STALIN'S ROAD TO THE COLD WAR
Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov

Russian scholars Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov explore the complex roots of Stalin's foreign policy in this excerpt from their prize-winning book, Inside the Kremlin's Cold War (1996). Drawing on previously unavailable Soviet archival sources, they sketch a picture of Soviet foreign policy during the early Cold War period that stands at odds with much Western scholarship—traditionalist and revisionist alike. Zubok and Pleshakov contend that Stalinist foreign policy cannot be seen either as inexorably expansionist, as traditionalist scholars claim, or as strictly reactive, as many revisionist scholars suggest. Rather, they argue that three interrelated factors shaped the Soviet road to Cold War confrontation with the West: the personalities of Soviet leaders, of whom the suspicious and insecure Stalin proved by far the most decisive; the peculiar blend of ideological and security compulsions found in all top Soviet leaders of the era; and the actions of the Western powers, most especially those of the United States. A "revolutionary-imperial paradigm," they propose, best explains postwar Soviet behavior.

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Late on the morning of June 24, 1945, the golden clocks on the Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower chimed and everyone in the Soviet Union with a radio listened to those familiar sounds. The great Parade of Victory was about to begin. All along Red Square and the area surrounding it, victorious troops in decorated uniforms, with captured Nazi banners, in formations and in the turrets of tanks, all perfectly still, waited for a signal to march. Thousands of people crowded into the guest stalls. Suddenly, thunderous applause spread through the crowd as the ruling State Committee of Defense emerged from the Kremlin and began to climb the stairs of Lenin's Mausoleum. It was this group that had replaced the Communist Politburo during the four years of the most devastating war in the world history. Leading the others, walking at some distance from them, was Joseph Stalin, the head of the USSR.

In just a few years the same leaders who celebrated the triumph over Nazi Germany would clash with their former allies, the United States and Great Britain, in a costly and protracted struggle. To understand how the Soviets perceived a conflict with the West, one has to understand what happened in the deep recesses of the Kremlin. Joseph Stalin and his lieutenants were rulers of a special type—tyrannical, cruel, and certainly loathsome in many ways—who defined their legitimacy in the terms they themselves set and harshly imposed on the people of the USSR. Nevertheless, in 1945, with the defeat of Nazi Germany still fresh in everyone's mind, these men were united in victory with the people they ruled.

The Kremlin leaders and their regime experienced their golden hour representing the triumphant forces of history. They carried on the legacy of Russia as the savior of the world, a legacy willingly shared by millions of their compatriots. In order to understand the Cold War from the Soviet perspective, one must understand the importance of that moment and the larger historic legacy of Russia and the Russian Revolution, vindicated by the victory of 1945.

The Soviet worldview had been shaped by a history that was dramatically different from that of the West. The legacy of czarist history, the Bolshevik revolution, the Civil War, and the experience of World War II all contributed to a unique Soviet perspective. Another, important factor that significantly shaped the Soviet perspective was that Russia represented not only a nation but also a distinctive imperial
civilization. One could argue that, with the exception of the period of the Mongol yoke (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries), Russia has always been an empire. And even during the Mongol interlude, when its land had become a province of a grandiose nomadic mega-state, Russia still remained in the imperial framework. The traditional imperial legacy was an insurmountable obstacle to Russia's becoming an "ordinary" nation-state. Despite their intentions to build a brave new world from scratch, Russian Communists simply could not break with the imperial mode of thinking. At the end of the fifteenth century the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome had emerged; two previous Romes had fallen, for they had sinned, and (after the collapse of Constantinople) it was now time for Moscow to be the eternal keeper of the Christian faith. This Russian messianism became the spiritual backbone of the expanding Russian empire, which perceived itself as nothing short of sacred. After the revolution of 1917, however, Soviet Russia assumed the responsibility of spreading the Marxist message. Now, as the keeper of the Marxist faith, it would emancipate mankind rather than Orthodox Christianity. History gave the Russians more concrete reasons to see themselves as saviors of the world. Russians credited themselves with having rescued Europe from two invading powers—the Mongols in the thirteenth century and Napoleon's army in the early nineteenth century. The belief that Russia was the protector of mankind against a militant anti-Christ was strongly reinforced by the victory over the Nazis in 1945. In the European war theater the Soviet contribution to victory was decisive and costly. The enormous sacrifice of the Russian people in the Second World War had led the Soviet leaders to believe that the Allies owed them a great deal. The fact that the Soviet regime had been founded by Communist revolutionaries further alienated Russia from the West and contributed to its messianic legacy. The proletarian revolution, as envisaged by Marx and Engels, was meant to create an unprecedented universal proletarian empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Marxism in Western Europe was becoming more and more national, and was being transformed into the Social-Democratic projects of a welfare nation-state. The Socialists of France and Germany and even of Russia supported World War I as a war between nation-states. V. I. Lenin, the founder of bolshevism, found himself alone when he called for transforming the imperialist European war into a civil class war. His call, after the defeat of a leftist revolution in Germany in 1918, failed to ignite any other nations. Only in Russia, where the concept of a nation-state had totally failed, did Lenin lead the people to the Utopia of a universal proletarian empire without borders. The imperial implications of both Marxist thought and Russian history provide the broad background and context for understanding Soviet involvement in the Cold War. The origins of Cold War thinking from the Soviet side are often interpreted in the West in a simplistic manner: Stalin wanted to conquer the world and so switched from cooperation to confrontation. The American revisionist school generally regards the Cold War as a bilateral process, with Stalin reacting to certain assertive actions by Washington. In the case of Stalin's leadership, however, we are facing something more complicated than just expansionism or "reactions." Stalin and generations of Soviet bureaucrats who grew up with him or under his rule shared a complex attitude toward the outside world that had its roots in Russian history, Marxism, and, in its modified version* Leninism. It would be wrong to interpret Communist behavior in the world arena in terms of either geopolitics or ideology. We prefer to conceive of this conduct as the result of the symbiosis of imperial expansionism and ideological proselytism. When Lenin came to power in 1917, he was driven by a Utopian dream that the fire of the world revolution, having started in Russia, would engulf the world. In this context in 1918 he attempted to abandon the world of geopolitics. If Russia were to prevail over Germany in the First World War, any regime in Russia would have to collaborate with the Allies. Instead, Lenin signed a separate peace treaty (the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk) with Kaiser Germany in which he sacrificed the most developed areas of European Russia, even those that Germany had not yet occupied. The loss of these crucial territories—a
geopolitical catastrophe—could have been averted only through military cooperation with the major allies of czarist Russia: Great Britain, France, and the United States. But this was unacceptable to Lenin, for the leader of the Russian Revolution had his eyes only on consolidation of the new regime—and for a particular purpose. Preserving Russia as the headquarters of world revolution promised the spread of the revolutionary ideology around the globe, or at least in Eastern and Central Europe. In 1922, after signing the Treaty of Rapallo with Germany, Lenin switched to a more complex model of Marxist state behavior, coming very close to elaborating the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. But the father of the Russian Revolution did not have the slightest intention of canceling ideology as a motivation in the making of foreign policy. The result was a strange amalgam of ideological proselytism and geopolitical pragmatism that began to evolve in Soviet Russia in the early 1920s. Marxism was a Utopian teaching, but since it proclaimed that the goal of the material transformation of the world was to be realized in a violent confrontation with its opponents, Communist proselytes developed a whole set of highly effective political institutions. Utopian ideals gave way to a ruthless and cynical interpretation of the realpolitik tradition.

The combination of traditional Russian messianism and Marxist ideology produced something larger (though more fragile) than its parts taken separately. The two phenomena became completely blurred in the USSR by the 1920s and remained that way until the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991. Together they provide a theoretical explanation of Soviet foreign policy behavior—the revolutionary-imperial paradigm.

Lenin's comrades-in-arms, such as Stalin and Molotov, and even the younger generation of Soviet leaders represented by [Nikita] Khrushchev, would inherit this ambivalent worldview. Each of them would make his own intricate Cold War journey, guided by the two misleading suns of empire and revolution. . . . Instrumental to any society, leaders were the driving force of the USSR. The changing society and the international environment at some points were even ignored by the Soviet demigods, though none of them could disregard entirely the world around them. Stalin throughout his life carefully monitored the possible dangerous consequences of Western ideological influence on his regime. Similarly, the problem of international security was never ignored during the Cold War years. The ominous and almost lethal German invasion of Russia in 1941 took the Soviet leadership by surprise and taught them a tragic lesson. The nuclear issue in particular was one of the major factors predetermining the actions of all members of the Kremlin leadership. . . .

Another major issue concerns the extent to which the Soviet Union wanted the Cold War. Without a doubt the imperial tradition of Russia, reinforced by Marxist globalism, predestined Soviet expansionism. But the Cold War emerged from the ruins of World War II, and this hard fact raises three problems. First, there was the issue of the appropriate rewards for the Soviet contribution to the war. Of paramount importance in Europe and recognized as such by Britain and the United States, the Soviet war effort had almost unimaginable costs. More than twenty-seven million people died—the majority of them young men between the ages of eighteen and thirty, but also women and children. The European sphere of the USSR was devastated by the German war machine. Shouldn't Stalin's leadership expect special treatment from Western powers after such a sacrifice? And how did this expectation affect Soviet relations with the West after 1945—be it concerning economic assistance (generous reparations from Germany, direct American aid) or recognized spheres of influence for the Soviet Union in Europe (each territory—Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia—having been fertilized with Soviet blood)?

Second, given the scale of human and material losses, the Soviet Union, though it had troops almost all over Eurasia from Germany to Manchuria, could not sustain the stress of another war. In this respect, it is hard to imagine that Stalin could have deliberately chosen to pursue brinkmanship with the West. The nuclear disability of the Soviet Union in 1945-1949 also argues for the belief that Stalin's original intention of 1945-1947 was to proceed with some kind of partnership with the West.
Third, there was the issue of complete Soviet cooperation with the United States and Britain during the
war. The tension this cooperation often engendered did not preclude a search for solutions and even
unilateral concessions on both sides. Stalin disbanded the Comintern in 1943; Roosevelt and Churchill
formally recognized the Soviet zone of security in Eastern Europe in 1943-1945. Could Stalin have
believed that this intense interaction was to end abruptly as soon as the war was won? Or did this new
mode of understanding based upon mutual compromise imply postwar cooperation? Could Stalin—
especially given his fascination with the Russian imperial past—envisage some sort of jointly managed
system of international relations, not unlike that which followed the Napoleonic Wars? We do have
evidence that Stalin identified himself with Alexander I, a victorious emperor and a postwar partner of his
warranty allies at the Vienna Congress of 1815.

The Soviet wartime experience did not in itself regulate Stalin's attitude toward the West. There was also
the xenophobic nature of Stalin's regime, which had deep roots in the past. Stalin was aware that any
openness toward the outside world could mean the seeds of political opposition in the USSR. Russian
czarist history taught a lesson from the Napoleonic Wars, after which Russian officers, having seen
Europe, did try to abolish autocracy in their own country in the Decembrists' mutiny of 1825.

In February 1945, in the Palace of Livadia at Yalta, the Western Allies did something that millions of
people, including thousands of politicians and dozens of historians in the West, would for decades after
regret and criticize: they acknowledged that the enormous Soviet sacrifices and successes in the war
entitled the Soviet Union to a preeminent role in Eastern Europe. This was reflected in a number of key
decisions that during the Cold War would be called "the treason of Yalta" or the "Yalta agreements." The
Western Allies recognized the Soviet-made Provisional Government of National Unity in Poland on the
condition that some members of the government-in-exile in London and of the Polish Home Army
underground be added to it, and that free and unfettered elections take place as soon as possible.
Roosevelt and Churchill also agreed to Stalin's plans to move Poland eastward by annexing the lands up
to the Curzon line and compensating the Poles with Germany's Eastern Silesia, part of Saxony, and
Western Prussia. This meant that Eastern Prussia would belong to the Soviet Union, a new geopolitical
fact that Stalin confirmed later at Potsdam. Even before the Soviet leader promised to join the fighting in
the Far East, he found that the Western leaders supported his interest in long-sought spheres of influence
there. The Yalta Conference advocated the status quo in Outer Mongolia, thus leaving it within the Soviet
domain and outside China. When U.S. Ambassador Harriman asked Stalin what he wanted in exchange
for Russia's entry in the war against Japan, Stalin brought out a map and said that "the Kurile Islands and
the lower Sakhalin should be returned to Russia." He then "drew a line around the southern part of the
Liaotung Peninsula, including Port Arthur and Dairen, saying that the Russians wished again [as before
1905] to lease these ports and the surrounding area." Roosevelt and Churchill complied with these
demands as well.

In expectation of this moment Stalin refrained from promoting revolutionary Marxist-oriented movements
or unilateral expansion. The commitments to Soviet security interests that he extracted from the Allies in
Teheran and especially Yalta for some time looked to him to be the surest way to create a protective
territorial belt around the USSR, to neutralize the resurgence of its traditional geopolitical rivals,
Germany and Japan. The USSR had to digest its territorial and geopolitical gains and heal its terrible
wounds. Stalin, when he analyzed the world in terms of the last interwar period (1918-1939), had ample
reason to expect that there would be a protracted period of "capitalist stabilization," a return of the United
States to isolationism, and a struggle of European powers for preservation of their vast imperial
possessions. Thus a number of considerations led him to believe after V-Day in Europe that some mode
of cooperation with the United States and Great Britain could be imaginable after the war as well.
The empirical evidence confirmed for Stalin that his country had been fully recognized as a partner in
managing the world. The diplomacy of the Grand Alliance of the war years seemed to have started a new
chapter in international relations. The Soviet Union had been accepted as a great power, equaled only by
the United States and Great Britain. This equality manifested itself in the Soviet Union's full participation in preparing the outlines for the postwar world. The Big Three were steadily coming to a mutual understanding on spheres of influence in Europe and Asia. The territories annexed by Stalin in 1939-1940 during his alliance with Hitler were recognized de facto as part of the Soviet Union. Later, in the Cold War days, the United States would insist that it had never recognized the incorporation of the Baltics into the USSR, i.e. 1943-1945, during the Big Three meetings, however, the three leaders and their foreign ministers had spent hours discussing the problem of elections in Poland and of the legitimacy of the Poles' "London" government, but the issue of free elections in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was tacitly omitted.

As for the countries of Eastern Europe, the Allies were step by step agreeing to the introduction of Soviet influence there. These countries were not supposed to be sovietized, but Churchill did agree with Stalin on the percentage of influence that the USSR and Britain should get in each country in Eastern Europe. The Polish issue had been the most acute one and did cause quarrels and antagonisms among the Big Three. But in Yalta and Potsdam, London and Washington were supporting the "London Poles" with much less vigor than in 1944.

Even the United Nations, which was created by the Big Three, met Stalin's expectations. The permanent members of the Security Council, where the United States, the USSR, and Great Britain were to dominate (for France was hardly tolerated as a great power and China was infinitely weak), would form the elite club for managing the globe. In late 1944 to early 1945 Stalin took the task of organizing the United Nations as seriously as did Litvinov. To ensure that the U.N. Security Council would, in fact, be a club of great powers, Stalin did much to see that the United States would not stay out. With Stalin's blessing, Molotov and another Soviet diplomat, Dmitry Manuilsky, cooperated with the American drafters on the U.N. Charter—which became for decades a model document in the Wilsonian tradition. To the same end the Kremlin leader also supported New York over Geneva, Vienna, or Prague as the future headquarters of the United Nations, because he wanted the United States to be actively engaged in a future organization of United Nations. Simultaneously, Stalin persistently sought and, to his satisfaction, obtained the agreement of Roosevelt and Churchill to grant the Soviet Union veto power in the U.N. Security Council. By 1945 one could find some rudiments of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm in Stalin's foreign policy, but he was fully prepared to shelve ideology, at least for a time, and adhere only to the concept of a balance of power. Stalin ardently believed in the inevitability of a postwar economic crisis of the capitalist economy and of clashes within the capitalist camp that would provide him with a lot of space for geopolitical maneuvering in Europe and Asia—all within the framework of general cooperation with capitalist countries.

Yet just one year after Yalta, in his first postwar speech in the Bolshoi Theater, on February 9, 1946, Stalin emphasized the importance of ensuring Soviet security unilaterally—through renewed mobilization of domestic resources, belt-tightening, and rearmament. There was only a dying echo of the early hopes for a possible model of peaceful coexistence. He said, "It might be possible to avoid military catastrophes, if there were a way of periodically reapportioning raw materials and markets among the countries according to their economic weight—taking concerted and peaceful decisions." But, he added, "this is impossible to fulfill in the contemporary capitalist conditions of world economic development." Stalin meant a possible settlement of disputes among the great powers through the redistribution of spheres of influence, but he could not be that explicit. This was the part of his "election" speech addressed to party functionaries, and thus Stalin's point went totally unnoticed. The American embassy in its report on the speech omitted this point completely. George Kennan wrote his famous "long telegram" explaining to officials in the Truman administration that it would be simply impossible to find a modus vivendi with the USSR, the revolutionary heir to the security-obsessed czarist Russia. In another message Kennan wrote, "That suspicion in one degree or another is an integral part of [the] Soviet system, and will not
yield entirely to any form of rational persuasion or assurance." From that moment many in the United States regarded Stalin's speech as the declaration of the Cold War.

The shift in Stalin's attitude toward postwar cooperation in 1945-1946 can be attributed in part to his "deep and morbid obsessions and compulsions," which had lain dormant for a while but eventually pushed him to guarantee Soviet security in expectation of the total collapse of relations between the USSR and the Western democracies. These compulsions were of immense international significance, since the power to dictate Soviet foreign policy—and domestic policy as well—belonged to Stalin alone. One such compulsion was to retain his totalitarian control over the state and society once the war was over. Stalin, reflected the Soviet writer Konstantin Simonoy, had "feared a new Decembrism. He had shown Ivan to Europe and Europe to Ivan, as Alexander I did in 1813-1814." Indeed, many Soviet soldiers who participated in the liberation of Europe were appalled at how poorly the standard of living in the Soviet Union compared with that of Europe. Many veterans no longer feared the Soviet secret police and would not be silenced. Some, according to an NKVD (secret police) report to Stalin on January 27, 1946, made anti-Soviet remarks, clashed with local authorities, and even distributed anti-Soviet leaflets. Stalin, true to form, moved to eradicate this mood before it could develop into even the slightest threat to his power. Upon their return, millions of the Soviets who had stayed abroad, as prisoners of war or in the forces of European resistance groups, were screened—some were eventually shot, and others were sent to the Gulag to be cleansed of any European influence. All this was done when the "popular" legitimacy of Stalin's regime was at its peak, and when, for quite a few Soviet citizens, patriotism and preoccupation with Truman's America, armed with the atomic bomb, overshadowed the frustrations of everyday life. Another of Stalin's compulsions was his deep suspicion of the motives of the Western Allies. Stalin, as the Yugoslav Communist Milovan Djilas has noted, feared that "the imperialists" would never tolerate great Soviet advances during the war. As pleased as he was with the outcome of Yalta and Potsdam, he looked forward to the struggle ahead. . .

Two events dramatically altered Stalin's view of the diplomatic landscape and loosed his demons of suspicion: the first was the death of Roosevelt; the second was America's dropping of the A-bomb on Hiroshima.

When Stalin had hoped to encourage London and Washington to resolve recurrent tensions by "redistributing spheres of influence," his dream partner had been Franklin D. Roosevelt. William Taubman correctly sees Roosevelt's death as "a turning point in Soviet-American relations," but fails to appreciate how important Roosevelt was to the Soviet dictator. He was the only president whom Stalin accepted as a partner, even when he felt that FDR was scheming behind his back. In April 1945, when Soviet intelligence informed Stalin of Nazi attempts to conclude a separate peace with the Americans, his faith in the possibility of a partnership with the West was not shaken. As long as the two Western leaders did not, in Stalin's opinion, "gang up" on him, there remained the chance for an international regime of cooperation.

When Roosevelt died and Churchill was not reelected—a total surprise to the Kremlin—Stalin lost his two equals, the opponents with whom he knew he could play a grand game with a good chance of success. There was no longer a common threat or the great cauldron of European war to forge a strong relationship of equals between Stalin and the new Western politicians. Truman, James Byrnes, Clement Attlee, and Ernest Bevin were obviously not powerful enough (and probably also not cynical enough) for Stalin's game. In a matter of months what looked like a classic trilateral diplomacy deteriorated before Stalin's eyes into a hopeless international morass, where many expectations were swept aside by a host of new faces and factors. This must have been stunning to Stalin, who was used to dealing with a maximum of three players. During the party infighting of 1923-1929 it was Stalin and the Kamenev-Zinoviev group against Trotsky, then Stalin and Bukharin against Kamenev-Zinoviev. This pattern of very few players had continued in the international arena in 1939-1944. Now all was changed.
Truman in particular seemed to be an unknown entity: a rookie president was easy prey for crafty manipulators. Yet Stalin did not abandon his hopes for a grand game or "detente." He tested Truman at Potsdam and, after hard bargaining, "got what [he] wanted" on two key issues: reparations from Germany and the future of Poland. Many years later Molotov admitted that, at that moment, "the Americans provided us with a way out that reduced tension between us and our Western allies." Yet this was not to be. It was the atomic bombardment of Japan and the abrupt end of the war in the Pacific that convinced Stalin that his dream of a postwar partnership was not to be fulfilled. The old demons of insecurity were back. The atomic bomb threw the Kremlin leader off balance—and eventually back into the curse of tyrants: neurotic solitude.

For those who conceive of the despotic Soviet regime as static, consistent, and expansionist at all times, we have argued otherwise. Like all political systems, even the one built by Stalin had a human face and limitations. Three major factors shaped the Kremlin's view of the post-World War II order and later of the Cold War: the personalities of the key Soviet leaders, their peculiar blend of ideological and geopolitical motivations, which we have labeled the revolutionary-imperial paradigm, and the policies of the West, primarily the United States.

Of these three factors, the Soviet leadership was by far the most dynamic and variable. Soviet leaders possessed impressive qualities and suffered terrible delusions and weaknesses. They could be brutal and unreasonable but also prudent, cautious, and patient. Raised in an autocratic state, they were influenced by its dictates and in turn challenged them. Not all of the leaders were die-hard dogmatics. Their whims and innovations, complexes and phobias, shaped a malleable view of the Cold War from the Soviet shore. Sometimes they even enjoyed more flexibility in their roles than their Western counterparts. Yet the messianic prescriptions of revolutionary-imperial ideology loomed large in the political environment in which Soviet leaders struggled, rose, and fell. Ideology was neither the servant nor the master of Soviet foreign policy. But it was the delirium tremens of Soviet statesmen, the core of the regime's self-legitimacy, a terrifying delusion they could never shake off.

It is tempting to lay total blame for the Cold War on the delusions of Stalin and his lieutenants. A closer look at the Cold War from the Soviet side reveals, however, that they were not the only culprits in the conflict. We cannot disregard other, complex factors, such as the crass nature of power politics, choices of U.S. and British policy-makers, and the deeper causes of hostility and mistrust between dictatorship and democracy in an uncertain world. Stalin, notwithstanding his reputation as a ruthless tyrant, was not prepared to take a course of unbridled unilateral expansionism after World War II. He wanted to avoid confrontation with the West. He was even ready to see cooperation with the Western powers as a preferable way of building his influence and solving contentious international issues. Thus, the Cold War was not his choice or his brainchild.

The arrangements at Yalta for Eastern Europe, and the critical victories of the Red Army in the Allies' ultimate triumph over the Axis powers, led Stalin to expect that the cooperative regulation of international relations would be possible. For this, by 1945, Stalin was ready to diminish the role of ideology in his postwar diplomacy with the West to a minimal level. He was ready to observe the limits on Soviet spheres of influence in Europe and Asia, and he was prepared to keep in power "transitional" regimes in Eastern Europe that would be acceptable to the West. That did not mean that Stalin would cease to be the dreadful dictator and the pontiff of the Communist world. It did mean, however, that the Kremlin leader believed he needed years of peace in order to bring' the USSR from its wartime destruction, when six out of the fifteen Soviet republics were occupied and devastated by the Germans, to the status of an economic and military superpower.

After the death of Roosevelt, which signaled the end of the wartime bonds of amity between Stalin and the Western leaders, and particularly after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Stalin began to
have increasing doubts about postwar cooperation. His probes in Turkey and in Iran, "gray areas" between the Soviet and British zones of influence, had evoked fierce resistance on the part of the United States. Step by step, the revolutionary-imperial paradigm began to resurface in Stalin's thought and actions.

Stalin's foreign and domestic priorities were limited in nature, and yet they led to tension with the West. Stalin wanted not only to restore order and strength to a country torn apart by war, but also to maximize the fruits of victory. He refrained from flying red flags all over the Soviet spheres of domination, yet he was determined to exploit Central Europe for his rearmament program. The brutality of the Soviet regime and Stalin's cruel, scheming, and maniacally suspicious nature, which served these ends, looked first unacceptable and then sinister to the West.

Stalin's road to the Cold War, in the years from 1946 to 1950, was strewn with miscalculations. He did not want to provoke American and British "imperialism," yet he overreacted to any perceived threat of it in Germany and in Eastern Europe. In response to the Marshall Plan, Stalin began to consolidate a Soviet security zone in Eastern Europe by ruthless police methods and intensive Communist propaganda. Trying to stop Western separatist policies in Germany by ruthless police methods and intensive Communist propaganda. Trying to stop Western separatist policies in Germany, he triggered the Berlin blockade crisis. Stalin's biggest diplomatic triumph in the chilling years after the Second World War was an alliance with Communist China in February 1950. Yet this strategic success did not survive the Korean conflict, where the Kremlin leader grossly misjudged the international situation and, by sanctioning the North Korean aggression, subjected the Koreans, his Chinese ally, and the rest of the world to a bloody and protracted war that contained the real danger of a global conflagration. In short, Stalin's postwar foreign policy was more defensive, reactive, and prudent than it was the fulfillment of a master plan. Yet instead of postponing a confrontation with the United States and gaining a much-needed respite for recovery, he managed to draw closer to it with every step. The explanation of this seeming paradox can best be found in Stalin's mentality as well as in his increasing reliance on the logic and dictates of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm to which he had committed himself.

It is no secret that Stalin ran Soviet foreign policy more or less single-handedly, without the benefit of advice from his close circle of friends. Molotov and Zhdanov, two oligarchs at Stalin's side, never acted on their own while Stalin was alive. These men, their perceptions and activities, point to the real source of the impressive achievements, yet ultimate folly and debacle, of Soviet foreign policy under Stalin—the totalitarian way in which it was conceived, directed, and implemented. Molotov's diplomacy was exactly what Stalin hoped Soviet diplomacy could be: a combination of blunt pressure and exploitation of "imperialist contradictions" among Western countries. Molotov was always prudent and even more cautious than Stalin. He had a strong sense of how far the Soviets could probe Western strength and resolve. For Molotov, the growth of Soviet power was the most certain and infallible road toward the global triumph of the Communist order. Disastrous miscalculations, policies that cost millions of lives, were just tactical slips en route to ultimate triumph and mattered little to him. After Stalin's death, Molotov became the guardian of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm that his predecessor and idol sought to shape and that was embodied in the conquests of the USSR during the Second World War.

Zhdanov's activities testify to his subservient role as a keeper of ideological orthodoxy in Soviet foreign policy under Stalin. Zhdanov cannot be associated with a "party diplomacy" or any thing distinct from the diplomacy of Stalin and Molotov. All attempts of the of the Communist party's propaganda staff to expand its responsibilities came to naught in the face of Stalin's personal diplomacy. Zhdanov, however, became one of the main and most talented players, when in the summer of 1947 Stalin decided to use Communist propaganda and ideology to legitimize Soviet control over Eastern Europe and resuscitate the Comintern's "fifth column" throughout Western Europe. Through Zhdanov, Stalin announced the concept of "two camps" and accepted the worldview of Manichean bipolarity long before this bipolarity acquired
its deadly nuclear reality. Until his premature death, Zhdanov remained an obedient keeper of the ideological goals that only Stalin had the power to implement.

Stalin cast a long shadow on the Cold War from the Soviet shore and on the foreign policy of his successors. The challengers to Stalin's legacy, Beria, Malenkov, and finally Khrushchev, fought against the West, and had to face the formidable military threat of the United States, rearmed and bristling with nuclear weapons as a result of Stalin's provocations in Berlin and Korea. But, equally, they fought against Stalin's immortality, the enormous burden of protecting his legacy inside the Soviet Union and worldwide. All their strategies for detente with the United States were severely constrained and eventually shattered by America's hard line, but also by the determination of the vast majority of Soviet elites to prevent a roll-back of Soviet power and influence in the world. The only possible course, in this climate, was to achieve a truce with the West from a position of strength.

It is tempting to argue that, in this sense, the Cold War tensions and the revolutionary-imperial paradigm, shared by most of Stalin's successors, fed off each other. The magnitude of the U.S. challenge served to unite the Soviet leadership and elites in their determination to spare no resources in fending off the war threat. Also, it may explain why, long after Stalin was dead, there was no outbreak of mass discontent in the Soviet Union over the issue of "guns versus butter": most in that generation of Russians, Ukrainians, Byeloruss, and others, having experienced the Nazi invasion, did not question the Kremlin's military and foreign policies, so long as they appeared to provide protection, however illusory, against the nightmare of another major war.

Yet, Stalin's death changed much in the Cold War from the Soviet side. None of his successors could afford to wage the Cold War with the same large-scale mobilization of resources. Nor were most of them as ruthless as Stalin had been. . . .