government. In all of this, as top American diplomat Robert Murphy reported approvingly, Togliatti acted as an “intelligent national patriot” rather than as a “Communist.” It is, of course, impossible to say how this insurrectionary upsurge might have gone without the moderating influence of the PCI, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that the consolidation of a pro-Western state, even if successfully accomplished, would have required prolonged and bloody confrontation with partisan forces. The fighting in Athens at Christmas 1944 when British forces, acting with Moscow’s approval, imposed a conservative monarchy on recalcitrant partisans, gives a glimpse of what this might have looked like. The consequences, in strategically central Italy, would surely have been extremely far reaching.

These critical Western European aspects of the postwar order shaped by military power and by top-level discussion between London, Moscow, and Washington are entirely overlooked by those works, like McMeekin’s *Stalin’s War*, that recite the hoary old myth that President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was out “to make a nice personal impression” on Stalin, gave away the farm to a clear-eyed and steely-hearted Soviet

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7 See, for example, David Reynolds and Vladimir Pechatnov, *The Kremlin Letters: Stalin’s Wartime Correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 307.
From this viewpoint, Stalin’s “demands,” including one for a share of the Italian fleet, appear self-evidently unreasonable, not least because the USSR had “played no role in the war against Italy.” This judgment rests on a very narrow view of Italy’s war: fact the 85 soldiers who were killed or captured in the rout of the Italian Eighth Army on the Don in early 1943—as many combat casualties as were suffered by Italian forces in the entirety of the North Africa campaign—suggest that the Red Army did play a significant military role in the defeat of Italy. Moreover, thanks to the agreement reached at Tehran, the PCI was critical to the political solution registered by the rapid emergence of a stable and pro-American postwar Italy. These facts do not make the horse-trading over the disposition of the Italian fleet or of Italy’s colonies in Africa any less unseemly, but they do help to contextualize them. They also make it clear that while the precise shape of the postwar settlement differed in different parts of the continent, both its overall character and the partition of Europe upon which it rested were a product of inter-allied negotiation and agreement.

The European—and not just the East European—settlements were also in large part a product of the kind of war Washington elected to fight. The main elements are well known. After it became apparent that the Soviet Union would survive the first shock of Barbarossa, Roosevelt rallied American policymakers around a grand strategy that in the European “theater” hinged on sustaining the USSR in order to enable the Red Army to carry the lion’s share of the ground war against Nazi Germany. At the same time, American policymakers deployed massively expanded and genuinely world-spanning air and naval forces in what Philips Payson O’Brien has described as a devastating “air-sea” war against the Axis fought across a “super battlefield” of unprecedented scope. This global strategic approach began to take shape as Soviet resistance stiffened in fall 1941, but it only took on its full form incrementally and over time. The evolution of American strategy was registered in the gradual downward revision of the proposed size of the American land army, starting with the massive 213-division force projected in the fall 1941 Victory Program and ending with the trim 90-division army envisaged in November 1943 and formally adopted on the eve of D-Day in May 1944. This “90-division gamble” was explicitly predicated, as Maurice Matloff explains, on the increasing military capacity of the Red Army and on the increasing effectiveness of the combined Anglo-American bombing campaign against Germany. Personnel planning was also carefully calibrated to ensure that the upcoming B-29 bombing offensive against Japan would receive adequate logistical backing from service and support troops.

As it took shape over time, this world-strategic plan enabled millions of men who would otherwise have been drafted into the army to remain at work in America’s factories and mines, and on its farms. Their labor, and that of the millions of women and African Americans who joined them in the war plants, facilitated the production of the tsunami of military materiel that sustained the entire allied war effort. It could not have been done any other way: American industry was (relatively) highly automated and extremely efficient, but it still required the input of massive quantities of human labor. The dramatic wartime expansion of American production, which simultaneously underpinned military victory and laid the basis for the protracted economic upswing upon which America’s postwar hegemony rested, thus emerged as a direct and integral product of Washington’s warfighting strategy.

Washington’s wartime strategic choices cannot be picked apart as if the resulting Soviet domination of Eastern Europe was somehow a discrete and independent variable. It was not. On the contrary, while the precise lines of demarcation and the pace and scope of integration into the Soviet economy were shaped by conjunctural and contingent factors—including the rapid postwar acceleration of American-led efforts to “contain” Soviet power—the fundamental character of the partition of Europe flowed from the entirety of

11 McMeekin, Stalin’s War, 498.
12 McMeekin, Stalin’s War, 498.
Washington’s grand-strategic approach to the worldwide war. This approach, with its heavy reliance on Soviet ground troops, was itself rooted on an astute assessment of the profoundly anti-revolutionary nature of Soviet policy. American leaders were well aware of the major changes in the USSR that were signaled by the rise of Stalin, with President Roosevelt observing in a May 1942 note to Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox that “it seems increasingly true that the Communism of twenty years ago has ceased to exist in Russia.”16 This assessment, which contrasted contemporary Stalinism with the Bolshevik internationalism or the early years of the Russian Revolution, would later inform George Kennan’s February 1946 comments on the “powerful currents of Russian nationalism,” the “traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity,” and the pursuit of economic autarky that he believed shaped Moscow’s postwar outlook and policy.17 This fundamental appreciation of the nature of Stalinism allowed both Roosevelt and Kennan to conclude that “peaceful and mutually profitable coexistence of capitalist and socialist states is entirely possible,” at least during the war itself.18

Had this not been true—had, in other words, Washington been facing a Bolshevik regime that was set on advancing world revolution—then none of the wartime agreements and accommodations with the Soviet Union would have been possible. At the same time, however, while Moscow was willing to partition Europe, including by exercising its considerable influence over Communist parties in the West to smooth the emergence of postwar pro-American nation-states, the fact remained that the Stalinist regime was based on a socialized economic system that was antithetical to capitalism. This reality, which could be largely set aside in the midst of the fighting, assumed renewed salience as the end of the war approached and the postwar order began to take shape. With the war against Germany won and with Italy and France securely in the Western camp, the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe that had once seemed a reasonable price to pay for the kind of world war that American policymakers wanted to fight, suddenly became an intolerable constriction on the world capitalist market. The Sovietization of Eastern Europe, as our opening prompt has it, thus became one of the most “troubling moral questions” of the war.

This sense of moral outrage, as I am sure my fellow roundtablers will discuss, was of a piece with a political and historiographical campaign to lay the blame for the breakdown of the wartime “Grand Alliance” and the beginning of the Cold War entirely on the shoulders of the Soviet leadership.19 At least in some versions of this narrative, Moscow got an assist from unwitting—or perhaps even willing—American politicians and military leaders. The decoupling of the postwar settlement in Eastern Europe from that in the West was critical to this campaign. Broadening the frame to once more include Western Europe neither resolves nor absolves the moral questions; on the contrary, it points towards challenging the entire ideological superstructure of the so-called “good” war.

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16 Roosevelt to Knox, May 4, 1942, quoted in O’Brien How the War Was Won, 137.
19 This campaign has been through several iterations; for its most recent “post-revisionist” phase see John Lewis Gaddis, We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); on the historiography, see Odd Arne Westad, “The Cold War and the international history of the twentieth century,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Westad, eds., The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Vol. 1; Richard Ned Lebow, “We Still Don’t Know,” Feature Reviews, Diplomatic History, Vol.22, No. 4 (Fall 1998), 627-632.
Let me express my gratitude to Warren Kimball for organizing this roundtable, which provides an opportunity to reflect anew on President Franklin Roosevelt’s policies towards the Soviet Union during World War II and the implications of his conciliatory approach for the peoples of Eastern Europe. In preparing this contribution, I engaged Sean McMeekin’s recent study, *Stalin’s War: A New History of World War II.*1 McMeekin’s provocative thesis castigates Roosevelt for his stupidity (I choose the word carefully) in his dealings with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and argues that there were alternate courses of action that the United States should have pursued. McMeekin’s polemical criticism of Roosevelt pushes the proverbial envelope too far, and, as a result, it has been too easily dismissed by some reviewers. In considering McMeekin’s arguments, I reviewed the positions I outlined in my 2007 book *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War.*2 I found them just as convincing today as when I first wrote them. I provide a summary of what I argued there as a contribution to this roundtable. (Readers who wish to see my case developed further should examine the second chapter of that book.)

I agree with McMeekin’s argument, but only to a limited extent. Roosevelt was naïve in his dealings with Stalin and in his preparations for the post-war world. He bears some limited responsibility for the terrible sufferings of the peoples of Eastern Europe under almost half a century of Communist oppression, although, to be clear, Stalin and his repressive system own the primary share of that blame. Roosevelt’s actions, or lack thereof, are more like sins of omission than deliberate commission.

It must be well understood at the outset that Roosevelt set out to build a bond of friendship with Stalin during World War II. His approach has been astutely described as one of “trust the Russians and win their trust in return.”3 Laurence Steinhardt, US Ambassador to Moscow when World War II began, saw the Soviets quite correctly as “accomplices” of Nazi aggression from 1939 to 1941, and this insightful understanding led him to oppose unrestricted aid to the Soviet Union after June 22, 1941, when Germany’s Adolf Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa. Steinhardt recommended reciprocity, i.e., aid only in exchange for Soviet cooperation on a range of matters, but eventually he found himself marginalized for this advice.4

The perfidy of Soviet international behavior during 1939–1941 never appears to have registered fully with Roosevelt. He never gauged that the Soviet Union, in George Kennan’s words, “moved into the wartime period on the basis of a series of calculations which could scarcely have been more hostile and dangerous to the Western powers.”5 Stalin’s alliance with Hitler, as Adam Ulam later noted, was eventually “rationalized as a natural and desperate step in view of the [supposed] British and French intention in 1939 to ‘push Hitler eastward,’” a stance that was completely at odds with the British guarantee to Poland which aimed precisely to restrain Hitler in the East.6 Throughout the war, Roosevelt held tough-minded and knowledgeable critics of the Soviet Union largely at arms-length. He preferred the poorly grounded counsel of those like former ambassador Joseph Davies and, most importantly, Harry Hopkins, his closest aide.

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As a result of Hopkins’s advice, Roosevelt rather quickly determined not only that the United States must fully support the Soviet Union in its desperate military struggle against Hitler, but also that he should elicit Soviet cooperation in shaping the postwar world order and accord them a key role in it. The former determination (contra McMeekin) is understandable given the enormous threat that Hitler represented, but the latter is questionable indeed. Furthermore, it was pursued on the basis of limited policy analysis which did not involve those who possessed genuine expertise on the Soviet Union. By May of 1942 Roosevelt blithely could tell Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, that the Soviet Union would be one of the four policemen who would manage the postwar world. Less than a year earlier, of course, Stalin had maintained faithfully and proudly his nefarious pact with Hitler.

Roosevelt’s failure should neither be blamed upon domestic or international constraints of one sort or another nor be mitigated because of a lack of viable options. He does not appear to have seriously considered possible alternatives and he rejected Steinhardt’s reciprocity approach. Only his extraordinary confidence in his own instinctive judgment and in his capacity to influence Stalin, combined with his reliance on a very narrow circle of like-minded advisers, and one of the more lamentable exercises in denial in the annals of diplomacy, can explain his attitude and actions. Stalin, whose “extraordinary cunning and duplicity” had been so well honed in eliminating supposed rivals during the Terror of the thirties, easily gained the initiative in the relationship. Instead of being treated as a supplicant who needed American support, Stalin deftly placed on Roosevelt the burden of proving Western friendship. It is crucial to appreciate that Roosevelt was unstinting in his efforts to meet this test, moving far beyond what might have been necessary to encourage the Soviet military effort.

In reality, Hitler left with Stalin few options but to fight to the death. Despite this, the American president expended his energies attempting to establish a special personal relationship with the Soviet leader. He ensured that huge amounts of aid were delivered to the Russians in order to assist them in defeating the Germans. He either downplayed or simply failed to appreciate the ideological chasm which divided the democracies from Stalin’s totalitarian regime. He largely ignored the evidence of Soviet culpability for the 1940 Katyn massacre of 22,000 Polish military officers and members of the intelligentsia, and, in general, he refrained from criticizing the Soviet leadership and refused to retaliate to rude or provocative behavior. Roosevelt’s complaisance cannot be explained away simply by his recognition of the military necessity of defeating Germany. It rested upon the tragic misperception that he could build a bond of friendship with his Soviet opposite.

Space precludes a detailed accounting of Roosevelt’s obsequious efforts to win Stalin’s favor. These efforts dominated his diplomacy from Casablanca in January of 1943, where he called for the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers, until Yalta and bore him no animus whatsoever recalled that “as far as the Soviets were concerned, I do not think Roosevelt had any real comprehension of the great gulf that separated the thinking of a Bolshevik from a non-Bolshevik, and particularly from an American. He felt that Stalin viewed the world somewhat in the same light as he did, and that Stalin’s hostility and distrust, which were evident in the wartime conferences, were due to the neglect that Soviet Russia had suffered at the hands of other countries for years after the Revolution. What he did not understand was that Stalin’s enmity was based on profound ideological convictions.”

Charles Bohlen’s recollections are especially telling here. The suave diplomat who translated for Roosevelt at Yalta and bore him no animus whatsoever recalled that “as far as the Soviets were concerned, I do not think Roosevelt had any real comprehension of the great gulf that separated the thinking of a Bolshevik from a non-Bolshevik, and particularly from an American. He felt that Stalin viewed the world somewhat in the same light as he did, and that Stalin’s hostility and distrust, which were evident in the wartime conferences, were due to the neglect that Soviet Russia had suffered at the hands of other countries for years after the Revolution. What he did not understand was that Stalin’s enmity was based on profound ideological convictions.”

surrender of the Axis, through the Teheran Conference in November of that year, and on to Yalta in February of 1945. Even the dastardly Soviet behavior surrounding the Warsaw Uprising failed to shake Roosevelt’s faith. The US chargé in Moscow, George F. Kennan, later asserted that

this was the moment when, if ever, there should have been a full-fledged and realistic political showdown with the Soviet leaders, when they should have been confronted with the choice between changing their policy completely and agreeing to collaborate in the establishment of truly independent countries in Eastern Europe or forfeiting Western Allied support and sponsorship for the remaining phases of their war effort.  

For Kennan’s immediate superior, American Ambassador Averell Harriman, the Warsaw Uprising proved a true moment of revelation and led him to question “the possibility of co-operation with Stalin.” Harriman tried to influence Roosevelt through Hopkins, to whom he explained that the Soviets “have misinterpreted our generous attitude towards them as a sign of weakness, and acceptance of their policies.” For the ambassador the time had come “when we must make clear what we expect of them as the price of our good will.” He did not propose “any drastic action but a firm and friendly quid pro quo attitude.” Harriman’s recommendations for a somewhat tougher stance in negotiations with the Soviet Union found no receptive audience in the White House. Instead, Roosevelt continued to emphasize great-power collaboration. “In classic Roosevelt style,” Warren Kimball observed, “he…evaded, avoided, and ignored specifics regarding Eastern Europe, hoping to insulate the more important objective—long-term collaboration.” Perhaps he hoped that the Soviet leader might moderate his behavior and establish what might be termed a ‘soft sphere’ in the region where benign oversight rather than brutal subjugation might be applied. If so, it was a sad clutching at straws and it should be named as such.

Of course, it is possible, as Robert Dallek has posited, that “had he lived, Roosevelt would probably have moved more quickly than Truman to confront the Russians.” But there is little indication that he was contemplating such a move, even following upon the imminent defeat of the Germans. Roosevelt had preserved some diplomatic instruments for future use, but in the case of both the sharing of information on the atomic bomb and the granting of a postwar loan, these instruments were designed to elicit Soviet cooperation. They were designed as carrots to coax the Soviet leaders to share his broad vision not as sticks to compel Soviet compliance with agreements like Yalta’s Declaration on Liberated Europe. To the end Roosevelt remained trapped by the same hopes and, regrettably it must be said, illusions regarding the possibility for genuine cooperation with Stalin which had guided his actions from 1941 onwards.

To criticize Roosevelt in this way is not easy and one does so hesitantly. There still exists a shield of sorts that seemingly protects the dominant president of the twentieth century. The desire to avoid any residual association with the extreme criticisms of those who, over a half century ago and for their own domestic political ends, falsely alleged that Roosevelt deliberately “sold out” half of Europe to Stalin at Yalta

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contributes to this tendency. Further, Roosevelt’s defenders have not been shy in defending the president. Maybe there is even more involved. Addressing Roosevelt’s violation of “the first principle of war-and-peace politics—the possession of turf,” Max Lerner cogently argued, that “if anyone else happened to be president—Wendell Willkie, Thomas Dewey, Henry Wallace—the historians and the political culture would have called it the idiocy it was. But it was Roosevelt, and it is a measure of the spell he casts over us that few even now dare condemn his actions and inactions outright.” The time has come finally to move beyond the Rooseveltian “spell” and to acknowledge honestly the limitations of Roosevelt’s efforts in preparing for the postwar world and its costly consequences for all of Eastern Europe.

In response to criticism Roosevelt’s defenders ask for a better alternative which would have served American interests in the global war still being fought. In this regard nothing can be definitively proved. Such is the nature of counter-factual history. Yet, it seems clear that Roosevelt should have pursued a much more measured embrace of Stalin at the outset and to have allowed advisers who were genuinely knowledgeable about the Soviet Union to guide his outlook as to the possibilities of any long-term co-operation with him. The effort should have been less to win Stalin’s trust and more to win his respect. A politician as devious and deft as Roosevelt would have been able to apply quid pro quo tactics with rare skill if he had so chosen to do so, and as his ambassadors like Steinhardt and Harriman had recommended. The policy options were not simply between efforts to cooperate on the one hand and adversarial actions on the other. Remi Nadeau has it right in noting that “Roosevelt did not begin to exercise the full octave of escalation that he commanded short of a final break. This unsophisticated approach to Big Three politics was his tragic shortcoming until he died at the moment of victory over the common enemy.” It is hardly exculpatory to suggest that Roosevelt wanted to avoid the burden of responsibility for starting any conflict with Stalin or that his co-operative efforts put the burden for the Cold War firmly on Stalin. Statesmen, in the end, must be judged not by their good intentions but by their actual achievements.

The extent to which a more guarded approach to Stalin and a more judicious implementation of an American quid pro quo strategy would have brought about a better result for the people of Eastern Europe remains debatable, but the end result could not have been worse for those people trapped behind the line from Stettin to Trieste than Roosevelt’s mollification efforts. Surely the American application of a genuinely realist approach—especially after the Warsaw Uprising—would have been superior to the acquiescence in Soviet

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19 Max Lerner, Wounded Titans, 179.

20 E.g., Kimball, The Juggler.

21 On the possible alternatives note the incisive analysis of Henry Kissinger, who explores options as December 1941 and again after the battle of Stalingrad, at which point he suggests “the issue of Eastern Europe’s future could have been raised without risking either a Soviet collapse or a separate peace with Hitler. An effort should have been made to settle the political structure of territories beyond the Soviet frontiers and to achieve for these countries a status similar to that of Finland.” See Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 406-22.


23 Robert Divine suggests that “at the very least, Roosevelt’s attempt to seek a reasonable accommodation with the Russians threw the onus for the subsequent Cold War squarely upon Stalin,” in his Roosevelt and World War II (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 98.
domination of the region. It also would have reflected that the United States at least grasped clearly the antagonistic nature of the state it dealt with and the ruthless individual who led it.

Undoubtedly David Reynolds is correct to note, as Louis Halle did memorably over sixty years ago, that “power, like nature, abhors a vacuum.” Thus, as Reynolds explained, “the fall of one great state usually creates space for another to rise. A Sovietized eastern Europe was, in part, the price of how Allied victory was won.”24 The power vacuum created by Germany’s defeat brought the Soviet Union into the very heart of Europe where, unfortunately, it stayed for almost half a century. Reynolds acknowledges that “this remains one of the most troubling moral questions about the ‘Good War.’” His insight should be appreciated more fully by all those who still speaking glowingly of the Allied ‘victory’ in Europe in World War II. There was no victory for the Poles, the Czechs, the Hungarians, and all the others who were locked up for decades behind the Iron Curtain. Whether Roosevelt could have acted in a way that might have changed this outcome to benefit the East Europeans is still a matter for debate. That he did not seriously try to use his nation’s power and influence to negate the extent of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe lamentably is not.

Remembering well this historical experience holds some value as American policy makers face Russian President Vladimir Putin’s present invasion and devastation of Ukraine. Effective policy cannot be based on wishful thinking. Good planning and policy making must deal with the world as it is and not how policymakers would rather have it. Roosevelt in his dealing with Stalin never grasped this essential point. We can be grateful that President Harry Truman eventually did, although, by then, it was too late for Eastern Europe.

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The 80th anniversary of Operation Barbarossa in 2021 brought with it a new cycle of books, articles and movies about Nazi Germany’s epic invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. After being consigned to the shadows in the West for much of the Cold War, the Eastern Front has attracted much more attention since the Gorbachev era—becoming, for some, the decisive theatre of the Second World War. This is certainly how it is now being presented by Russian President Vladimir Putin as part of his attempt to justify his brutal invasion of Ukraine.

Yet national memories of the Second World War, like any other great conflict, are highly selective. In Britain the Second World War has become fixated on “Our Finest Hour” in 1940. For Americans, the story of victory in 1941-5 centres on the D-Day landings in June 1944 and the blood-soaked island-hopping battles across the Pacific such as Iwo Jima and Okinawa. In China, the Greater East Asian War starts in 1937 or even 1931, and is seen as part of an even longer struggle to roll back Japanese imperialism and to regain national unity after centuries of subservience to the West.

These wars about the war revolve around technology much as geography. In a conflict waged on land, sea and in the air—one that opened new frontiers in nuclear weapons, guided missiles and signals intelligence—there are many candidates for “the winning weapon.” Equally contentious is the question of what the war was really about. Answers have varied according to time and place. The defeat of fascism? The victory of Communism? The triumph of American capitalist democracy? The beginning of China’s road to world power? Perhaps the deepest problem is that all-embracing label, “the Second World War.” Does it foster a spurious sense of global and ideological unity? And does it blind us to the political and moral complexities of those years—which still afflict us today?

During July 1945—with Germany defeated and Japan on its last legs—staffers at Time Magazine in New York prepared a cover story on the weapon that had won the war. Their special issue was largely devoted to radar, Radio Detection and Ranging: transmitting a pulsating radio wave and using the echo to calculate location, distance and speed. In 1940 the Battle of Britain had been won with waves of more than one meter, using cumbersome “bedspring” antennae. After the Fall of France, the British shared with the Americans (still neutral) their pioneering research on microwave radar, which permitted reception by small mobile bowls. From that, in a massive program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the Pentagon developed miniaturized systems for use in ships and planes, which were critical in the Battle of the Atlantic in 1943 and the air war over cloud-ridden Germany in 1944-5. Staffers prepared a detailed and gripping account.

Yet this proved to be the cover story that never was. On 20 August 1945 Time published a highly condensed account of radar, plus the graphics originally intended for the cover, in a short essay relegated to page 78. In its place, the magazine featured “an event so much more enormous that, relative to it, the war itself shrank to minor significance.” Time called it simply “The Bomb.”

Radar veterans protested that the Bomb had only ended the war, whereas their program had won it—attracting 50 percent more investment along the way (some $3 billion). In time they could also point to its lasting importance because this military technology would shape the civilian future in multiple ways from

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1 This article is a revised version of an essay first published in New Statesman, 21 June 2021, and is reprinted here by permission.


microwave ovens to the transistor. But their protests were in vain. The war had ended with an atomic bang, not an electronic whimper. And everyone could see this: images of the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki became iconic. When America’s ally-turned-foe the Soviet Union also tested an atomic device in 1949, the post-war period became defined as the nuclear age.

The Cold War shaped interpretations of the war itself. Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s half-dozen volumes of war memoirs in 1948–1954 (following a similar six-pack about the Great War) ostensibly presented the view from 10 Downing Street, using memos and telegrams he had written. But because of the privileged access accorded to Churchill, he was able also to draw on thousands of captured Axis documents and confidential British and US papers from which his research assistants prepared detailed narratives of selected aspects of the war. British military and naval operations bulked large—the Desert War, for instance, and the Battle of the Atlantic. But there were also chapters on US naval battles in the Pacific, especially Coral Sea and Midway, even though Churchill had virtually nothing to do with these operations.

The glaring gap in his memoirs was the Eastern Front. Churchill wrote vividly about his meetings with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, but the titanic battles of the Red Army in 1941–1943, from Moscow to Kursk, were mostly noises off. It was only after prodding from his literary agent, Emery Reves, that Stalingrad got a mention, and then on just four pages far apart in two separate chapters. Churchill summed up in words written in August 1950 (as Soviet-backed North Korean forces rampaged across South Korea): “This crushing disaster to the German army ended Hitler’s prodigious attempt to conquer Russia by force of arms, and destroy Communism by an equally odious form of totalitarian tyranny.”

Churchill’s memoirs shaped the view from the West. A few informed accounts of Russia’s war appeared in English, for instance by journalist Alexander Werth, but they attracted nothing like the attention given to Britain’s world-famous war leader. British movies in the 1950s, featuring matinee idols such as Kenneth More and Jack Hawkins, picked out isolated moments from Britain’s war, such as the Dam Busters Raid in 1943. Recycled on television ever since, these films have become central to British war memory. Meanwhile, US generals from Dwight Eisenhower downward inscribed their own achievements, and America’s war, into history.7 And in 1962, Darryl F. Zanuck’s three-hour film epic The Longest Day—featuring British and American all-stars headed by John Wayne, Henry Fonda and Richard Todd—etched 6 June 1944 into the post-war imagination, while also helping to consecrate the “Special Relationship.”

The overall impression of “all quiet on the Eastern Front” was partly the fault of Soviet leaders. Stalin had drawn a veil over the war, to avoid comment on his own follies, such as failing to anticipate the German attack on 22 June 1941. The Soviet death toll was officially fixed at 7.5 million—large enough to be sobering but not so high as to prompt difficult questions—and in 1947 Stalin removed Victory Day (9 May) from the list of national holidays. The few movies made about the war mostly featured himself.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, however, his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, upped the official death toll to 20 million and credited victory not to a great leader but to the wise direction of the Communist Party and the

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heroism of the Soviet people. Under Khrushchev’s successor Leonid Brezhnev, the twentieth anniversary of victory in 1945 spawned a new cult of the “Great Patriotic War, with major museums opening in “Hero Cities” such as Moscow, Leningrad and Volgograd (the new name for Stalingrad). For a regime that was struggling to maintain legitimacy, the story of party and people united in a titanic struggle that destroyed the Third Reich became the Soviet Union’s unifying master narrative.\footnote{On Soviet memorializing see Nina Tumarkin, \textit{The Living and the Dead. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia} (New York: Basic Books 1994).}

As the USSR opened up about the war, it also was also opening up to the West in the era of détente. The effect was evident in the landmark British TV series of 1973-1974, \textit{The World at War}, which blended vivid archive footage and compelling interviews.\footnote{The episodes are available at https://archive.org/details/the-world-at-war-1973.} Made at a time when the superpower leaders had negotiated major agreements on Berlin, Germany and nuclear weapons, the series took the Eastern Front seriously. Three of its 26 hour-long episodes were devoted entirely to Russia’s war in 1941-3. Although 1944–1945 was treated more patchily, no one who watched those early episodes could have doubted the scale of the fighting and the enormity of the suffering. Narrated in the sonorous tones of Laurence Olivier, Russia’s war was elevated to an epic human tragedy.

All but one of the episodes of \textit{The World at War} was shown to British audience with a single commercial break in the middle. The exception was episode 20, about the Nazi project of Jewish extermination, which—as historian Taylor Downing notes in his book about the series—was screened without interruption.\footnote{Taylor Downing, \textit{The World at War} (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 140.} That special reverence and the episode’s title—\textit{Genocide}—indicate the unique place that the Holocaust was assuming in war memory in the US and Western Europe.

That had not been the case in 1945, when the concentration camps were liberated. Images from Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald shocked British and American audiences but, rather than foregrounding the Jewish tragedy, they were seen as evidence of indiscriminate Nazi bestiality—proving that this had been “The Good War,” to use the phrase later popularized by the author Studs Terkel.\footnote{Studs Terkel, \textit{The Good War: An Oral History of World War Two} (New York: Pantheon, 1984).} It was not until the 1960s, with the trials of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 and of lower-level functionaries in Frankfurt in 1963-5 that the singularity of \textit{Endlösung}—the Nazis’ intended “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Problem”—was taken as axiomatic.

This became a feature of political discourse and public education in West Germany, especially after 1969 when the Social Democrats ended two decades of conservative Christian Democrat hegemony. And in countries occupied by the Nazis and run by their clients, the extent of collaboration in implementing \textit{Endlösung} was gradually exposed. In France, particularly, revelations about \textit{Les Années sombres} continued to divide society in the 1970s and 1980s—similarly fueled by headline-grabbing trials such as that of Klaus Barbie, the so-called “Butcher of Lyon,” in 1987.

By the 1980s, therefore, a “good war” narrative was firmly established in Britain and America—each country focusing selectively on cherished moments of its own story. The magnitude of Soviet Russia’s struggle was now being acknowledged, yet without incorporation in an account of how the war had been won. But the demise of the USSR in 1991 opened up new perspectives, not only on the Cold War but also on the World War from whose bloody entrails it had emerged.

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\footnote{8 On Soviet memorializing see Nina Tumarkin, \textit{The Living and the Dead. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia} (New York: Basic Books 1994).}
In the 1990s, America’s mood was triumphantalist. The hope that “bipolarity” had now been replaced by “unipolarity” strengthened the belief that 1941–1945 had been the platform for an “American Century.” In 1998, TV anchor Tom Brokaw helped immortalize the GIs as the men who won the war in his book The Greatest Generation. But the early 1990s also saw a large-scale opening up of Soviet archives. This increased Western awareness of the Eastern Front, for instance through Antony Beevor’s bestsellers on Stalingrad (1998) and Berlin: The Downfall (2002) and Richard Overy’s film series and book Russia’s War (1997). Overy’s preface included the statement: “Few would now contest the view that the Soviet war effort was the most important factor, though not the only one, in the defeat of Germany.” But, he added, the debate had “now shifted to how the Soviet Union won that victory,” and on this issue there was “no scholarly consensus.”

The revelations from the Soviet archives were in fact double-edged. The heroism and fortitude of millions of Soviet citizens became clearer, but also the crimes perpetrated by many of them on behalf of Stalin’s regime. Discipline was maintained by orders to shoot those who deserted or surrendered and to strip their families of state benefits. “Blocking units” armed with machine guns were formed to mow down those who retreated. Another issue was the Katyn Massacre. The culpability of Stalin and his entourage for the mass shooting of some 20,000 Polish officers and intellectuals at Katyn was confirmed by publication of the signed execution order dated 5 March 1940. This finally disposed of Stalin’s vehement claims in 1943 that the atrocity had been perpetrated by the Nazis—an assertion that had not been publicly challenged by Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the wartime alliance with the USSR, even though neither had any doubt of the truth. This diplomatic silence was maintained by the Foreign Office right through the Cold War, until being embarrassed in 1989, during Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost, when the Russians admitted Stalin’s guilt.

Equally unsettling were the historical counter-narratives from the countries of the former Soviet empire, which had been liberated by the revolutions of 1989. Because the Soviets had frozen or distorted historical research and teaching, 1989 made it possible to study properly not only the Cold War but also events ranging right back to the First World War. (Just imagine, in the 1990s, that people in Britain had suddenly been able to discuss, freely and with open archives, their past ever since the days of Lloyd George—with millions of corpses to boot.)

After 1917, Finland, Poland and the Baltic states had fought bloody wars for independence from Russia. Then, during the Second World War, they were spoils in the Nazi-Soviet battle for regional domination. Hitlerite occupation, though bestial, lasted only a few years; Soviet repression spanned nearly half a century. And in the “memory wars” that have raged across the region since the 1990s, the dominant narrative about the Second World War treated Stalinist Russia as a predator that was comparable, or worse, than Hitler’s Germany.

As an example, take the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. This two-meter-high statue of an infantryman in Red Army uniform was erected in the city center by the Soviet authorities to commemorate the “liberators of Tallinn” in 1944. But, after Estonia was liberated from the “liberators” in 1991, the Bronze Soldier became a site of controversy—vilified by nationalists but regarded as a talisman by the country’s Russian minority. Eventually, following riots in April 2007, the statue was moved to a military cemetery on the edge of the city. Instead, to mark the “true” liberation of the country, a Victory column was raised in Tallinn’s Freedom Square in 2009, to honor the 4,000 Estonian dead in the War of Independence in 1918–

1920 to throw off the Russian yoke. This finally realized a project started in the 1930s but suppressed during the Soviet years. Here was but one of many “statue wars” across the Baltic States.

Such stories were of little interest in the West, but in 2010 the American historian Timothy Snyder attracted global attention with Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin—about the 14 million civilians who were starved, shot and gassed in Poland, Ukraine and the Baltics between 1933 and 1945. Snyder did not assert direct moral equivalence between the two regimes, and he noted that two-thirds of the deaths were caused by Nazi Germany. But by bringing Hitler and Stalin between the same covers as mass murderers, by reminding Anglophone readers of the famine Stalin inflicted on Ukrainians in 1933 and by that simple, chilling title Bloodlands, Snyder put Eastern Europe’s killing fields on the West’s mental map.14

Any hint of equivalence, however, ran up against the growing insistence in the European Union that Holocaust memory was a crucial element of “being European” in the post-Cold era. The Jewish genocide represented an absolute evil against which to define tolerance and diversity as hallmark values of modern western democracy. During the 1990s the EU encouraged member states to adopt the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, 27 January, as Holocaust Memorial Day. In America, 1993 saw the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. It was followed by similar museums or memorials across America and Europe—in the case of Berlin, right next to the Brandenburg Gate. And so, the Holocaust came to be regarded in the West as “unique with reference to the past and universal for the future,” to quote sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider: in other words, “the Holocaust past is something that happened predominantly to the Jews, while the Holocaust future might happen to anyone.”15

Many in Eastern Europe, however, pushed back. The 2008 Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism, widely supported across Eastern Europe, called for “recognition that many crimes committed in the name of Communism should be assessed as crimes against humanity serving as a warning for future generations, in the same way Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg Tribunal.”16 Belatedly recognizing Communist atrocities and remembering their victims became a prime concern in Eastern Europe, which Holocaust memorialization was not allowed to overshadow. As the Polish writer Maria Janion said when her country joined the EU: “To Europe, yes, but with our dead.”17 Given such a fracture between east and west, there could be no “common European memory” of the Second World War, or indeed of the First.

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The bloodlands are central to Sean McMeekin’s 2021 blockbuster Stalin’s War, whose dedication reads “For the Victims.” Across 800 pages, based on extensive multinational archival research, he dissects Soviet policy in astringent prose. As explained in the introduction, his aim is to contest the way that, in anglophone writing, “the global conflict of 1939–1945 has always been Hitler’s war”—centering on the Führer as “the villain who gives the struggle meaning.” Yet, even in Eastern Europe—let alone across Asia, where the Third Reich was not a belligerent—“German aggression left behind much less of a trace than the Stalinist variety,” with legacies lasting for decades in China, North Korea and Vietnam. McMeekin admits that “it has always been a stretch to lump together all the wars on the globe between the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in September 1931 and Japan’s final capitulation in September 1945”—and “even more of a stretch to blame them all on one man.” But, he continues, “if we do wish to find a common thread it would make far more sense to

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16 https://www.praguedeclaration.eu/
17 Quoted in Snyder, Bloodlands, 406.
choose someone who was alive and in power during the whole thing.” His title *Stalin’s War* is intended to have global reach.18

McMeekin’s sweeping interpretation provoked debate. He inclines to the view that it would have been better to let Hitler and Stalin fight it out, pondering whether the outcome “could have been all that much worse than what did happen.” This argument was articulated by some rightwing anti-interventionists in 1941: “Now we can just let Joe Stalin and the other dictators fight it out,” declared Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana.19 McMeekin is particularly caustic about Lend-Lease aid without strings, accusing Churchill of “going all out to arm Stalin” in 1941 “at the expense of Britain’s own desperate wartime needs” and calling this an “impulsive decision as selfless as it was strategically foolish.” And he makes good use of detailed research by military historians showing that the impact of Allied tanks and planes was more significant on the Eastern Front than Soviet historians have acknowledged, declaring with customary brío that, whatever the exact proportions, “it is an imperishable historical fact that Anglo-American capitalism helped win the battle of Stalingrad.”20

However, *Stalin’s War* looks much smaller in the pages of *How the War was Won* by Phillips Payson O’Brien, published in 2015, which was unjustly neglected. He opens with panache: “There were no decisive battles in World War II.” (So much for Stalingrad, Kursk and indeed Alamein.) Losses in these “great” battles amounted to a “minuscule” percentage of German munitions production. For Germany and Japan, Britain and America (though not the USSR), “at least two-thirds of annual construction during the war went to air and sea weapons.”21 The aerial and naval war constitutes what O’Brien calls a “super-battlefield,” spanning thousands of miles and dwarfing the land war. It was here, he argues, that the struggle was won, because “the only way to ‘win’ a war is to stop your enemy from moving.” This, he adds, was largely accomplished before the battlefields, in three crucial phases: pre-production, production and deployment.22

As a classic example of pre-production, he singles out the US air and submarine campaign in the Pacific, which prevented Japan from exploiting its massive gain in resources in 1941–1942, particularly oil from the Dutch East Indies. Allied bombing of transport networks, especially rail, also had a devastating effect on the flow of raw materials to German and Japanese factories in 1944–1945. And the raids affected production itself, both through damage to key plants and also through their geographical dispersal—even underground. In the case of Japan, US air barons abandoned any pretense of precision bombing, targeting whole cities. The firebombing of Tokyo caused some 100,000 deaths, more than the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. And vast amounts of equipment, supplies, and personnel were eliminated by Allied air attacks during their attempted deployment to German and Japanese fronts. By late 1944, states O’Brien, these losses had become “catastrophic,” virtually denying their forces the ability to move.23

O’Brien’s trenchant revisionism has been taken seriously, even by specialists on the Soviet war effort. But as one of them, Mark Harrison, has noted, *How the War was Won* is in danger of writing the Eastern Front out of the story because “movement and territory go hand in hand…the means of battle had to be produced somewhere.”24 Territory was what Germany and Japan were fighting to acquire. The Allies already had it in

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20 McMeekin, *Stalin’s War*, 659 [fight it out], 366 [Churchill], and 432 [Stalingrad].
23 O’Brien, *How the War was Won*, 82.

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abundance: the Americans through their vast continent-wide domain, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, so secure that it suffered only six deaths from enemy action during the whole war.\(^{25}\) This provided a uniquely safe base to develop and test the atomic bomb—on sites judiciously spread out from Oak Ridge, Tennessee, to Hanford, Washington, and Los Alamos, New Mexico. The British, although perched on a tiny archipelago, enjoyed their own global space thanks to a seaborne empire whose links were strained during the war but never severed. And also, crucially, because Britain itself did not capitulate in 1940. Once its supply line from the “Arsenal of Democracy” across the Atlantic was secure from U-boats, by late 1943, Britain became the indispensable base for American power (air, sea and land) to target Hitler’s Reich. D-Day could not have been launched from the East Coast of the United States, 3,000 miles from France. Without “Churchill’s Island,” surely the US would have opted for “Fortress America” isolationism—whatever FDR’s inclinations?

Nor should we forget the territorial importance of China: its continued resistance—supported by Stalin—to Japanese aggression deterred Tokyo from resuming its 1939 war against the Soviet Union. And then Stalin’s tactical neutrality pact with Japan in April 1941 ensured that, unlike Hitler, he did not have to wage a two-front war. It was he who denounced the pact in April 1945, in preparation for his declaration of war on Japan on 8-9 August in order to ensure that the US did not gain all the benefits of Japan’s surrender, which was inevitable after Hiroshima.\(^{26}\)

To recognize the territorial imperative also casts a different light on what McMeekin dubs “Anglo-American generosity and naiveté” in supplying the USSR.\(^{27}\) Soviet survival in 1941–1942 gave Churchill and Roosevelt vital time and security to build up their production and deploy this to key points in the global war. But the embattled Stalin maximized his own resource assets, especially manpower which, as a brutal dictator—not unlike leaders beholden to democratic legislatures—he could use with obscene profligacy to push the Germans all the way to Berlin. Roosevelt and Churchill did not “give away” Poland and Eastern Europe across the negotiating table: the Red Army won them, at huge human cost, on the battlefield.

None of that, of course, negates McMeekin’s questions about whether Allied aid could have had more strings attached, or why Roosevelt and Churchill each placed such faith in Stalin.\(^{28}\) But there’s also a deeper truth here. Power, like nature, abhors a vacuum. The fall of one great state usually creates space for another to rise. Soviet control of Eastern Europe was, in part, the price of how Allied victory was won. This remains one of the troubling moral questions about the “Good War.”


\(^{27}\) McMeekin, *Stalin’s War*, 373.

\(^{28}\) For further reflections, see the chapter on Stalin in David Reynolds, *Mirrors of Greatness: Churchill and the leaders who shaped him* (New York: Basic Books, 2024), 197-231.
For more than 75 years now, President Franklin D. Roosevelt has been harshly criticized for his wartime policies and behavior toward Soviet leader Josef Stalin, his ally in the war against Nazi Germany. Critics claim that Roosevelt’s policies and behavior unnecessarily gave Stalin postwar control of not just Eastern Europe but also large segments of Central Europe and Asia. For almost as long, Roosevelt’s supporters have defended him against these charges. While the participants in the debate have changed over time, many of their arguments have not.

The first attacks were written in the late 1940s and early 1950s by prewar critics of Roosevelt’s domestic and foreign policies, by some of his former advisers, and by journalists such as Hanson Balwin and Chester Wilmot—all of whom attacked what they labeled his naiveté regarding Stalin. These critics dominated the early literature and accused Roosevelt of naively believing that he could befriend Stalin and for rejecting the contrary but correct political and strategic military alternatives proposed by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. In effect, they argued that Roosevelt’s appeasement of Stalin during the war had given away half of the world to Communism and caused the Cold War. The title of an influential 1948 article by William C. Bullitt, Roosevelt’s first ambassador to the Soviet Union, aptly summarized this critique: “How We Won the War and Lost the Peace.”

Roosevelt’s wartime policies toward the Soviet Union also became a major issue in American politics during the early 1950s, with Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy and others accusing the president and his advisers of treason rather than mere blunders and naiveté. By that time, the February 1945 tripartite summit conference at Yalta in the Crimea had become virtually synonymous with such charges and had acquired, as British historian D.C. Watt has noted, “a connotation of failure, if not outright trea son, matching that attached to the Munich Conference of September 1938.”

The political uproar over Yalta resulted in the early publication in 1955 of a special volume of documents from the conference within the State Department’s Foreign Relations series. Those documents provided virtually no evidence for the more extreme charges, and their publication led to defenses of Roosevelt’s behavior at the conference on the basis of military necessity and existing geopolitical realities in the war against the Axis powers. Nevertheless the overall criticism of Roosevelt’s behavior vis-à-vis Stalin continued, for with only a few exceptions, most of Roosevelt’s wartime advisers and supporters had by this time become Cold Warriors themselves and thus accepted to an extraordinary extent the naiveté arguments of the early critics if not the more extreme attacks of the McCarthyites.

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The resulting historical consensus accurately reflected the public consensus and mood of the 1950s. And as that public consensus was shattered in the 1960s, so was this historical one on Roosevelt and American diplomacy during the war. The assault on the traditional approach was fueled by the declassification and publication of an enormous quantity of World War II documents during the 1960s and 1970s, including the records of the other wartime summit conferences and large segments of Roosevelt’s correspondence with Churchill and Stalin. This resulted in a flood of new studies, many if not most of which defended Roosevelt against his earlier critics on the basis of his need to maintain the Grand Alliance if Nazi Germany was to be defeated. That need and military realities, most notably those created by the Red Army’s advance into Eastern Europe rather than blunders, naiveté or treason, had led inevitably to an enormous increase in Soviet power.

John Snell clearly and forcefully enunciated this theme in his 1963 *Illusion and Necessity*, an interpretive survey of World War II diplomacy that maintained that Axis leaders rather than Roosevelt had acted on the basis of illusions instead of realistic appraisals and had thereby lost the war. Roosevelt’s policies, on the other hand, constituted a highly realistic and pragmatic attempt to mesh military means with political ends and to maximize US interests while reconciling Allied differences in order to maintain the alliance and achieve victory. The outstanding example of such realism was his much-maligned policy of unconditional surrender, which had been motivated by a desire both to keep the alliance and US public opinion unified and to postpone all territorial settlements until either Soviet confidence had been won or large US forces had arrived in in Europe and Asia and thereby strengthened Roosevelt’s postwar bargaining position vis-à-vis the Soviets. Axis defeat would inevitably result in a new global balance of power based on Russia and the United States, Snell further maintained, and Roosevelt’s policies had severely limited Stalin’s territorial gains so that they were no greater than those the last Russian czar would have received in 1918 had he not been overthrown.6

The groundwork for this and related arguments lay in a series of articles and books published in the late 1950s and early 1960s, primarily but not exclusively by historians working on the massive multi-volume *U.S. Army in World War II* series. As summarized by Army chief historian Kent Roberts Greenfield in 1963, many of these works challenged the traditional notion of political naiveté by Roosevelt and his military advisers, arguing instead that the president had possessed a realistic assessment of international relations, that he had clearly controlled his military advisers rather than vice-versa and had overruled them on numerous occasions for political reasons, and that they were well aware of the need to design military strategies to achieve rather than ignore political goals.6

These reassessments were reinforced in 1969 and 1970 by reinterpretations of Roosevelt by Robert Divine and James MacGregor Burns that emphasized his realism and pragmatism. It was not Roosevelt who had been an idealistic Wilsonian who had been duped by Stalin, Divine argued. Instead it was the public and the historians who had been duped by Roosevelt’s Wilsonian public statements as opposed to his private comments and actions, which revealed a believer in great-power domination who had attempted to avoid President Woodrow Wilson’s mistakes. While following a more traditional approach to Roosevelt’s ideas of world order, Burns in his Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Roosevelt also emphasized the pragmatism that had dominated his actions if not his goals.7 Then in a detailed and exhaustive 1979 analysis of all of Roosevelt’s foreign policies from 1932–1945, Robert Dallek sided with and expanded upon the conclusions
of Roosevelt’s previous defenders by dismissing all the supposed “blunders” listed by earlier critics and by emphasizing both the president’s realism and the severe domestic as well as international restraints under which he had operated.\(^8\)

Throughout this time period scholars also explored the sharp Anglo-American conflicts that had occurred during the war, conflicts that Churchill sought to downplay for political reasons in his memoirs but that the documentation clearly revealed.\(^9\) Some of them also began to question the supposedly realistic alternative strategies and policies vis-à-vis Stalin that the British prime minister had proposed.\(^10\) This process continued into the 1980s, thereby exposing an Anglo-American wartime relationship that, although indeed “remarkable,” had been marked by severe disagreements and had become “special” only gradually, fitfully, and incompletely.\(^11\) Simultaneously Cold War revisionists challenged the entire notion of American naïveté vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the US lack of any blame for the Soviet-American conflict, with some seeing an expansionist US policy throughout the war and others pointing to a major change in policy under Roosevelt’s successor Harry S Truman.\(^12\) As early as 1970, Diane Clemens directly challenged the great symbol of Roosevelt’s supposed appeasement of Stalin by concluding that Stalin had made the bulk of the concessions at Yalta and that Truman rather than the Soviet leader had later broken the accords.\(^13\) Then in the mid-1980s works by Keith Eubank, Keith Sainsbury and others on the previous Big Three summit conference in Teheran emphasized the importance of that November 1943 meeting as the pivotal summit that in many ways determined both the agenda for a new postwar world order and the results of the later Yalta meeting.\(^14\) At the same time, in a detailed reassessment of Yalta, Melvyn Leffler concluded that each nation had complied with some components of the accords while disregarding others and that Washington had used supposed Soviet violations as a “convenient lever” to excite its own.\(^15\)

Illustrative of the tremendous impact of all of these studies from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s was the sharply changed tone in the 1985 second edition of Gaddis Smith’s, American Diplomacy during the Second World War.\(^8\)

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8 Robert Dallek, Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). See also his earlier “Franklin Roosevelt as War Leader,” American Historical Review 76 (December 1971): 1503-13. Echoing a series of newer works, Dallek did sharply criticize Roosevelt on different grounds: for his “unnecessary and destructive compromises of legal and moral principles” (529), most notably his illegal wiretaps and mail openings, as well as Japanese internment and his overly cautious (or lack of) response to the Holocaust.


World War. Whereas the first 1965 edition had echoed most of the early criticisms of Roosevelt, Smith in the preface to the second edition admitted that he had been “too harsh” and “insufficiently appreciative of the limits of American power and of the intractable obstacles” that Roosevelt faced. Although Smith did not alter his overall assessment of Roosevelt’s postwar policies as a failure, he did admit that the president had been less naïve than he had originally thought. He also altered his tone so that there was “less stridency in condemnation” and openly questioned whether US interests, first and foremost defeating the Axis powers, would have been better served by other policies that would have resulted in open arguments within the tenuous alliance. Smith concluded in this regard that Roosevelt’s approach to Stalin might have been based on a “deeper realism.”16

Harsh criticism of Roosevelt soon reemerged, however, that often used language extraordinarily similar to the language that had been used in the 1950s. Eubank and Sainsbury in their previously cited works on the Teheran Conference, for example, projected the old criticism of Roosevelt’s naïveté at Yalta back to this earlier meeting, though for Sainsbury, as for Smith, with recognition of the limits under which Roosevelt had to work and the dangers posed by an alternative policy of confrontation with Stalin. Neither Robert Nisbet nor Frederick Marks were as understanding or temperate a few years later, with Teheran for Nisbet replacing Yalta as the place where Roosevelt “essentially played the role Chamberlain had had at Munich” and where the Cold War had begun, and with Marks denying that Roosevelt had been “the absolute prisoner of events”; rather, Marks argued, “he gave away much of his hand in a game whose rules he did not comprehend.”17

As in the 1950s, this criticism was clearly linked to domestic and international political events, in this case the rise of the neoconservative movement, the end of détente with the Soviet Union and the revival of the Cold War that accompanied Ronald Reagan’s 1980 election to the presidency. Also revived was the view that cooperation with the Soviet Union was and always had been impossible given its ideology, and that Roosevelt had thus been a fool to try it.

As in the 1950s, the ensuing arguments spilled far beyond the confines of the historical profession, with an exceptionally harsh debate erupting on the pages of Commentary and the New York Review of Books between Roosevelt’s critics and Theodore Draper, who attacked this “neoconservative history” that he labeled, in a thinly veiled reference to McCarthyism, another effort to make history “serve current political extremism.”18 The “defamatory fury” of the critics had “less to do with the past than with the present,” specifically their neoconservative ideology and hatred of “liberal internationalism” and domestic liberals—a group to which they had once belonged. Roosevelt’s critics responded in kind, accusing Draper as well as Roosevelt of being “the accomplice[s] of Stalin…in the enslavement of Eastern Europe.”—a comment Draper in turn labeled a “political obscenity.”19

The collapse just a few years later of first the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe and then the Soviet Union itself did not end this interpretive conflict—at least partially because it had been and continued to be fueled by domestic politics as well as the Cold War. It also continued to be fueled by fundamental disagreement over what Daniel Yergin had as early as 1977 labeled the “Yalta” as opposed to the “Riga” axioms—that is, whether Stalin’s Soviet Union was a traditional great power with whom compromise was possible or an ideological monstrosity and menace led by a pathological dictator incapable of cooperation or normal

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19 See Mark A. Stoler, “A Half Century of Conflict,” 390-92 (or 187-90) for additional details on this controversy.
diplomatic behavior.20 If one believed in the former “Yalta” axiom, then Roosevelt tended to be portrayed as a realist working under domestic as well as international limits. If the latter, then Roosevelt was a naïve and idealistic blunderer who never understood Stalin’s USSR or international relations. In between these extremes were interpreters of Roosevelt who viewed him as a realist who had more maneuverability with Stalin than he thought; as a skillful pragmatist who held mistaken conceptions of the Soviet Union; and as a combined “idealist/realist forced by wartime exigencies and dilemmas to compromise his clear and defensible vision of a reformed international order.21

The conflicting interpretations of Roosevelt’s Soviet policy thus continued through the last decade of the twentieth century and into the first two decades of the twenty-first. The end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union did lay the groundwork for another generation of Soviet-American World War II studies by accelerating both scholarly contact between the two countries and the long-desired opening of Soviet World War II archives. The increased scholarly contact resulted in multinational and multilingual publications stemming from numerous bilateral and trilateral conferences in Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States,22 while the opening of Soviet records resulted in the publication of important document volumes, memoirs, histories and biographies, many of which appeared in English translation. Consequently, the post-Cold War years witnessed a continued flood of scholarship on the Grand Alliance.23

Release of additional Soviet documents was and remains highly erratic, however, and was so incomplete as to preclude any definitive conclusions about Stalin’s relations with Roosevelt or Soviet policies in general, claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Furthermore, neither the documents released nor the post-Cold War international environment resulted in any resolution of the existing historiographical disputes over Roosevelt’s wartime diplomacy with Stalin. Indeed, two studies with sharply conflicting conclusions regarding Roosevelt and Allied wartime relations published in the early 1990s by Remi Nadeau and Robin Edmonds clearly illustrated that, far from resolving the debate, the Soviet collapse and the new documents merely provided additional ammunition to continue it. So did similarly conflicting studies of US officials other than Roosevelt who were involved in Soviet-American wartime relations, with Dennis J. Dunn in 1998 praising the ambassadors in Moscow who had opposed the president’s cooperative policy and Mary Glantz in 2005 criticizing them as well as lower level officials for subverting that cooperative and highly effective policy.24

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As had been true in previous decades, Roosevelt’s post-Cold War critics (labeled the “new ‘perfectionists’” by Warren Kimball25) praised the alternative policies supposedly offered by Churchill. Ironically, however, John Charmley launched a major British neoconservative attack on Churchill in the 1990s for his pro-American policies, which Charmley maintained had hastened if not caused the postwar demise of the British Empire. The questioning of and debate over Churchill as strategist that had begun in the 1960s continued in the 1990s, now joined by another debate over how he and his advisers had really viewed the Soviet Union.26 Indeed, as a result of these as well as older studies of Anglo-American wartime relations one could argue that it was Churchill much more than Roosevelt who, by both his diplomatic and strategic initiatives, had left Stalin in control of Eastern Europe at war’s end. It was Churchill, after all, who had been willing in the spring of 1942 to agree to Stalin’s proposed Anglo-Soviet pact, over Roosevelt’s objections, that would have recognized the Soviet 1939–1941 territorial acquisitions in Eastern Europe that had resulted from the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact; and who in the fall of 1944 proposed the notorious Eastern Europe “spheres of influence” deal to Stalin. It was also Churchill who in July of 1942 vetoed the US plan for an Anglo-American cross-Channel invasion of northern France in late 1942 and/or 1943, thereby reversing a previous Anglo-American agreement in April to do so that the Soviets had publicized as a promise and that Roosevelt had used to talk Churchill and Stalin out of their proposed territorial treaty. That veto of an early cross-Channel invasion led to the 1942 invasion of French North Africa instead, followed by the 1943 invasions of Sicily and Italy rather than northern France, where the invasion was consequently postponed until 1944.27

This two-year postponement of the so-called “second front” dominated and poisoned Anglo-American-Soviet relations in 1942 and 1943. It also determined much of the agenda for the first Big Three meeting in Teheran—and consequently the fact that the Red Army rather than Anglo-American forces would occupy most of Eastern Europe and much of Germany at the time of Yalta, thereby virtually predetermining many of the decisions made there. No one of course knows whether a 1942 or 1943 invasion would have succeeded, and historians have long debated this question.28 But if it had, then Anglo-American forces would in all likelihood have been able to advance much farther east than they did, thereby denying Stalin military control of much of Central and Eastern Europe.

And as in the past, the debate over Roosevelt’s wartime policies toward the Soviet Union was far from limited to the historical profession. In 2005, President George W. Bush asserted during a visit to Eastern Europe that the Yalta agreements “followed in the unjust tradition of Munich” and the 1939 Nazi Soviet Pact, and that the resulting “captivity of millions in Central and Eastern Europe will be remembered as one of the greatest wrongs of history.” Such comments clearly echoed popular beliefs in both the United States and Europe. Historical assessments, both earlier and during the rest of the decade, did not.29 Making use of the numerous Soviet sources that had become available, Geoffrey Roberts in 2006 presented Stalin as a deeply successful war leader who sought postwar cooperation with his wartime allies, not conflict, in order to preclude any revival of American power.30 A few years later, S. M. Plokhy and Fraser Harbutt each published new and


detailed book-length studies of Yalta based on multi-archival research that directly challenged the popular conclusions Bush had reasserted, albeit in very different ways. In a wide-ranging and detailed study of the conference that made extensive use of Soviet as well as British and American sources, Plokhy strongly defended Roosevelt’s diplomacy at Yalta and rejected the idea that the conference had failed and led directly to the Cold War. Instead he re-emphasized the often-forgotten fact that it was a wartime, not a postwar conference, and the continued military importance of the Soviets if Germany was to be defeated. At the same time Harbutt in a highly revisionist work of international history attempted to refocus the debate in “structural” terms rather than personalities and to emphasize in this regard the pre-existing Anglo-Soviet accord on the division of Europe, an accord that the United States sought to alter both at and after the Yalta Conference. In the process he reinforced the continued emphasis in the literature on the importance of wartime Anglo-American conflicts, and the ensuing trilateral rather than bilateral wartime and postwar relationships.

These works sharply questioned the centrality of Yalta in the criticism of Roosevelt’s Soviet policy, much as the studies of Churchill previously cited questioned whether his Soviet-related policies and strategies really were realistic alternatives to Roosevelt’s. But that has not stopped the extreme critics of Roosevelt, though some have altered their criticisms so as to account for this scholarship. Sean McMeekin’s recent Stalin’s War, for example, sharply criticizes Churchill’s as well as Roosevelt’s behavior with Stalin, and he moves their “appeasement” of the Soviet leader far back before Yalta, or even before Teheran, to their 1941 decision to offer the Soviet Union military aid against Hitler’s invasion free of charge.

In effect, we are still debating whether Stalin’s Soviet Union was a traditional great power with whom compromise was possible or an ideological monstrosity and menace that was led by a pathological dictator who was incapable of cooperation or normal diplomatic behavior. McMeekin’s book argues for latter interpretation, and in language that is as harsh if not harsher than that used by Roosevelt’s early critics in the late 1940s and 1950s and the neoconservatives in the late 1980s and 1990s. In fact the analysis and condemnation in Stalin’s War goes back even further—to the 1930s debate over Hitler vs Stalin and the 1940–1941 debate between those who favored US intervention in World War II and the mislabeled isolationists who did not (I prefer the term non-interventionists, as used by Justus Doenecke in many of his works); McMeekin’s narrative strongly implies (as did many Americans at the time) that the United States and Britain should have negotiated with Hitler and/or simply let the two dictatorships bleed each other to death (659). He is far from alone in reaching such conclusions. That they should reemerge at this time is no accident, and it once again reflects US domestic politics. Donald Trump, after all, used the name of the major 1941 anti-interventionist organization, “America First,” as a major part of his successful 2016 presidential campaign. As illustrated in the present Congressional debate over aid to Ukraine, it apparently continues to represent the beliefs of many in the Republican Party.

McMeekin’s book also joins most if not all of the previous works of extreme Roosevelt criticism in a Manichean view of politics and international relations during World War II, criticizing Britain for not bombing the Soviet Baku oilfields during the days of Nazi-Soviet Pact in order to “thus turn the war of 1939 into a principled fight against totalitarian aggression.” This language reflects what Frank Costigliola has recently and accurately labeled the “American tradition of mobilizing against demonic foes, and of defining

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33 See, for example, Justus Doenecke, Storm on the Horizon: The Challenged to American Intervention, 1939–1941 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
34 McMeekin, Stalin’s War, 515.
the nation in that struggle,” something he called “a constant that traces back to warring against indigenous peoples in colonial days.”35

But that is not the way international relations work or how wars—especially coalition wars—are fought. Such wars often bring together nations with very different governments and ideologies in the face of a perceived common threat; witness the Allied coalition in World War I against the Central Powers. Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin all understood this. Churchill abandoned his previous history of anti-Communism in 1941 and pledged aid to Stalin on the grounds that if Hitler invaded Hell he would “make at least a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.”36 Stalin cited an old Balkan proverb, one Roosevelt adopted and used—that in crossing the bridge one is allowed to walk with the Devil until one reaches the other side. That “other side” was not reached until World War II ended in the 1945 unconditional surrender of the Axis powers, an achievement that required military support for and maintenance of the active Anglo-American alliance with the Soviet Union. As George F. Kennan pointed out as early as 1951, the “great mistake” of the West had been to allow the totalitarian dictatorships to accumulate so much power that an alliance with one would be needed to defeat the other.37 Such an alliance would also be necessary to keep the total number of American and British deaths in World War II lower than those of any other major belligerent: fewer than 1 million compared to more than 26 million for the Soviet Union.38

That is not the way Americans wish to remember what they still consider “the good war.” For how could it be “the good war” if the United States had to rely for victory on Stalin and accept his military conquest and control of much of Eastern and Central Europe? As David Reynolds has aptly concluded, “A Sovietized eastern Europe was, in part, the price of how Allied victory was won,” a fact that “remains one of the troubling moral questions about the “good war.””39 Perhaps the problem lies in that mistaken image of the war, an image that cannot be squared with the existence of such “troubling moral questions.”

38 See the statistical charts and tables in Mark A. Stoler and Molly C. Michelmore, eds., *The United States in World War II: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2018), xviii, xxxvi and xxxvii.
Once More With Feeling: The Debate Over Yalta Resurrected
by Priscilla Roberts, University of St. Joseph, Macau

The fashion industry, the theatre, and historical writing have one thing in common: wait long enough and past styles, plays, and debates will be revived, albeit more often than not with a newly self-conscious backward glance. Purportedly novel historical interpretations often bear some resemblance to the ghosts of Banquo or of Hamlet’s father, reincarnations of earlier deeply felt arguments over issues that once seemed settled, indeed dead and buried, but with dissentient specters from the past insisting on making unpredictable reappearances in the hope of prevailing in the end.

At the best of times, Cold War historiography has never been simple. Expectations that the opening of archives from behind the Iron Curtain that began in the 1990s would provide an outpouring of unknown source material that would conclusively settle outstanding contested issues have not been met. While more information, much of it fascinating, has become available and has shed new light on the complexities of the period, debate continues over numerous contentious subjects.

The February 1945 Yalta agreements, whereby the Big Three powers of World War II (the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom) divided up Europe into zones of military occupation that would soon develop into de facto spheres of influence, are proving a particularly attractive target for such reassessment. Almost from the first they provoked controversy, not least because within a few years those states in Eastern and Central Europe—notably Czechoslovakia and Poland—that had been the early targets of Adolf Hitler’s German Reich had become satellites, ruled by repressive hand-picked Communist governments that normally followed Russian directives.¹

In the United States, Republicans in particular seized on the issue of the Yalta accords, claiming that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had needlessly ceded control of Eastern Europe to Soviet president Josef Stalin, and suggesting that a firmer stance by the Western allies would have deterred Russian expansionism and prevented the installation of Communist governments in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and Yugoslavia. Charges that Roosevelt’s declining health led him to make unnecessary concessions to Stalin at Yalta just a few weeks before his death rapidly became part of the political mythology of US conservatism. So, too, did allegations that the presence within the American policymaking elite of Communist spies and fellow travelers whose first loyalty was to the Soviet Union had been responsible for the extension of Soviet military power across Europe and the Balkans, and also for the Communists’ victory in the Chinese Civil War.²

Complicating the issue still further was the often tragic situation of 2 million Russian prisoners-of-war who were forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union under the Yalta agreements. A substantial number were disaffected Cossacks and Ukrainians who had fought with German forces against the Allies; they also included émigré refugees who had left Russia in 1920, following the Soviet victory in the civil war. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill feared that unless they returned these POWs, Stalin might well refuse to repatriate German-held British and American prisoners from territory in eastern Germany that had been taken by invading Russian forces. In the 1980s and 1990s, this undeniably brutal and rather sordid bargain ignited a bitter political controversy, with several British political and military figures who had been

involved in implementing it, notably former Conservative prime minister Harold Macmillan, accused of effective complicity in war crimes, charges that led to at least one highly publicized lawsuit for libel.\(^3\)

Over forty years ago, by contrast, Daniel Yergin argued that Roosevelt's policies of seeking a viable working relationship with Stalin, an outlook Yergin termed the “Yalta axioms,” offered the best chance of a stable postwar settlement. Following Roosevelt’s death in April 1945, however, in Yergin’s analysis the “Riga axioms” soon prevailed, as Harry S Truman, the relatively inexperienced new president, relied heavily on a group of more hardline State Department Soviet specialists, who had been trained by White Russian émigrés during the 1920s in Riga, the Latvian capital, and were less prepared to compromise with the Russians.\(^4\) In consequence, relations between the Soviet Union and its Western allies rapidly deteriorated. Even earlier, Diane Shaver Clemens praised the positions taken by all three main protagonists during the Yalta negotiations as realistic compromises that arose from pragmatic and justifiable decisions by Roosevelt and Churchill “to treat the Soviet Union as the nation it was—an existing state with increasing influence in world affairs.” She placed much of the blame for the subsequent development of Cold War antagonisms upon American decisions to renege from the agreements reached at Yalta.\(^5\)

Recent years have seen a revival of the debates over Yalta. It may be symptomatic of the extent to which older arguments are still being recycled that Mark Stoler, in his essay in this roundtable, has been able to repurpose material that he first wrote forty years ago. East Europeans have—entirely understandably—generally condemned the conference as a meeting at which the great powers cynically treated the lesser nations as bargaining chips, reaching a spheres-of-influence settlement that relegated Poland and other small states in the regions liberated or occupied by Russian troops to permanent subjugation by the Soviet Union.\(^6\)

Once more, American conservatives and hawks have assailed Roosevelt and sometimes Churchill for policies that they consider to have been overly conciliatory, on par with giving away the store to the Soviet Union, in terms of making unnecessary territorial concessions at the expense of other powers.\(^7\)

Recently, Sean McMeekin has been particularly scathing in criticizing the lavishness of US Lend-Lease assistance to the Soviet Union, arguing that by providing excessively generous quantities of such aid to an obviously untrustworthy and opportunistic ally, the Roosevelt administration effectively subsidized the Russian reconquest of the Ukraine and its takeover of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and eastern Germany. McMeekin also highlights Stalin’s ruthlessness and unprincipled opportunism, as the Soviet leader concluded a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939 and proceeded to annex the Baltic states and much of eastern Poland, as well as attacking Finland, while supplying Hitler’s armies with vital war supplies. He further contends—that others dispute his evidence\(^8\)—that in 1941 Stalin intended to launch an assault against Germany, if so, the early successes of Operation Barbarossa suggest that Russian forces were poorly prepared to mount any such attack.\(^9\)

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Writing with great style, Frank Costigliola has followed in Yergin’s footsteps and forcefully propounded the alternative viewpoint, that while the Big Three managed to make the best of their wartime alliance of convenience, the working arrangements fell apart in the aftermath of Roosevelt’s death. At that point, Truman came under the influence of State Department Russian experts, notably Charles E. Bohlen and George F. Kennan, the future formulator of the policy of containment of the Soviet Union that would serve as the official strategy of the United States throughout the Cold War. Other prominent figures within the bureaucratic elite who were less willing to conciliate Stalin included W. Averell Harriman, US ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1943 to 1946, who had been left deeply shocked by the failure of nearby Russian troops to assist Polish partisans during the August 1944 Warsaw uprising against the occupying Nazi forces. Backing this position were influential British officials, their ranks including not just diplomats such as Frank Roberts, British minister to the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1947, but even Winston Churchill, one of the Big Three top leaders who attended Yalta. (Ironically, in the 1950s Kennan, Harriman, and Churchill all became committed advocates of reaching an understanding with the Soviet Union, a strategy they considered wiser than a state of entrenched antagonism that might prompt a nuclear confrontation.)

Critics of all political stripes, therefore, have found much to dislike in the postwar settlement that developed from decisions and agreements symbolized by those reached at the Yalta conference (though in practice the deals and accords concluded in late 1943 at the earlier Tehran conference and those reached at the July 1945 Potsdam conference were almost equally significant). There seem to be two parts to these arguments. What—if anything—could have been done differently, before and during World War II, to ensure a less harsh territorial outcome, one that did not leave the Soviet Union in control of the greater part of Eastern and Central Europe, or at least would have produced a situation in which Soviet hegemony was exercised with less brutality? And secondly, were there any circumstances in which the Western powers and the Soviet Union might have escaped the bitter geopolitical and ideological confrontation that became so entrenched in global politics from around 1946 until the end of the 1980s? Was a more benign and less hostile relationship ever in the cards? Or—as Realist international relations theory would suggest—was the Grand Alliance a mere military coalition of convenience, inevitably destined to fall apart once the common enemies that united its members were defeated?

Subsequent recommendations as to what alternative policies might have been more effective vary enormously. McMeekin identifies numerous occasions from 1938–1939 to 1945 when he believes Western policies toward Soviet Russia were strategically misguided and based on false assumptions. From at least the late summer of 1939, when the German and Soviet foreign ministers concluded the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, which effectively gave the Third Reich the green light to launch hostilities against Poland, Stalin undoubtedly displayed enormous cynicism and a brutal determination to expand Soviet territory at almost any price, especially when much of the cost of doing so might be borne by others. After leaving German forces to undertake 16 days of early offensive fighting against Poland in September 1939, Soviet troops finally invaded from the east on September 17, with the objective of annexing eastern Poland.

The German and Soviet occupation forces alike displayed great brutality. Approximately 5.5 million Poles—including around 3 million Jews—died in German-held territory between 1939 and 1944. Meanwhile, from 1939 to 1941, the Soviets murdered around 150,000 Poles they considered threats—including 60,000 military


12 Roberts, Stalin’s War, 33–40.

officers and members of the intelligentsia whose bodies were later discovered in and near the Katyn Forest—and deported a further 320,000. Compounding the loss, until 1989 the Soviet government refused to admit responsibility for these deaths, blaming them instead upon the forces of Nazi Germany, which captured these parts of Poland in 1941. By removing potential opponents, these murders were apparently intended to facilitate future Soviet administration of eastern Poland. While British and American officials believed privately that the Russian government had ordered these killings, given their interest in maintaining some kind of equilibrium with the Soviet Union, for decades neither government was willing publicly to place the blame upon Stalin’s Russia.\textsuperscript{14}

Stalin exercised comparable unscrupulous opportunism in seizing the three Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, and invading Finland when the latter country’s government declined to cede strategically important territory to Russia. Once Germany launched Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union in June 1941, German forces rolled into the Baltic states and Poland, while Finland allied itself with the Third Reich. Later, following three years of savage fighting and horrendous military and civilian casualties on both sides, Soviet troops once again advanced into eastern and central Europe, the Baltic states, and the Balkans, raping and looting as they “liberated” German-held territories and moved on into Eastern Germany, which received similar treatment.\textsuperscript{15} It is scarcely surprising that in the mid-1940s, the populations of European states where Russian military dominance replaced German overlordship discerned little real benefit in the exchange.

The prospect that Soviet troops might occupy their own country left Germans themselves equally unenthusiastic. As Russian forces approached German territory, what was left of the German military fought a bitter rearguard action in the east, designed to allow as many of their own people as possible to flee to areas in the west of Germany that were expected to experience less onerous occupation at the hands of British or American troops. Although the Wehrmacht spent ten months doggedly battling on the second front that Anglo-American armies finally launched in Normandy in June 1944, there were indications at that point that elements within the German military would have welcomed a separate peace with the United States and the British, an agreement that would have left them free to turn all their energies and resources to blocking further Russian advances in the east. In July 1944, the failure of a plot by high-ranking German officers to assassinate Hitler, which prompted the Führer to order the brutal execution of all who were thought to be implicated, meant that in future any such independent overtures from within the German forces might well prove fatal to their would-be negotiators. Even at this point, moreover, it seems that most of the German military leaders involved cherished hopes that, while relinquishing its conquests in Western Europe, the Reich might be able to keep some of its gains in the East and maybe enjoy support or at least benign neutrality from the Western allies as German troops continued to fight Soviet forces.\textsuperscript{16} In practice, it is difficult to imagine a plausible scenario in which Churchill and Roosevelt could have prevailed upon their political colleagues and rivals, parliament, Congress, and their own peoples to endorse such a massive military and strategic U-turn.

Such an arrangement would, of course, have breached the “unconditional surrender” pledge the Western powers had made at the Casablanca conference in January 1943, a commitment made with the specific objective of convincing Stalin that his allies would fight on against Germany to the bitter end and not abandon Russia, thereby leaving it to confront Germany military might alone. Stalin was undoubtedly


apprehensive of such an outcome, as his Western allies—while mounting campaigns in North Africa and Italy—deferred to mid-1944 the opening of a second front in Western Europe. McMeekin assails this pledge as a major strategic blunder, one that encouraged the Germans to continue fighting to the bitter end, rather than contemplating a negotiated settlement to hostilities. (Ironically, it seems that Stalin may have shared this opinion; at the Teheran conference of late 1943, he told Churchill and Roosevelt that he feared the policy might unite the German people against the Allies.)\(^{17}\)

In this connection, it is perhaps worth remembering that in this respect Stalin too was not above reproach, as evidenced by the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Roosevelt, Churchill, and other Allied leaders had some reason to believe that, should Stalin consider this to be in Soviet interests, following the World War I precedent set by the separate peace that Russia and Germany concluded in early 1918 at Brest-Litovsk, he might well cut his own deal with Germany. As late as January 1945, for example, with British and American forces in Western Europe stalled by an unexpected German counter-offensive, rumors were circulating that the Soviets might make a separate peace with Germany.\(^{18}\)

The Yalta accords were by no means perfect. Critics do, however, have a certain obligation to offer recommendations as to what more preferable options were on offer. To quote the Ukrainian historian Serhii M. Plokhy: “One of the testimonies to Roosevelt’s and Churchill’s sound strategy at Yalta is that decades after the conference, with the benefit of hindsight, new archival findings, and tons of research, it is still very difficult to suggest any practical alternative to the course that they took.”\(^{19}\) Despite the rhetorical pledges of Roosevelt and Churchill enshrined in the Atlantic Charter of August 1941, that the Allied powers “desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned,” and would “respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live,” while seeking “to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them,” the British and Americans recognized that at the war’s end, what would effectively be a spheres-of-influence settlement was likely to prevail.\(^{20}\)

The lines demarcating territories in Europe that fell under Soviet dominance from those under Western control were likely to coincide pretty closely with the boundaries separating areas taken by Russian troops from those that fell to British and American military forces. As Andrew Buchanan highlights in his essay in this roundtable, the decision by the United States to deploy much of its manpower in the factories supplying the joint war effort against Germany, leaving Russian soldiers to do the fighting in the European war, meant that when the war ended, Soviet armies would control much of that continent. In pragmatic recognition of this prospect, at the Teheran Conference in late 1943, the Big Three leaders effectively reserved the future disposition of power in most of Western Europe, including France, the Low Countries, Italy, and Scandinavia, to local political elements that enjoyed Anglo-American backing. In return, the Soviet Union expected a relatively free hand in the Eastern and Central European territories that had been taken by Russian forces. Whatever rhetorical commitments the great powers might make to such principles as the right of all nations to self-determination, in practice, just whose boots were treading which ground would be the most significant factor in setting the parameters within which local governments could function. For the most part, in terms of political ideology, the old Westphalian principle of *Cuius regio, eius religio* would prevail.

The dictates of geography and wartime strategy meant that when World War II ended, Poland, which had been the invasion route for German armies to attack Russia, as they had done twice since 1914, would fall within the Soviet zone of influence, as would several of the successor states from the former Austro-

\(^{17}\) Roberts, *Stalin’s Wars*, 182-183.


\(^{19}\) Plokhy, *Yalta*, 399.

Hungarian empire. The best that Western leaders could realistically hope to accomplish on their behalf was to mitigate the harshness of pro-Communist governments that were installed with Soviet backing by persuading Stalin to allow relatively free elections in which non-Communists could take part. Roosevelt, who had expended considerable political capital in establishing and winning Russian and British—as well as American—support for a new international organization, the United Nations, hoped that ultimately Soviet policy in the satellites—and perhaps even in the Soviet Union itself—would become less oppressive, as the wartime Big Three continued to work together to resolve issues that arose as the details of the postwar peace settlement were hammered out. He also believed that the United Nations would itself serve as a mechanism to moderate Soviet policies toward its wartime conquests.21

Limits nonetheless existed to what even Roosevelt, a past master at finessing issues and negotiating deals that reconciled seemingly incompatible interests, could accomplish. His room for maneuver was restricted not just by what his Russian ally would swallow, but also by what Americans were willing to accept. Costigliola suggests that in his last months, Roosevelt sought to back the United States gently into a more realistic policy.22 Yet the president never properly addressed the task of explaining to his countrymen that, despite the high aspirations that were expressed in the Atlantic Charter and then embodied in plans for a United Nations organization, the Big Three would effectively carve up Europe among themselves. At Teheran and Yalta, the Soviet Union demanded that all Polish territory east of the Curzon Line, 69,000 square miles in all, should be incorporated into the Soviet Union; a few months later, at the July 1945 Potsdam conference, the United States and Britain agreed to this. Poland was compensated with territories to the west which had previously been part of Germany; the German population of these lands was expelled, sent further west and replaced by Poles. The Soviet Union likewise as constituent Soviet republics Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, the three Baltic states it had seized in June 1940 following the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, lost to Germany one year later, and then recaptured in 1944–1945. Their status remained more controversial, since Britain, France, and the United States all declined to recognize this transfer, as did many of the inhabitants and their émigré communities elsewhere.

Ironically, in terms of lasting security, the harshness of Soviet policies toward those states in Eastern Europe that were annexed or expected to act as malleable and obedient satellites proved counter-productive. Soviet dominance proved as unpopular as the earlier rule of the Hapsburg Empire, of which many of these states had formed part until World War I. In 1953, East Berlin rose up against Soviet rule; in 1956, the Hungarians did likewise, attempting to break away from the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet-led military security alliance the Soviets established in 1955 following the decision to admit West Germany to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Soviet forces brutally suppressed both revolts, with many rebels shot or imprisoned and others choosing exile. In 1956, the Poles also came close to outright rebellion, though timely concessions by their government meant that actual revolt was avoided.23

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21 Recent studies of Roosevelt’s thinking on international order in the last years of his life include Ian Hamilton, War and Peace: Roosevelt’s Final Odyssey, D-Day to Yalta, 1945–1945 (New York: Mariner Books, 2019); David B. Woolner, The Last 100 Days: FDR at War and at Peace (New York: Basic Books, 2017); also Plokhy, Roosevelt’s Lost Alliances. Despite allegations then and later that the president’s flagging health affected his ability to function effectively at Yalta, most observers seem to have thought him quite capable of handling the issues involved, even if he had to ration his strength to do so.

22 Costigliola, Roosevelt’s Lost Alliances, 228-230.


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By 1961, East Germans were fleeing to the West in such large numbers that, in order to stem the influx, Soviet and East German officials responded by building a wall separating East Berlin from West Berlin. In the 1968 Prague Spring movement, Czechoslovakia tried to gain greater independence, a movement that Soviet tanks and troops eventually ended. In 1980–1981, the independent trade union movement Solidarity threatened Soviet control in Poland; in 1981, the Polish government declared martial law, reportedly to preclude a potential Soviet invasion. On each occasion, Western powers offered rhetorical support and sanctions, but took no concrete military measures to intervene. The spheres-of-influence arrangements negotiated at Yalta and other wartime conferences, and implemented in the later 1940s, held firm. But the harsh measures and internal police-state apparatus required to maintain Soviet hegemony over the satellites were incubators of disaffection, meaning that across large cohorts of their populations, sullen resentment of the Russian overlords and their local allies became endemic.

American diplomats, historians, and political commentators have sometimes been assailed for working on the assumption that the power of the United States was unbounded, as were the available options. In reality, as many Western policymakers of the 1940s appreciated, there were distinct limits circumscribing just how much diplomacy, threats, or economic inducements or sanctions could achieve. Cultural factors also constrained Western policy. Intellectually, American and British officials, military men, intelligence operatives, and journalists might realize that Russian leaders expected a free hand in their own areas of occupation. The brutality the occupying Soviets displayed in imposing their own rule, in terms of both the elimination of political opponents and also the systematic rape and looting and casual violence in which Russian troops indulged, repelled outside observers, many of whom found it emotionally difficult if not impossible to acquiesce in the situation. In many respects, the Soviet Union was rejecting the enlightenment liberal norms to which since at least the nineteenth century most Western powers had increasingly sought to adhere, and demonstrating instead the behavior of an unregenerate eighteenth-century—or earlier—state committed to Machtpolitik alone.

This was not the only level where cultural differences mattered. As Costigliola notes, by the late 1930s, American diplomats who served in Moscow and other Russian cities usually found it almost impossible to enjoy the social contacts and give-and-take with Russian counterparts and interlocutors that were a normal feature of postings in other countries. Journalists encountered similar restrictions and isolation. In the second half of the 1930s, many of those Russians with whom Americans and other foreigners had still been able to socialize earlier in the decade became targets of Stalin’s purges and were executed, or if they were lucky, exiled to labor camps. These disillusioning personal experiences often inclined foreign diplomats, journalists, and others who had spent time in Russia to take an extremely jaundiced view of the country as a whole. Some became key figures in policymaking; others were well placed to influence broader external public opinion toward the Soviet Union. A web of common official and private linkages—shared universities and clubs, working for international businesses, media, and governmental and non-governmental organizations, personal family, marital, and social ties and well-established friendships—bound elites from the Western powers together. When necessary, during inter-state crises, these trans-national connections could serve as shock absorbers. By the 1940s, the need to work together in fighting their common enemy notwithstanding,

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24 Harrison, Driving the Soviets up the Wall, 96-223.
26 Kemp-Welch, Poland Under Communism, chaps. 9-12.
28 Costigliola, Roosevelt’s Lost Alliances, 259-290.
29 On the depth and significance of these kinds of connections in terms of building transnational linkages among elites from the United States and Britain and its white dominions, see Kori Schake, Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

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contacts of comparable significance between Russians and Westerners were decidedly limited. Indeed, Soviet officialdom usually went to considerable lengths to block them.

In terms of facilitating negotiations, such chasms in experience and understanding did not augur well. Equally unpropitious was the degree to which influential American policymakers were themselves driven by shifting perceptions and emotions, with consistency often falling by the wayside. The foremost example may be the diplomat George F. Kennan, a rising State Department star and Russian specialist who turned forty in 1944, when he became counsellor at the US embassy in Moscow, a position he held until 1946. Writing in early 1945 to Charles Bohlen, who interpreted for Roosevelt at Yalta, he advised that the Great Powers should divide “Europe frankly into spheres of influence—keep ourselves out of the Russian sphere and keep the Russians out of ours.”

In June, Kennan recommended that the United States should make the provision of a huge economic reconstruction loan, that would be repaid in raw materials and that the Soviet government had requested, conditional upon a Russian retreat from Eastern Europe. In August, he advised against any effort to share Allied knowledge on atomic weapons with the Soviet Union, requesting that the State Department make his views a formal “matter of record.”

In February 1946, Kennan dispatched to Washington his famous “Long Telegram,” a document arguing the Soviet Union was fundamentally expansionist and that, to maintain their hold on power, Soviet leaders needed to convince their people of the existence of external threats. All that the United States could do in response was to adopt a policy of standing firm against (or containing) the further extension of Soviet dominion. With Soviet relations with the West rapidly deteriorating, Kennan’s telegram, which was sent at the request of the State Department, became the new orthodoxy, making him an instant celebrity in Washington and beyond. Hawkish figures within the Truman administration, notably Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, circulated the document throughout the foreign policymaking apparatus. Recalled to Washington in spring 1946, Kennan was first appointed deputy commandant of the US War College, delivering numerous persuasive public lectures on the need to stand firm against the Soviet Union in prestigious forums such as the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations.

He amplified this message for a wider audience in an article “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” published in spring 1947 under the pseudonym “X” in the Council’s influential journal Foreign Affairs, which served as a discussion forum for the American foreign policy elite.

In May 1947, Kennan became founding director of the State Department’s new Policy Planning Staff (PPS), an internal think tank set up to formulate the broad principles of US dealings with the rest of the world. Here, he would play a central role in developing the strategies of the economic rebuilding of Western Europe (including those portions of Germany that were occupied by British, French, and American troops) and Japan, to serve as buttresses against the further international extension of Communism in Europe and Asia. Working with operatives from the newly established Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Kennan also backed clandestine US sponsorship of anti-Soviet guerrilla activities that were intended to destabilize and “roll back”...
Soviet rule in the East European satellites. These covert ventures generally ended in fiasco, with the would-be insurgents captured and executed.36

By the late 1940s, however, Kennan had become increasingly disillusioned with the growing militarization of Western policy toward the Soviet Union and the degree to which the divisions within the European continent were rapidly hardening into fixed and recognized spheres of influence. He deplored the major rearmament program on which the United States embarked in 1949, following the recommendations made in planning paper NSC-68 by Paul H. Nitze, his successor as PPS director.37 Besides opposing the creation in 1949 of the NATO alliance, Kennan began to advocate positive responses to suggestions from Stalin in the late 1940s and early 1950s that Germany in its entirety should be neutralized and unified, with occupation ended and outside military forces withdrawn from both the Western and Soviet zones. Japan, too, he believed, should be neutralized, and the United States should renounce any first use of atomic weapons.38

Kennan hoped that his appointment in spring 1952 as US ambassador to Moscow would give him the opportunity to facilitate a Soviet-American rapprochement. Once arrived, however, resentment of the Soviets’ fierce anti-American propaganda led him instead to reduce contacts with officials in Moscow. In September 1952, Kennan’s comments to reporters in Berlin that the isolation of foreigners in Moscow was worse than that he had experienced while interned in Germany after Pearl Harbor prompted a Soviet declaration that he was persona non grata. John Foster Dulles, secretary of state in the Republican Eisenhower administration that took office in January 1953, declined thereafter to offer him a diplomatic position, forcing Kennan’s retirement from the Foreign Service.39

For the next 50 years, Kennan would function as a historian and prominent public intellectual, based at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. From this platform, he continued to urge the neutralization of Germany and the withdrawal of both Soviet and Western military forces from the European continent, a position he expounded at length in 1957, when he delivered the prestigious BBC Reith Lectures in Britain.40 Kennan also spoke out forcefully against the continued build-up of nuclear weaponry, a message he propounded consistently for the rest of his life. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he applauded most of the policies of President Richard Nixon and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, especially their efforts to improve relations with the Soviet Union and cut back on nuclear weapons.41 In May 1981, Kennan publicly called for a reduction of 50 percent in the US and Soviet nuclear arsenals. The following April, he joined three other prominent Democrats in a public call that the United States should pledge it would make no first use of nuclear weapons.42

Kennan displayed little enthusiasm for the growing emphasis on human rights that became a feature of international affairs from the 1960s onward. Indeed, he considered the provisions of the 1975 Helsinki Accords on this subject mere specious rhetoric, even though they would soon become a rallying point for dissidents within and beyond the Soviet Union.43 Meanwhile, Kennan’s reaction to Soviet repression beyond Russia’s borders was mixed. Following the August 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, he called for the dispatch of an additional 100,000 American troops to West Germany to deter further “adventurist” Soviet behavior.44 Yet in December 1981, after General Wojciech Jaruzelski, Poland’s prime minister, reacted to

36 Peter Grose, Operation Rollback: America’s Secret War Behind the Iron Curtain (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), offers the fullest account of this secret campaign.
37 See https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v01/d85; Gaddis, George F. Kennan, 389-392.
38 Gaddis, George F. Kennan, 319-381; Costigliola, Kennan, 309-320.
39 Gaddis, George F. Kennan, 439-485; Costigliola, Kennan, 323-370.
40 Gaddis, George F. Kennan, 520-537; Costigliola, Kennan, 395-406.
41 Gaddis, George F. Kennan, 620-646; Costigliola, Kennan, 454-455.
42 Gaddis, George F. Kennan, 647-657; Costigliola, Kennan, 465-469.
43 Costigliola, Kennan, 455.
44 Gaddis, George F. Kennan, 616.

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growing protests by imposing martial law and arresting the leaders of the Solidarity trade union movement, Kennan justified these measures as a sensible and even appropriate response to the crisis. Publicly, he warned in the *New York Times* that the Reagan administration’s retaliatory sanctions over Poland were “driving the Soviet leadership to desperation by pressing it mercilessly against a closed door.”

As the 1980s progressed, Kennan urged that the US government should respond positively to Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev’s efforts to improve relations. Yet when Soviet domination of Eastern Europe collapsed in late 1989, Kennan worried that “these excited peoples” in the former satellites would not emulate “the sensible Finns” and recognize “that the only way to establish their true independence is to show a decent respect for Soviet security interests.” Testifying to the U.S. Congress in January 1990, Kennan suggested—unsuccessfully—that the United States seek a three-year moratorium in Europe before any changes were made to NATO, the Warsaw Pact, or the status of the two Germanies. In October 1990, he deplored the unification of East and West Germany, not least because the Germans undertook this on their own initiative, rather than at the behest of “the powers that were allied in the Second World War.”

During the 1990s, while Kennan supported the continuation of US alliance commitments to NATO and Japan, he believed that involvement in other areas, including Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and south Asia should be kept to the minimum that US national interests required. Dealings with China should be polite but relatively distant. In 1997, in an op-ed piece entitled “A Fateful Error” published in the *New York Times*, Kennan publicly opposed the admission to NATO of the former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. He warned Strobe Talbott, deputy secretary of state for Russia in the Clinton administration, that in extending “NATO's borders smack up to those of Russia we are making the greatest mistake of the entire post-Cold-War era.” Doing so, would, he feared, provoke “a new Cold War, probably ending in a hot one, and the end of the effort to achieve a workable democracy in Russia.” Opposing the admission of the Baltic states, he warned: “These are sensitive borders.” He also condemned the allocation to Ukraine of the Crimean peninsula, where one of Russia’s three major naval bases was located.

Kennan’s intellectual acrobatics and oscillations, as he flipped and flopped like a contortionist in the effort to reconcile his predilection for conciliating Russia with the demands of Soviet satellites and even parts of the Soviet Union for independence, were symptomatic of the broader dilemma facing Western policymakers. Realistically, in the mid-1940s, in terms of ending the good war, seeking the least bad solution was probably the best available option. Indeed, Plokhy argues that at the time of the Yalta conference and even as late as 1946, Stalin had not yet decided on the details of how Eastern Europe should be governed. This leeway offered at least some latitude for the development of regimes of a less oppressive nature than those that were ultimately installed in the late 1940s and remained in place for the next four decades. On more peripheral issues, such as Turkey and Iran in 1945–1946, Stalin showed himself willing to back down if pressed. The case of Finland, which proved itself such a tough nut in terms of fighting prowess that it escaped Soviet occupation, albeit at the price of accepting neutralization and coughing up a heavy indemnity, was another indication that Russia could be persuaded to live with a compromise on security on the margins of the Soviet Union. But achieving such a solution in Eastern Europe, the area that Stalin considered a non-negotiable buffer zone between the Soviet Union and potential invaders, was more difficult. In Plokhy’s words, the best

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the Western powers could hope for was to “continue the dialogue, seeking to make an incremental difference, never quite closing the door and keeping hope for democratic development of the region alive.”

Yet abandoning large tracts of Europe to Soviet domination brought other and potentially intractable problems in its train. These did not result simply from the mismatch between rhetoric and practice in Western policy, but were rooted in the manner in which Soviet rule was imposed and enforced. For entirely understandable reasons, within the satellites, resentment of Soviet rule remained bitter and unwavering. As Archbishop Matthew Parker observed of Queen Elizabeth I’s imprisonment of Mary Queen of Scots, her cousin and claimant to the English throne, “I fear our good Queen has the wolf by the ears.” Bloody and repeated Soviet repression of efforts by East European states and peoples to steer their own course merely compounded the legacy of hatred and suspicion. Across Eastern and Central Europe, four decades of fraternal alliance with Russian comrades did little to inculcate loyalty or even goodwill towards the external hegemon. The Cold War ended in 1989–1991, with Soviet officials, most importantly President Mikhail Gorbachev, allowing the satellites to opt for non-Communist governments. The Warsaw Pact promptly fell apart and was dissolved on 1 July 1991. As the Soviet Union itself disintegrated, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia likewise chose independence, as did Ukraine and the other constituent Soviet republics. In December 1991, the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist.

It might seem that, with the dissolution of the Soviet empire, the NATO alliance had become equally defunct. In practice, rather than winding up the organization, its European members set about finding new missions for an institution for whose establishment they had pushed in the late 1940s, a military pact that they clearly still considered valuable. Before long, the Baltic States and most of the former Warsaw Pact members, smarting from their earlier experiences and apprehensive of future Russian efforts at domination, applied to join not just the European Union but also NATO. While many Russian officials assailed these moves as unjustified provocations and affronts to Russia, the former Warsaw Pact countries viewed their new affiliations as prudent measures taken in their own self-defense. Far from guaranteeing Russia’s future security, Soviet policies in Eastern and Central Europe had engendered lasting distrust and resulted in the long-term alienation of its former satellites from their overbearing eastern neighbor.

In the second half of the 1940s, the leaders of West European nations (what would become West Germany included), who feared that their states might be the next to succumb to Communism, whether domestic or external, prevailed upon the United States to provide first economic assistance for their recovery from the ravages of war and then the security guarantee of the NATO alliance. One Norwegian historian has gone so far as to describe the resulting US strategic predominance across Western Europe as an “empire by invitation.” Seeking an opportunity to be allowed some say in their own fate, Central and Eastern European nations watched and, when circumstances finally permitted, emulated their luckier neighbors. Just as Germans in 1945 fled the eastern regions of Germany for what they assumed would be less oppressive conditions in those areas occupied by Western armies, or as East Germans subsequently slipped into West Germany through Berlin, the former Soviet satellites turned to the European Union and NATO. To the east, an ever more corrupt, kleptocratic, authoritarian, and nationalist Russian state offered little to inspire either confidence or respect. With NATO representing the only credible port in a storm, it was hardly surprising that nations that had only recently escaped Soviet hegemony applied for shelter. With far more freedom of action and greater potential to assist the former satellites than existed during the Cold War years, Western states once again confronted the underlying dilemmas of the Yalta accords: to conciliate a big but

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51 Plokhy, *Yalta*, 395-399, quotation from 398.
fundamentally unattractive power, or to buttress and reinforce its smaller but more ideologically sympathetic neighbors.