

(CHAPTER 2)

STALIN'S ROAD

TO THE COLD WAR,

1945-1948



It is the height of Anglo-American impudence.
No elementary feeling of respect toward their ally.

—Stalin to Molotov, September 1945

I think before ten years elapse they [the Western powers]
will whip our ass. Our prestige has been declining abominably!

Nobody will support the Soviet Union.

—Conversation between Soviet generals, December 1946

CBS correspondent Richard C. Hottelet sat in the apartment of the former commissar of foreign affairs of the Soviet Union, Maxim Litvinov, in Moscow on June 18, 1946. He could not believe his ears. Back in the safety of his office, the journalist recorded what he had heard from the Old Bolshevik. The Kremlin, Litvinov said, had chosen an outmoded concept of security for the Soviet Union—the more territory you get, the safer you become. This would lead to a confrontation with the Western powers, and the best one could hope for was “a prolonged armed truce.”¹

The Yalta and Potsdam decisions legitimized not only the Soviet sphere of influence in Central Europe but also its continued military presence in Germany and its territorial and political expansion in the Far East. In the fall of 1945, the framework of talks among the three great powers, despite the growing tension, still offered some hope for the Soviets, including the possibility of reparations from the Western zones of Germany. Following the first months of peace, however, Stalin began to take one action after another that tested the limits of Allied cooperation. Litvinov's fears and despair were justified: the Kremlin's behavior became a major contributor to the Cold War. But how was Stalin's choice of the “outmoded concept of security” made? What calculations, motives, and domestic forces were driving the Soviet Union toward cold war with the United States?

AGAINST "ATOMIC DIPLOMACY"

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, followed by Japan's unexpected early collapse, shattered Stalin's calculations that the war in the Pacific might last for months.² On August 19, 1945, Stalin still planned to land Soviet troops in Hokkaido. He sent a letter to Truman demanding Soviet occupation of the entire Kurile Islands. He also argued that Russian public opinion "would be seriously offended if the Russian troops would not have an occupation region in some part of the Japanese proper territory." Truman conceded on the Kuriles but flatly rejected Stalin's demand to participate in the occupation of Japan. On August 22, the Kremlin warlord had to cancel the landing on Hokkaido. The United States occupied Japan, and General Douglas McArthur began to rule it unilaterally, without ever bothering to ask for Soviet input.³

Suddenly all of the vague and unresolved diplomatic issues hidden in the U.S.-Soviet understanding on the Far East, as well as on Central Europe, came to the surface. On August 20–21, the American and British representatives in Rumania and Bulgaria informed the Rumanian king, the Bulgarian regent, and the Soviet Allied commissioners in Rumania and Bulgaria that they would not recognize the new governments in Bucharest and Sofia until they included pro-Western candidates. Local U.S. representatives were armed with instructions from U.S. secretary of state James Byrnes to encourage the opposition to fight against violations of the Declaration of Liberated Europe, "if necessary, with the assistance of the three allied [governments]." This new turn of events demonstrated that the Western powers in fact did not grant the Soviets a free hand in the Balkans, and this news galvanized local anti-Communist forces and seriously complicated Soviet plans all over Central Europe. From Latvia to Bulgaria, rumors spread that there would soon be a war between the United States and the USSR and that the Americans would drop the atomic bomb on Stalin and force him to retreat. Soon the foreign minister of Bulgaria announced, to Soviet dismay, that elections in that country would be postponed until it was possible to monitor them by an Allied Control Commission consisting of representatives of the three great powers. "Outrageous capitulation," wrote Georgy Dimitrov in his diary. Soviet sources in Sofia informed Moscow of "brutal pressure of Anglo-Americans."⁴

Heightening Soviet concerns, Byrnes and British secretary of state for foreign affairs Ernest Bevin now acted together, in the same manner Truman and Churchill had done earlier during the crisis over Poland. Stalin immediately instructed General Sergei Biryuzov, the Soviet military commander in Bulgaria: "There should be no concessions whatsoever. No changes in composition of the government."⁵ In Stalin's eyes, developments in the Balkans, as well as in Japan, were

part of a Western political offensive, a direct consequence of the changed power balance after Hiroshima. Many in Stalin's entourage, in the military, and in the scientific community felt very much the same way. This perception was remarkably similar to the conclusions, decades later, reached by Gar Alperovitz and other American historians who argued that American diplomacy after Hiroshima became "atomic diplomacy."⁶

On September 11, Byrnes, Bevin, and Molotov met at the London conference of foreign ministers. It became, as historian Vladimir Pechatnov concludes, "a reciprocal demonstration of toughness" between the United States and the Soviet Union. Stalin instructed Molotov to insist on the logic of Yalta, which, in his opinion, confirmed the principle of mutual noninterference of great powers into each other's spheres of influence. He cabled on September 12: "It might happen that the Allies could sign a peace treaty with Italy without us. So what? Then we have a precedent. We would get a possibility in our turn to reach a peace treaty with [the countries of Central Europe] without the Allies." He continued, that even if such behavior would deadlock the conference, "we should not be afraid of such an outcome either."⁷

In the first days of the conference, Byrnes suggested inviting France and China to the discussion of peace treaties with Germany's satellites. Molotov agreed to this without checking with Stalin; in his view, the Americans just wanted to enhance the role of the United Nations, whose other members, they insisted, should attend peace conferences on Finland, Hungary, and Rumania. But Stalin saw each initiative of Western statesmen as part of a larger design to undermine the concept of exclusive spheres of influence that had been agreed upon at Yalta and Potsdam. He was furious at Molotov and instructed his hapless deputy to retract his agreement on Chinese and French participation—a move that stalled the conference. Stalin wrote: "The Allies are pressing on you to break your will. But you must hold on to the end." Molotov agreed that he had "committed a grave oversight." From that moment, in Stalin's eyes, Molotov fell under suspicion of being the "appeaser" of the West.⁸

Whatever Byrnes's intentions were to play "atomic diplomacy," the secretary of state did not want to be seen as ruining popular hopes for postwar cooperation. On September 20, Byrnes attempted to save the conference by proposing to Molotov a treaty of demilitarization of Germany for twenty to twenty-five years. In his communication to Stalin, Molotov recommended accepting Byrnes's proposal, "if the Americans more or less move in our direction on the Balkan countries." But Stalin did not want to pull out Soviet troops from Germany in exchange for a piece of paper guaranteeing its demilitarization.⁹ The Kremlin supreme leader instructed Molotov to reject Byrnes's idea. He explained to Molo-

tov that Byrnes's proposal pursued four separate goals: "First, to divert our attention from the Far East, where Americans assume a role of tomorrow's friend of Japan, and to create thereby a perception that everything is fine there; second, to receive from the USSR a formal sanction for the US playing the same role in European affairs as the USSR, so that the US may hereafter, in league with England, take the future of Europe into their hands; third, to devalue the treaties of alliance that the USSR have already reached with European states; fourth, to pull out the rug from under any future treaties of alliance between the USSR and Rumania, Finland, etc."¹⁰

These words reveal Stalin's thinking to be a combination of insecurity and wide-ranging aspirations. In response to Byrnes's new proposal, Stalin instructed Molotov to propose the establishment of an Allied Control Commission on Japan, similar to that established for Germany. America's exclusive control over Japan was a threat to Stalin's vision of the postwar world, as much as was the U.S. atomic monopoly. Byrnes, supported by the British, refused to discuss the Soviet counterproposal. Stalin was furious: "It is the height of Anglo-American impudence," he cabled to Molotov. "No elementary feeling of respect towards their ally."¹¹

Stalin still wanted to do business with the Americans and made attempts to avoid any show of disrespect for Truman.¹² At the same time, he decided to rebuff Byrnes, the suspected architect of "atomic diplomacy." On September 27, Stalin instructed Molotov to display "absolute adamancy" and forget about compromises with the United States. "A failure of the conference would mean the failure of Byrnes, and we must not grieve over that."¹³ Molotov still hoped that after days of tough bargaining the Allies would offer a suitable compromise.¹⁴ Stalin, however, was unyielding, and the London conference ended on October 2 in deadlock.

In the short term, Stalin's tactics of stonewalling the London conference produced its desired result. Byrnes was very upset by his failure to reach agreement with the Soviets and decided to back away from his earlier assertive policy. U.S. determination to oppose Soviet behavior in Central Europe declined substantially. Byrnes instructed Averell Harriman to break the deadlock at a personal meeting with Stalin. On October 24–25, Stalin played the gracious host to Harriman at his secret dacha on the Black Sea, in Gagri. During the meeting, Harriman noted that Stalin was "still very irked at our refusal to permit Soviet troops to land at Hokkaido." The Soviet leadership complained that General Douglas MacArthur was making decisions without bothering to transmit them to the Soviets. He said that the Soviet Union would not accept the role of "an American satellite in the Pacific." Perhaps, Stalin said, it would be better for the Soviet Union to step

aside in Japan and let the Americans act as they wished. He, Stalin, was never in favor of isolationism, but “perhaps now the Soviet Union should adopt such a policy.”¹⁵

Harriman found Stalin “inordinately suspicious of our every move,” but he left the meeting thinking that Soviet security concerns in Central Europe could be satisfied without closing the region to American trade and economic and cultural influence.¹⁶ He failed to see that for Stalin there was no room for Anglo-Saxons in Central Europe and the Balkans. On November 14, at the same dacha in Gagri, Stalin flatly told Wladyslaw Gomulka and other Polish Communists “to reject the open door policy” of the Americans. He warned the guests that the Anglo-Americans sought “to tear away our allies—Poland, Rumania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.”¹⁷

Stalin’s determination to close Central Europe to Western influence did not mean he abandoned diplomatic games. Suddenly, Byrnes became his preferred partner. The decisive factor was Byrnes’s acquiescence to the Soviet demand to exclude France and China from the peace treaties negotiation format. On December 9, in his cable from the Black Sea to the Politburo foreign policy “Quartet” in the Kremlin (Molotov, Lavrenty Beria, Georgy Malenkov, and Mikoyan), Stalin wrote that “we won the struggle” and forced the United States and Britain to retreat in the Balkans. He berated Molotov again for giving in to pressure and intimidation from the United States. “It is obvious,” he concluded, “that in dealing with such partners as the U.S. and Britain we cannot achieve anything serious if we begin to give in to intimidation and betray uncertainty. To get anything from this kind of partner, we must arm ourselves with the policy of tenacity and steadfastness.”¹⁸ The supreme leader demonstrated to his subordinates that they needed his guidance in postwar affairs as much as they had during the war.

When Stalin met with Byrnes in Moscow in December, he treated him as a guest of honor. But American concessions (the creation of the Allied Control Commission in Japan) fell short of his demands. Yet he still needed Byrnes’s cooperation to achieve favorable results on German reparations, as well as on the peace treaties with Germany and its former satellites. Byrnes did not attempt to play the atomic card, did not act in tandem with the British, and did not press the Soviets on their separatist adventures in northern Iran. In general, both sides bargained in the give-and-take style Stalin felt was his strong suit, including mutual consolidation of spheres of influence and concessions.¹⁹

Byrnes also recognized the rigged elections in Bulgaria and Rumania, in return for small changes in the governments and public assurances that the Kremlin would respect political “freedoms” and the rights of the opposition.

Stalin immediately called the Bulgarian Communist leader, Georgy Dimitrov, in Sofia and told him to pick “a couple of representatives from the opposition” and give them “insignificant ministries.” After that, according to Harriman, “the Russian attitude changed completely and thereafter, collaboration on many other world problems was easily secured.”²⁰

Stalin’s diplomacy of linkage was successful in the Balkans. On January 7, 1946, Stalin shared his victorious mood with the Bulgarian Communist leaders. Stalin exclaimed: “Your opposition can go to the devil! They boycotted the elections. Now three great powers recognized these elections.” The Western powers, he concluded, may be angry at the Bulgarian Communist government for arresting the opposition leaders, but “they will not dare” to blame the Soviet Union.²¹ Stalin’s tactics in the Balkans did not change after Churchill gave his famous speech at Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946, warning the United States that the whole of Eastern Europe now was behind the “iron curtain” and under the increasing control of Moscow. Churchill’s call for the U.S.-British alliance to balance Soviet power gave pause to some Eastern European Communist leaders, but Stalin, aware of their vacillations, kept pushing them. He criticized Dimitrov for his caution and ordered him to finish off the opposition immediately.²²

Stalin was more careful with other European countries within Soviet reach. Finland, despite its proximity to Soviet borders, managed to escape the noose of Sovietization. At a meeting with a Finnish delegation in October 1945, Stalin called Soviet policy toward Finland “generosity by calculation.” He said: “When we treat neighboring countries well, they will respond in kind.” This “generosity” had strict limits: Stalin’s lieutenant Andrei Zhdanov worked hard to squeeze every ounce of war reparations (in raw materials) out of Finland.²³ In the same calculated way, Stalin preferred to pretend that the Soviet Union continued to heed Anglo-American sensibilities on Poland. He repeatedly advised his Polish Communist clients “not to breach” the Yalta and Potsdam agreements. He told them to tolerate Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, even though he called him “a British puppet.” Yet, when the Poles mentioned that Churchill’s Fulton speech encouraged the opposition to expect “liberation” by the Western powers, Stalin confidently said that the United States and Great Britain were not ready to break up with the USSR. “They will try to intimidate us, but if we ignore it, then they gradually stop making noise.”²⁴

Stalin’s struggle against American “atomic diplomacy” was not limited to Central Europe; it extended to the Far East as well. In October, the Kremlin took an uncompromising line toward the Guomindang and began to encourage the CCP forces in Manchuria. Chinese historians link this change to U.S. refusal to acknowledge a Soviet role in Japanese affairs at the London conference.²⁵ But it

was part of Stalin's reaction to the "atomic diplomacy" practiced by Byrnes. When Stalin received reports in late September that U.S. marines were landing in Manchuria to aid the Guomindang, he was angered.²⁶ In his view, this portended a shift in the balance of forces and a threat to Soviet longer-term influence in Northeast Asia. The Kremlin again sought to exploit the presence of the Chinese Communists in Manchuria as a counterbalance to the Nationalist government.

In late November, Truman sent George Marshall, celebrated military leader, on a diplomatic mission to China to build up the Nationalists against the Soviets and the CCP. When Marshall arrived in China, however, Stalin had already shifted from the "policy of steadfastness" to tactics of compromise. Soviet representatives in Manchuria began to cooperate with Guomindang officials. As in Europe, in the Far East, Stalin wanted to signal to the Americans that he was prepared to return to the framework of Yalta. Stalin knew that Soviet troops had to leave Manchuria soon. But, meanwhile, the struggle for that crucial area continued. From December 1945 to January 1946, Jiang Jieshi, leader of the Republic of China, tried to revisit the understanding on Manchuria. This time, instead of the pro-American Dr. Soong, he sent his son, Jian Jinguo, to Moscow. Jian had grown up in the Soviet Union and was a former member of the Soviet Communist Party.²⁷

Moscow met the envoy with skepticism. Solomon Lozovsky, deputy commissar for foreign affairs, wrote in his memo to the leadership that Jiang Jieshi was "trying to balance between the U.S. and the USSR." This ran counter to the Soviet objective—to keep the United States away from Manchuria. "We got rid of the Japanese neighbor on our borders and we cannot allow that Manchuria becomes an arena of economic and political influence of another great power." Vigorous measures, Lozovsky suggested, must be taken to prevent American economic penetration into northern China.²⁸ Stalin himself could not have put it better.

Truman helped the Soviets on December 15 by announcing that the United States would not intervene militarily in the Chinese civil war on the side of the Guomindang. This news weakened Jiang Jieshi's position on the eve of the Moscow talks. His son informed Stalin confidentially that the Guomindang Nationalist government, in exchange for Stalin's help in restoring its control over Manchuria and Xinjiang, was prepared to develop a "most intimate" alliance with the USSR. Jiang also promised to demilitarize the Soviet-Chinese border and to grant the USSR "the leading role in [the] Manchurian economy." However, Jiang Jieshi insisted on preserving the Open Door policy in northern China and let Stalin know that he was not prepared to be exclusively on the Soviet side.²⁹

Stalin proposed an agreement on economic cooperation in China's Northeast

that would exclude the Americans. His goal was complete control over Manchuria, and this could be most easily achieved by Soviet military occupation and, after their withdrawal, by the CCP forces as a counterbalance to the Guomindang Nationalist government and the Americans. Therefore, Stalin firmly refused Jiang Jieshi's plea to apply pressure on Mao Ze-dong; he only directed the Chinese Communists to assume a lower profile and focus on occupation of smaller cities and the countryside.³⁰

The United States forcefully responded to what appeared to be a Sino-Soviet rapprochement. In February 1946, the Americans pushed Jiang Jieshi to abrogate the bilateral economic talks with Moscow. They also attempted to compromise the Sino-Soviet Treaty, by publishing the secret agreements on China reached by Roosevelt and Stalin. In response, Soviet representatives openly rejected the Open Door policy in the Chinese Northeast. Although Moscow announced withdrawal of its troops from Manchuria, the Kremlin finally allowed the CCP forces to occupy major cities in China's Northeast.³¹

What began so auspiciously for Moscow, however, led to major disruptions in the careful balance of the Yalta-Potsdam system. Although Stalin attempted to time the military withdrawal from Manchuria to pressure the Guomindang to make economic concessions to the Soviet Union and prevent the imposition of the Open Door policies there, he failed to achieve these aims.³² And, despite Stalin's machinations, he was not able to turn Manchuria into an exclusive Soviet sphere of influence. In the end, he had to cede this area to the triumphant Chinese Communists, in exchange for Mao Ze-dong's promises of strategic alliance with the Soviet Union.

PROBING THE PERIPHERY

For several months, until August 1945, the Kremlin breathed in the heady atmosphere of limitless horizons and aspirations, and even Hiroshima could not immediately dash them. Stalin was building a security buffer in Central Europe and in the Far East, and he also began to pay special attention to Turkey and Iran.

For centuries, the rulers of Russia had coveted the Turkish Straits, linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. In 1915, at the peak of the Great War, in which Turkey sided with Germany and Austria-Hungary, Great Britain even promised to support Russia's aspirations to claim the straits and the littoral zone of Turkey as its sphere of influence. The victory of the Bolsheviks, however, made this secret agreement null and void. During the Soviet-German talks in Berlin in November 1940, Molotov, on Stalin's instructions, insisted that Bulgaria, the Turkish Straits, and the Black Sea area should be a Soviet sphere of influence.

Stalin returned to his demand with a vengeance during his talks with his Western partners in the Grand Alliance. He wanted to “revise” the Montreux Convention of 1936, which allowed Turkey to build military defenses on the straits and to close the passage to other countries’ military ships moving through the straits during wartime.³³ Stalin wanted the Soviet navy to have access to the Mediterranean at any time. At the Tehran Conference in 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt agreed that some revision would be made, and during secret talks with Stalin in Moscow in October 1944 Churchill seemed to agree to Soviet demands.³⁴

In 1944–45, Soviet diplomats, historians, and international law experts unanimously concurred that this was a unique moment to lay “the issue of the straits” to rest once and for all. Litvinov wrote to Stalin and Molotov in November 1944 that the British should be persuaded to cede to the Soviet Union “the responsibility” for the zone of the straits. Another expert in the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs suggested that the best way to guarantee Soviet security interests would be “a bilateral Soviet-Turkish agreement on a joint defense of the straits.”³⁵ Reflecting the Kremlin’s high expectations after the takeover of half of Europe, all these proposals rested on the assumption that Great Britain and the United States would recognize Soviet geopolitical predominance (“geographic proximity”) in Turkey.³⁶

The Soviet army swept through Bulgaria, and some in the military, spurred on by the victories, encouraged Stalin to invade Turkey.³⁷ The major problem for the Soviets, however, remained the fact that Turkey, unlike during World War I, preserved strict neutrality. Consequently, the Soviet army could not support Moscow’s diplomacy with force. Nevertheless, the Kremlin ruler decided to act forcefully and unilaterally, without preliminary agreements with Western allies. On June 7, 1945, on Stalin’s instructions, Molotov met with the Turkish ambassador in Moscow, Selim Sarper, and rejected Turkey’s proposal to sign a new treaty of alliance with the Soviet Union. Instead, Moscow demanded from Turkey the abolishing of the Montreux Conventions and the establishing of joint protection for the straits in peacetime. The Soviets demanded the right to build military bases, jointly with Turkey, on the Turkish Straits. Molotov also shocked the Turks by insisting on the return of all “disputed” territories in the southern Caucasus that Soviet Russia had ceded to Turkey under the 1921 treaty.³⁸

New evidence shows that, in his hubris, Stalin wanted to destroy Turkey’s ability to act as an independent player between the British empire and the Soviet Union. The control over the straits was a geopolitical priority, since it would have turned the Soviet Union into a Mediterranean power. Territorial demands became an important second goal that, in Stalin’s opinion, helped to achieve the first.

Stalin planned to use the “Armenian card” to annex the eastern Turkish prov-

inces around Lake Van, Ardvin, and Kars. In 1915, over a million Armenians living in those provinces, then part of the Ottoman Empire, became the target of brutal massacres and forced deportations. In August 1920, according to the Treaty of Sevres, which divided the Ottoman Empire, these provinces were assigned to an “Armenian state.” However, the Armenians lost the war against the Turkish army, led by Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk). Lenin and the Bolshevik government, including Stalin, became allied with Kemalist Turkey, and in the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of 1921, gave up the “Armenian” provinces. In the spring of 1945, Armenians worldwide pinned their hopes on the Kremlin’s policies. Armenian organizations, including the wealthiest ones in the United States, appealed to Stalin to organize mass repatriation of Armenians into Soviet Armenia—with the hope that the USSR would give them the lands “reclaimed” from Turkey. In May, Stalin authorized the officials of Soviet Armenia to explore the possibility of a massive Armenian repatriation. This, in his calculations, could help to undermine possible Western support of Turkey and provide a “humanitarian” cover to Soviet demands.³⁹

The Turkish government responded that it would be ready to reach a bilateral agreement but rejected Soviet territorial claims and the demand for “joint” defense of the straits. However, as Molotov recalled later, Stalin ordered him to keep pushing.⁴⁰ On the eve of the Yalta Conference, Stalin told the Bulgarian Communist leader, Vasil Kolarov, that “there is no place for Turkey on the Balkans.”⁴¹ At the same time, the Kremlin leader probably expected that the Americans, still interested in getting the USSR to join the war in the Pacific, would remain neutral on the Turkish issue. At Potsdam, the British and the Americans confirmed their general agreement to make changes in the control of the straits. Truman, however, introduced a proposal that advocated free and unrestricted navigation of international inland waterways and opposed any fortifications on the Turkish Straits. Despite this proposal, internal Soviet assessments of Potsdam were optimistic. On August 30, the eve of the London meeting of foreign ministers, Stalin said to the Bulgarian Communists that the problem with the Turkish bases on the Dardanelles “will be solved at the conference.” If not, he added, the Soviet Union would then raise the question of an outlet on the Mediterranean.⁴²

In London, Molotov presented the Allies with a proposal to give the Soviet Union a mandate over Tripolitania (Libya), a former Italian colony. This was not just a tactical device but an expression of the Soviet postwar expansionist mood. Stalin-Molotov secret correspondence reveals that the Soviet leadership was banking on a vague promise that Roosevelt’s secretary of state, Edward

Stettinius, had given them during the San Francisco conference in April 1945. When Stalin learned that the Americans sided with the British in opposing the establishment of a Soviet naval base there, he instructed Molotov to demand at least bases for the merchant fleet. In the end, U.S.-British resistance denied the Soviets the much-coveted presence in the Mediterranean.⁴³

Turkey also put up strong resistance to Soviet demands. Had Stalin proposed a bilateral security alliance and special rights in the straits without bases in June 1945 to the Turkish government, Turkey probably would have agreed.⁴⁴ However, the Soviet ultimatum created a nationalist backlash—the Turkish leadership refused to keep the straits shut for all naval powers except the USSR. After Stalin's death, Khrushchev made these views public at a Central Committee plenum: "Turks are no fools. The Dardanelles is not only Turkish business. It is the spot where interests of many states intersect."⁴⁵ The ultimatum to Turkey revealed the limits of Stalin's power—his Napoleonic hubris prevailed over caution. Stalin, however, was not ready to give up. True to his political style, he continued the "war of nerves" against Turkey, adding pressure and then feigning retreat.

In late 1945 and early 1946, the Kremlin preferred, as historian Jamil Hasanli concludes, to implement Soviet objectives in Turkey through Georgian and Armenian officials.⁴⁶ Stalin tapped into nationalist aspirations in those Soviet republics. In fact, these aspirations led, unexpectedly, to considerable tension between Armenian and Georgian Communists. Armenia's sudden prominence in Stalin's plans vexed the officials of Georgia. They nurtured their own "national project," according to which the disputed Turkish provinces allegedly constituted Georgian ancestral lands. Khrushchev claimed in 1955 that Lavrenty Beria, Stalin's secret police henchman and leader of the Soviet atomic project, together with Georgian officials, persuaded Stalin to try to annex the southeastern part of the Black Sea coast from Turkey. In his memoirs about his father, Beria's son confirmed this.⁴⁷ In May and June 1945, Georgian diplomats and scholars obtained authorization in Moscow to do research on Georgia's "rights" to claim the Turkish lands around Trabzon, populated by the Lazi, an ethnic group that supposedly was part of the ancient Georgian people. Davy Sturua, whose father was the chairman of Georgia's Supreme Soviet, recalled that many Georgians eagerly anticipated the "liberation" of that land. Had Stalin seized those lands, Sturua concluded, "he would have become God in Georgia." By September 1945, the leaders of Georgia and Armenia submitted their conflicting claims to the same Turkish provinces to the Kremlin: their language and arguments had nothing to do with Communist "internationalism" but instead with nationalism.⁴⁸

On December 2, 1945, the Soviet press published a government decree autho-

rizing repatriation of Armenians from abroad to Soviet Armenia. On December 20, Soviet newspapers published an article by two authoritative Georgian academicians, "On Our Lawful Demands to Turkey." The article (based on their earlier memos written to Molotov and Beria) appealed to "world public opinion" to help Georgia get back the "ancestral lands" that the Turks had conquered centuries ago. At that time, rumors circulated in South Caucasus that the Soviet Union was getting ready for a war with Turkey. There were indications of Soviet military preparations in Bulgaria and Georgia.⁴⁹

In early December 1945, rumors of war with the Soviet Union provoked large anti-Soviet nationalist demonstrations in Istanbul. Reporting on these events to Moscow, Soviet ambassador S. A. Vinogradov proposed to present them to Washington and London as evidence of a "fascist threat." He also suggested that they could be a good pretext for severing diplomatic relations with Turkey and for "taking measures to ensure our security," a euphemism for military preparations. To the ambassador's shock, on December 7 Stalin rejected Vinogradov's proposals. "Weapon-rattling may have a nature of provocation," he wrote in a cable, referring to the ambassador's idea of using military exercises for blackmailing Turkey. Stalin then urged Vinogradov to "not lose one's head and avoid making thoughtless proposals that may lead to political aggravation for our state."⁵⁰

The Kremlin *vozhd* still hoped to neutralize the growing resistance of Western powers to Soviet demands to Turkey. The "Armenian card" and the letter of Georgian academics were timed to influence the discussions at the conference of foreign ministers of the great powers in Moscow on December 16–26, 1945. There, the Kremlin ruler wanted to charm Byrnes, not scare him away. Besides, Stalin's sense of priority and urgency led him to redirect his energies from Turkey to Iran, where chances for the success of Soviet expansion seemed to be very high at that time.

Stalin's policies toward Iran were another attempt to combine important strategic objectives with the mobilization of regional and domestic nationalism. During World War II, Iran began to gravitate into the German orbit. In 1941, after Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union, Soviet troops and British troops occupied the country, dividing their occupation zones roughly along the old demarcation line between British and Russian imperial interests from the beginning of the century. According to the agreements of Yalta and Potsdam, these troops would be withdrawn from Iran within six months of the end of the war. In the meantime, the Politburo, however, decided to gain access to Iranian oil and, when the

Tehran government resisted, decided to use the population of southern Azerbaijan (part of northern Iran) as a means of pressure on Iran and the West. The head of the Soviet Azerbaijan Republic, Mir Jafar Bagirov, repeatedly appealed to Stalin to use the favorable situation of Soviet occupation of northern Iran for “reunification” of Soviet and Iranian Azerbaijan. Historian Fernande Scheid concludes that Stalin decided to use Azeri nationalism, while attempting to play “a rather old-fashioned game of power politics, taking as much as he could without jeopardizing the relationship with his allies.”⁵¹

Oil was the Kremlin’s most important consideration. The dramatic dash of Hitler’s mechanized armies toward the oil refineries of Grozny and Baku in 1942 helped to focus Soviet attention on the broader issue of the “struggle for oil.” Former Soviet oil minister Nikolai Baibakov recalled that in 1944 Stalin suddenly asked at him if the Western allies would “crush us if they get a chance.” If Western powers were able to deny the USSR access to oil reserves, Stalin explained, then all Soviet war arsenals would become worthless. Baibakov left Stalin’s office reflecting that the USSR needed “much, very much oil.”⁵²

Throughout the war and the Soviet occupation of Iran, the Soviets tried to legalize their rights to drill oil in northern Iran. The anti-Communist Iranian government and the majority in the Majlis (parliament), supported by the British interests, successfully rebuffed these attempts. On August 16, 1944, Beria reported to Stalin and Molotov that “the British, and possibly Americans, secretly work against a transfer of oil fields in Northern Iran to the Soviet Union.” The report emphasized that “the U.S. actively began to seek oil contracts for American companies in Iranian Baluchistan” and concluded that “successes of U.S. oil policy in the Middle East began to impinge on British interests and led to aggravation of Anglo-American contradictions.” Beria recommended pushing for a Soviet-Iranian agreement on oil concessions in northern Iran and making “a decision on Soviet participation in Anglo-American oil talks.” The last suggestion implied that the Soviet Union could join the oil club of three great powers in Iran.⁵³

Stalin ignored the last point but implemented the first. The development of oil fields in Iran became his priority, along with the development of Soviet oil reserves beyond the Urals, as part of the Soviet Union’s postwar economic plans. In September 1944, Molotov’s deputy and Stalin’s protégé, Sergei Kavtaradze, went to Tehran to demand oil concessions. Despite great pressure, Prime Minister Muhammad Sa’id refused to negotiate until after the end of the war and the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Iranian territory. In June 1945, Soviet policy toward Iran entered a new, more aggressive phase. After consultation with

the “troika” of Molotov, Kavtaradze, and Bagirov, Stalin ordered exploration of oil fields in northern Iran (at Bender-Shah and Shahi) with the aim of starting to drill in late September.⁵⁴

Aside from the importance of oil, Stalin’s strategic motives in Iran were to keep the Western powers, particularly the United States, away from Soviet borders. George Kennan, American charge d’affaires in Moscow, recognized this motive, as well as the British consul in Mashhad, who wrote in his memoirs that it was, “above all, the efforts of Standard and Shell to secure oil-prospecting rights that changed the Russians in Persia from hot-war allies into cold-war rivals.”⁵⁵ Stalin’s security criteria were the same for northern Iran as they were for Xinjiang and Manchuria: Soviet control over strategic communications and a total ban on a Western business presence and even on the presence of foreign nationals.

There were other parallels between Soviet behavior in Manchuria and Iran. The Soviet army remained Stalin’s biggest asset as long as it occupied northern Iran. He also had allies inside Iran that he used to manipulate the Iranian government. The People’s Party of Iran (Tudeh), a Marxist-Leninist organization from the Comintern days, enjoyed some support among leftist Iranian intellectuals and nationalists. However, events of 1944–45 proved that the Tudeh was a very limited asset. Stalin decided to use the Azeri nationalist card to create a separatist movement in northern Iran. Then the Soviets could blackmail the Iranian government, just as they had done with the Guomindang using the Chinese Communists.⁵⁶

On July 6, 1945, Stalin sanctioned “measures to organize a separatist movement in Southern Azerbaijan” and other provinces of northern Iran. The decision aimed “to create inside the Iranian state a national autonomous Azerbaijani region with broad jurisdiction,” to instigate separatist movements in Gilan, Mazenderan, Gorgan, and Khorasan, and “to encourage” Iranian Kurds to assert their autonomy. The Soviet Union would provide armaments, printing presses, and money to the separatists. Defense Minister Nikolai Bulganin and the Azerbaijan leader Bagirov were in charge of these policies. The day-to-day practical implementation of the plan fell to Bagirov and the group of Soviet advisers in Tabriz and Tehran, most of them ethnic Azeris.⁵⁷ Stalin told Bagirov that it was time to reunify Azerbaijan and northern Iran. In the months that followed, Bagirov and the entire Azeri party machine enthusiastically implemented Stalin’s instructions.⁵⁸

Even British and American officials recognized that there was enough local fuel for nationalist insurrection in northern Iran—the Soviets only had to light a match.⁵⁹ The only problem that Stalin had was the shortage of time after the abrupt end of the war with Japan. Louise L’Estrange Fawcett correctly observed:

“It can be no coincidence that the ADP’s [Azerbaijan Democratic Party’s] reaction coincided almost exactly with the end of the war with Japan, which marked the beginning of the six-month period” after which Moscow, London, and Washington had agreed to withdraw their troops from Iran. In September, the clock began to tick toward the deadline for withdrawal.⁶⁰

From late September until December, the new autonomist movement, supported by Bagirov and the NKVD, created new power structures in Azerbaijan and almost totally dismantled Tehran’s administration there. Soviet occupational authorities engineered a forceful merge of Tudeh’s northern branches with the new pro-Soviet ADP. The leadership of the Tudeh, mostly veteran revolutionaries of the early 1920s, wanted to turn Iran into a leader of the anticolonial struggle in the Middle East and South Asia. But these dreams were brushed aside by the Soviets since they did not fit with Stalin’s plans. The Soviet embassy in Tehran instructed the Tudeh to refrain from revolutionary activities in major Iranian cities. Meanwhile, the creation of the Azeri autonomist movement evoked an enthusiastic response among the Azeri population. The nationalist card seemed to have brought an immediate political victory for Moscow.⁶¹

In December 1945, on the eve of Stalin’s meeting with Byrnes and Bevin in Moscow, the Soviets launched two secessionist regimes: in Iranian Azerbaijan and in the Republic of Kurdistan. Throughout the Iranian crisis, all sides, including the USSR, Great Britain, and the United States, had oil and influence in Iran as primary considerations. For the moment, however, Stalin seemed to be holding all the cards, but he preferred to avoid a direct showdown with the West. He may have expected that the British and the Americans would eventually prefer to resolve the future of Iran at a trilateral conference (as Russia and Great Britain had done in 1907).⁶² Indeed, Byrnes refused to join the British in their protest against the Soviet instigation of Iranian separatism. The secretary of state was eager to reach a general agreement with Stalin.⁶³

Stalin’s methods reveal a recognizable pattern. Each time, the Soviet leader sided with expansionist-minded subordinates and effectively mobilized jingoist sentiments in the Soviet bureaucracy. The Soviets acted unilaterally, under the camouflage of secrecy and denial. They exploited the presence of the indigenous revolutionary and nationalist movements but preferred to create movements under their control in order to further their goals. Although Stalin pretended to stay within the framework of great power diplomacy, he constantly tested its limits. This pattern allowed Stalin to achieve impressive tactical victories in Central Europe and the Far East. The Kremlin ruler, however, did not realize that every such victory wasted Soviet postwar political capital in the United States. Ultimately, it exhausted the potential for Stalin’s diplomacy.

FROM IRAN TO A COLD WAR

The Iranian government began to realize it would have to negotiate a deal directly with Moscow. On February 19, 1946, the new Iranian prime minister, Ahmad Qavam al-Saltana, came to Moscow to meet Stalin. The talks lasted for three weeks. During the war, Qavam had leaned toward the Soviet side, and this factor may have influenced Soviet tactics. Stalin and Molotov acted as a “good cop–bad cop” team: on the one hand, they dangled before Qavam a promise to act as mediators between Tehran and the separatist regimes; on the other hand, they pressed the prime minister to grant oil concessions to the Soviet Union. Qavam pointed out the Majlis’s explicit ban on any oil concessions while foreign troops remained in Iranian territory. Stalin encouraged Qavam to change the Iranian constitution and rule without the Majlis. Soviet troops, he promised, would “secure” Qavam’s rule. To emphasize the last point, Soviet tank formations began a movement toward Tehran. The Iranian leader ignored this poisoned offer; however, he promised Stalin he would obtain an oil concession for the Soviet Union after the Majlis elections.⁶⁴

Soon it became clear that Qavam had outfoxed Stalin. Jamil Hasanli concludes that the Iranian prime minister “correctly assessed U.S. capabilities in the post-war world” and shifted his orientation from the Soviet Union to the United States. While the talks dragged on in Moscow, the international deadline for withdrawal of foreign troops from Iran passed on March 2, 1946. The Soviet Union found itself in an open breach of this agreement. The Iranian government and the Majlis, encouraged by American diplomats, decided to bring this case to the United Nations, a brilliant move that changed the whole game in Iran. Suddenly, American public opinion became galvanized by “the Iranian crisis”: now at stake was not only the future of Iran’s oil but also the ability of the new United Nations to defend its members against the encroachments of the big powers.⁶⁵

The Soviet-Iranian conflict occurred at the time of an anti-Soviet shift in U.S. foreign policy and military circles: by March these groups began to see every Kremlin move as part of an aggressive Communist pattern. Truman decided to send the battleship USS Missouri to the Turkish Straits to support Turkey in the face of the Soviet ultimatum. On February 28, Byrnes publicly proclaimed a new policy of “patience with firmness” toward the Soviet Union. George Kennan sent his “long telegram” from Moscow a day after Stalin’s first meeting with Qavam. He explained that the United States could not turn the Soviet Union into a reliable international partner and suggested a containment of Soviet expansionism. On the next day after Churchill’s speech in Fulton, Missouri, the United States delivered a note of protest, saying that it could not “remain indifferent” to the delay of

Soviet military withdrawal from Iran. The Iranian prime minister left Moscow on the day *Pravda* published Stalin's angry reply to Churchill. The support of Iran in the spring of 1946, one historian concluded, "marked the transition from a passive to an active policy" for the postwar United States.⁶⁶

The hearing of the Iranian affair at the United Nations was scheduled for March 25. As Molotov began to prepare for this event, he discovered that the Soviet Union faced diplomatic isolation. "We began to probe [on Iran]," he recollected, "but nobody supported us."⁶⁷ Stalin failed to predict the far-reaching impact of the Iranian crisis. He regarded the fuss about Iran as just another test of nerves, an ongoing rivalry among a few statesmen. The sudden intensity of American involvement puzzled him. One day before the UN hearing, the Kremlin ruler ordered the immediate withdrawal of troops and instructed the Soviet ambassador in Tehran to strike a deal with Qavam. This pattern of behavior, pressing until the last moment before the collision and then pulling away, reflected Stalin's understanding of how international affairs worked. The damage, however, was done: Stalin's pressure on Iran, combined with his belligerence toward Turkey, put the Soviet Union on a collision course not only with the Truman administration but also with broad segments of American public opinion.

In response to cries of betrayal from the dispirited leader of the ADP, Jafar Pishevari, Stalin sent him an amazingly hypocritical letter. He asserted that bigger "revolutionary" reasons, which Pishevari was unable to see, necessitated the Soviet pullout. If Soviet troops had stayed in Iran, Stalin wrote, this would have "undercut the basis of our liberationist policies in Europe and Asia." The Soviet withdrawal, he continued, would delegitimize the Anglo-American military presence in other countries and facilitate a movement of liberation there and "would render our policy of liberation more justified and efficient."⁶⁸

Soviet diplomatic defeat at first was not apparent. Stalin felt vindicated for a brief time in April 1946 when Qavam agreed to grant oil concessions to the Soviets, contingent upon the approval of the newly elected Majlis. Only in September did Stalin admit that the Iranian parliament was not about to ratify Qavam's concession. As usual, he blamed his underlings for "an oversight" but did not punish anybody.⁶⁹ In October, the Iranian prime minister engineered a rightist crackdown on the separatists. Kurdish and Azeri regimes in northern Iran, left without Soviet military support, were doomed. When Iranian troops entered the northern provinces, Stalin abandoned the rebels to their fate. Responding to frantic appeals from Baku, he opened the Soviet border for ADP elites and some refugees, but did nothing else. Despite the collapse, Bagirov and many others in Soviet Azerbaijan continued to hope that "in a case of military conflict" between the Soviet Union and Iran, there would be a chance to annex

Iranian territories and “reunify” Azerbaijan.⁷⁰ However, the Kremlin leadership had never wanted to provoke a war over Azerbaijan.

Almost simultaneously, Stalin suffered another regional defeat. On August 7, 1946, the Soviets sent a note to the Turks, restating their “proposal” of the “joint” control of the straits. There was not a word about territorial demands in the note, and Soviet diplomats hinted that if an agreement on the straits was reached, these demands would be dropped. The Turks, now backed by Washington and London, responded with a firm refusal. Again, Stalin’s new move in his war of nerves against Turkey backfired by producing a genuine “war scare” among U.S. politicians and the military. Prompted by foggy intelligence signals and exaggerated estimates about Soviet military concentration near Turkey’s borders, some in these circles began to contemplate, for the first time, an atomic strike against the Soviet Union, including the plants of the Urals and the Caucasus oil industry. This time, as some evidence suggests, Stalin may have realized just how close he was to the brink and called the campaign off. Publicly, however, he dismissed the American atomic monopoly with his usual bravado.⁷¹

Once again, Stalin was not ready to clash with the United States over Turkey—to the great chagrin of Georgian officials. Around that time, Akaki Mgeladze, the senior Georgian official, expressed his frustration in a private conversation with Marshal Fedor Tolbukhin, commander of the Trans-Caucasus military district. Ukrainians, Mgeladze complained, had “regained” all their lands but Georgians were still waiting. Tolbukhin expressed his complete sympathy for the aspirations of the Georgian people.⁷²

The behavior of the United States was another crucial factor that confused Stalin’s calculations. From February 1946 on, the United States adopted a new strategy of actively defending Western Europe, as well as Turkey and Iran, seeing these regions and countries as potential victims of “Communist expansion.” Since the fall of 1945, the United States, not the Soviet Union, had acted as the defining factor in global international relations. And by 1946, the Truman administration decided to contain the Soviet Union, dramatically changing the outlines of international relations. The Americans were already moving toward confrontation, not cooperation, with the Soviet Union. The possibilities of success for Stalin’s great power games began to diminish.

The Soviet Union still enjoyed enormous authority and had many millions of friends in the West.⁷³ Yet the most influential friends were gone. Roosevelt’s death and the subsequent departure of Harry Hopkins, Henry Morgenthau, Harold Ickes, and the other New Dealers forever ended the Soviet Union’s “spe-

cial relations” with the United States. The last ally Stalin had in the U.S. government was Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace, who took a bold stand for continuing the wartime cooperation with Moscow. In fact, there was communication between Wallace and the Kremlin dictator. In late October 1945, Wallace used the NKGB’s station chief in Washington to communicate the following message to Stalin: “Truman was a petty politician who reached his current post by accident. He often has ‘good’ intentions but too easily falls under the influence of people around him.” Wallace described himself as “fighting for Truman’s soul” with a very powerful group that included Byrnes. That group, he alleged, was extremely anti-Soviet; they “advance an idea of a dominating Anglo-Saxon bloc consisting mainly of the U.S. and England” confronting the “extremely hostile Slavic world” led by the Soviet Union. Wallace offered to play the role of Soviet “agent of influence” in the United States. He pleaded with Stalin to help him and his supporters.⁷⁴

The NKGB transmitted this extraordinary appeal to Stalin. His reaction is unknown. In any case, Stalin was not about to alter his international behavior to help Wallace and American leftists. Nevertheless, he expected to use Wallace and his friends in his struggle for American public opinion against Byrnes and other adversaries.

We also do not know how Stalin reacted to the analytical and intelligence feedback regarding American attitudes toward the Soviet Union. In fall 1945, Igor Gouzenko, Soviet cipher clerk in Ottawa, and Elizabeth Bentley, an American citizen running a ring of Soviet spies in the United States, defected and told Canadian intelligence and the FBI about Soviet intelligence activities in North America. These defections produced a snowball effect in the following months. They led not only to a rapid heightening in the anti-Soviet mood in Canada and the United States but also to the blackout in Soviet intelligence efforts in these countries. The NKGB and GRU hierarchies delayed informing Stalin, Molotov, and Beria about their intelligence failures until the end of November. Meanwhile, as historian Allen Weinstein and journalist Alexander Vassiliev discovered, Bentley’s defection “managed virtually overnight to freeze all active NKGB intelligence activity in the United States.” Fearful for their remaining intelligence assets, the NKGB froze all contacts with an extremely valuable British agent in Washington, “Homer” (Donald Maclean). The GRU probably did the same with its networks.⁷⁵ Thus, American policy-making circles suddenly became more opaque to Stalin, just at the moment when the rapid switch to the policy of containment occurred.

Despite the effect of the Gouzenko affair, Stalin knew about the rapid tough-

ening of the U.S. stance toward the Soviet Union. Soviet intelligence, according to Russian historian Vladimir Pechatnov, eventually picked up a copy of Kennan's "long telegram" in Washington. Stalin and Molotov also understood the geo-strategic implications of a U.S.-British alliance: a combination of American economic potential and atomic power and the British empire's military bases around the globe led to a dangerous encirclement of the Soviet Union. Yet this knowledge ultimately did little to alter Stalin's decisions. Pechatnov wonders if Stalin was aware "of the connection between his own actions and a growing resistance to them." The answer is, probably not.⁷⁶

Stalin assumed that the other powers would remain selfish, scheming, and quarrelsome, in accordance with the Leninist concept of imperialism. When Stalin assessed his Western opponents, he did it based on his notion of their "imperialist" nature and logic. When the Labour government in London did not show consistency in this regard, Stalin heaped scorn on them. Ernest Bevin and Clement Attlee, he said in November 1945, "are great fools; they have the power in a great country and they don't know what to do with it. They are empirically oriented."⁷⁷ Stalin's contempt for Bevin contrasted with his attitude, ranging from respect to cold fury, toward Churchill.

Ideological influences, as John Lewis Gaddis has noted, explained Stalin's expansionism and his belief that the Soviet Union could get away with it. In particular, Stalin's expectation of an inevitable postwar economic crisis and his belief in "imperialist contradictions" among capitalist states made him dismiss the possibility of Western cooperation.⁷⁸ Also, Stalin's expansionism was linked to his domestic politics of mobilization, which included Russo-centric propaganda and his appeal to other forms of nationalism. Nationalist sentiments and aspirations among Soviet elites and the broader public gave domestic support for the Kremlin's policies of "socialist imperialism" in 1945-46.

It is not possible to determine whether Stalin expected that his toughness in the Balkans and his probing in Turkey and Iran would provoke a rupture with the Western allies. It is clear, though, that Stalin's actions helped pave the way for the Cold War. His tactics in the Middle East helped to bring about a postwar cooperation between Great Britain and the United States and made U.S. administrations react harshly to "Soviet expansionism." Stalin's assumptions played a trick on him. Stalin was brutally effective inasmuch as his territorial and political goals could be supported by the force of the Soviet army. However, as a diplomatic and public relations practice, this stance was disastrous, just as Litvinov had feared. Without adequate feedback about his own failures, he persevered in the course that helped to turn the tension between the USSR and the United States into a full-

scale confrontation. And, later, his black-and-white worldview, faith in brute force, and Marxist-Leninist ideological baggage left him without any alternative to the Cold War and the unilateral mobilization of Soviet economic and military power.

The new American global power and the determination of the Truman administration to use it was an independent factor. The United States, many historians agree, began to act as a global power not only in response to the Soviet challenge but also according to its own blueprint for the world. The post-Wilsonian program to build a “free and democratic” Europe and contain Communism elsewhere was a new revolutionary factor that was fundamentally changing foreign affairs. And there were powerful forces in American political circles and society that had always believed, as W. R. Smyser concludes, that “only [the United States] could have interest and forces all around the world.” In the minds of these thinkers, for the postwar peace the Soviet Union could have a regional role but could not play the role of a truly great power.⁷⁹ At the same time, one wonders if these forces would have had their way and if the United States would have moved to center stage in world politics so rapidly without the “help” of the Soviet threat and Stalin’s actions.

Stalin’s extrapolation of the lessons of *European* international relations during the previous century kept his mind closed to the motives behind *American* global interventionism. Stalin could foresee the end of American isolationism, but he failed to give credence to the huge impulse behind the ideas of the “American century,” which, couched in multilateral language, drove the United States to stay in Europe. Until the fall of 1945, Stalin received many benefits from his partnership with Washington. His experience dealing with Americans led him to believe he could squeeze out other marginal gains without encountering U.S. resistance, so long as the Soviet actions targeted the British spheres of influence. Much to Stalin’s surprise, the Truman administration decided that there was no alternative to containment of Soviet expansionism in every part of the world, including Central Europe. This decision set the stage for decades of Cold War.

Stalin did avoid one huge mistake. He never openly posed as an aggressor and carefully preserved the veneer of international legitimacy on his expansionism. The Soviet leader left to the West the role of breaking the agreements of Yalta and Potsdam and starting a confrontation. Later, Molotov could claim: “What does the ‘cold war’ mean? We were simply on the offensive. They became angry at us, of course, but we had to consolidate what we conquered.”⁸⁰ The majority of Soviet citizens shared this perception. For decades to come, they would continue to believe that not Stalin but the United States had unleashed the Cold War.

DOMESTIC "COLD WAR" BEGINS

Stalin feared that the effect of Hiroshima, combined with the overall sense of laxity and fatigue after the war, could cause Soviet elites to seek an accommodation with the United States, perhaps even an acceptance of U.S. superiority. Molotov's "softness" during the London conference made him a target of Stalin's anger and suspicion.⁸¹ Back in Moscow in early October 1945, Molotov had to admit his errors before his own subordinates at the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. He described the conference as a battlefield where "certain American and British quarters" launched the first "diplomatic attack on the foreign policy gains of the Soviet Union."⁸²

This was just the beginning of Molotov's troubles. In early October, Stalin left for a vacation on the Black Sea—his first in many years. The war had greatly aged the Kremlin leader, and foreign journalists began to speculate about Stalin's ill health and possible retirement. They even named Molotov and Zhukov as his successors. Reading press dispatches, Stalin began to suspect that his closest lieutenants (Beria, Malenkov, Molotov, and Mikoyan) might no longer need his leadership and would not be averse to accommodating the United States and Great Britain behind his back. Stalin was incensed when he read that Molotov, speaking at a reception for foreign journalists, hinted at the forthcoming relaxation of state censorship on world media. In a coded telegram, Stalin lashed out at Molotov's "liberalism and ad-libbing." He blamed his lieutenant for attempting to carry out a policy of "concessions to Anglo-Americans," to "give foreigners an impression that he had his own policy distinct from the policy of the Government and Stalin, the impression that with him, Molotov, [the West] could do business." By one stroke of a pen he excluded Molotov from the narrow circle of leadership and proposed to Beria, Malenkov, and Mikoyan the removal of Molotov from his positions as first deputy to Stalin and foreign minister. The attempt of other lieutenants to defend Molotov infuriated Stalin even more. After some time and Molotov's pleas for mercy, Stalin agreed to put his old friend Vyacheslav on probation and authorized him to continue negotiations with Byrnes.⁸³

While Stalin was planting the mine under Molotov, he cracked his whip over all his lieutenants. He wrote to them: "There are now many in seats of authority who wax ecstatic like children when hearing praises of the Churchills, the Trumans, and the Byrnes and, conversely, losing their heart after unfavorable references from these misters. As I see it, these are dangerous attitudes, since they spawn in our ranks servility before foreign figures. Against this servility before foreigners we must fight tooth and nail."⁸⁴ This cable contained the gist of the ideological campaign of xenophobic isolationism that would erupt in a few

months. This campaign would force all Stalin's subordinates to reconfirm their loyalty and zeal on the new front, uprooting the mood of "kowtowing before the West" allegedly present in the Soviet state apparatus and society.

Had Stalin died at that moment, his colleagues might have chosen a more accommodating course toward the United States. They lacked his unique talent for doom scenarios; they also shared the nomenklatura's preference that life after the war should be less demanding. As their actions after 1953 would demonstrate, they did not and could not ignore, as Stalin did, the country's exhaustion and misery. Still, Stalin's subordinates were prisoners of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm. Xenophobic and isolationist, they were torn between the desire for peaceful reconstruction and the temptations of "socialist imperialism." They wanted cooperation with Western powers, but on Soviet terms, with preservation of Soviet economic autarky and freedom of action.

In the fall of 1945, the Soviet leadership and officials debated if the Soviet Union should join the postwar international economic and financial institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) created at Bretton Woods. Some high officials dealing with state budgets, finances, industries, and trade argued, for pragmatic and economic grounds, for Soviet participation. The commissar of finances, Arseny Zverev, insisted that a Soviet presence in these institutions, even in an observer's capacity, would help in future trade and loan negotiations with the West. This position received support from Mikoyan and Lozovsky. They considered American loans and technology as necessary to Soviet economic recovery. Other officials, including Nikolai Voznesensky, the head of Gosplan, the State Planning Committee, argued that foreign debts would undermine Soviet economic independence. In a memorandum to Molotov in October 1945, Ivan Maisky cautioned that Americans used their loans to the British to open their empire for U.S. economic and financial penetration. Particularly worrisome, he wrote, was American insistence that money would be disbursed under their control and that Great Britain should dismantle its state mechanisms for trade monopoly.⁸⁵

By February 1946, according to Vladimir Pechatnov, isolationist attitudes prevailed inside the Soviet bureaucracy. Some officials appealed "to Stalin's reluctance both to make the Soviet economy more transparent and to deposit part of the Soviet gold reserve" with the International Monetary Fund. Stalin decided not to join the Bretton Woods system. In March, the official correspondence of the finance ministry already stressed the new stance—that the Western powers might interpret a Soviet presence in the international institutions as a sign of Soviet weakness and readiness for unilateral concessions "under US pressure." Molotov, when asked in the 1970s, said that the Americans "were trying to draw us into

their company, but in the subordinate role. We would have got into the position of dependence, and still would not have obtained anything from them.”⁸⁶

The Generalissimo used the occasion of the first postwar “elections” for the Supreme Soviet to set new guidelines for the Communist Party and state cadres on February 9, 1946, in the Bolshoi Theater. Stalin’s speech, infused with ideological language, announced an unabashedly unilateralist postwar course. For many observers, it meant a final break with the spirit of the Grand Alliance; there was not a single friendly word in the speech to the Western powers. The speech commanded the officials in the audience to convert the Soviet Union into a superpower in one decade, “to surpass in the near future the achievements of science beyond the borders of our country” (a hint at the future atomic-missile race), and to “increase the level of our industry, for instance, threefold in comparison with the pre-war level.” This, the speech concluded, would be the only condition that would ensure Soviet security “against any eventualities.” Stalin wrote the speech himself, edited it several times, and even prescribed the audience’s reaction by inserting the words “furious applause,” “applause and standing ovation,” and so on, in the speech draft after the key paragraphs.⁸⁷ The speech was broadcast on the radio and printed in tens of millions of copies. Shrewd listeners and readers immediately recognized it as a death knell to hopes of a better life, as well as postwar cooperation with Western allies. Stalin ordered the nomenklatura to make another big leap forward.⁸⁸

The new course, in effect, transformed the postwar period into a time of mobilization and preparation for future lethal “eventualities.” The official statistics show the drop in military expenditures, from 128.7 billion rubles in 1945 to 73.7 billion rubles in 1946. They remained at this level, which was higher than the prewar level, in 1947 as well. This figure did not include the costs of the atomic project, which came from the “special” funds of the state. The plans for 1946 also included forty new naval bases. The consumer-oriented sectors of the economy, above all agriculture, remained in a disastrous condition, as the official estimate from Finance Minister Zverev to Stalin in October 1946 indicated:⁸⁹

	1940	1942	1944	1945
Bread (in millions of tons)	24.0	12.1	10.0	11.0
Meat (in thousands of tons)	1,417	672	516	624
Butter (in thousands of tons)	228	111	106	117
Sugar (in thousands of tons)	2,181	114	245	465
Clothing items (in millions)	183.0	54.0	47.0	50.0
Shoes, pairs (in millions)	211.0	52.7	67.4	66.1

The living standards of the Soviet people, the victors, plummeted to a level below that of the vanquished Germans. During the war, the state had requisitioned a large part of people's incomes through the enforced purchase of war bonds, semivoluntary donations, and indirect taxes. Inflation did additional damage.⁹⁰ The prewar living standard, already very low, looked by 1946 like an unreachable dream.

Churchill's iron curtain speech supplied Stalin with another excellent opportunity for preparing Soviet citizens for the life of destitution and hunger ahead. In his reply in *Pravda* on March 14, 1946, personally drafted and carefully edited, Stalin called the former British ally "a warmonger," compared him to Hitler, and contrasted Soviet "internationalism" with Churchill's search for "racist" Anglo-Saxon world domination. The harshness of the response was calculated: in this way, Stalin indicated his uncompromising attitude toward any Western attempt to challenge the Soviet sphere of influence in Central Europe. The common public wish from now on would not be cooperation with the Western powers but the prevention of war with them. This fear was exactly what Stalin needed to promote his mobilization campaign.⁹¹

Stalin put Andrei Zhdanov in charge of the mobilization campaign (known as *Zhdanovshchina*). Zhdanov had not excelled in his wartime role as Leningrad's party chief, yet his background made him good enough for the propaganda job. He came from a well-educated family—his father, like Lenin's father, was an inspector of public schools, and his mother belonged to the nobility and had graduated from the Moscow Conservatory. He was cultured and a good speaker. In April 1946, Zhdanov transmitted "the order of comrade Stalin" to the central party apparatus and propagandists: to refute decisively the assumption that "people should take some time to recover after the war, etc."⁹²

Another target of Stalin's campaign was war commanders. The Kremlin leader suspected the conquerors of Europe of Bonapartist tendencies. Stalin wanted to whip them into shape as the mass demobilization continued. By September 1946, the strength of the Soviet army had dropped, according to American intelligence estimates, from a peak of 12.5 million to 4.5 million.⁹³ Meanwhile, the military elite was resting on its laurels, and its combat spirit evaporated in the orgy of drinking, womanizing, and expropriations. In March 1946, a first tentative purge was carried out of the top echelon of "the generation of victors." A number of military leaders, state managers, and engineers were framed in the "affair of the aircraft industry." General Alexei Shakhurin, commissar of the aircraft-building industry, and marshal of aviation Alexander Novikov, commander in chief of the Soviet air force, were abruptly fired and then arrested on trumped-up charges of arming the Red Army with "flawed" aircraft.⁹⁴

At the same time, Stalin's military counterintelligence "discovered" that Marshal Georgy Zhukov had brought carloads of goods and treasures from Germany for his household and personal use. Now the Soviet national hero, who led the Victory Parade on a white stallion, went into semiexile as commander of the Odessa military district.⁹⁵ At the same time, Georgy Malenkov, Stalin's loyal lieutenant, who had been in charge of the aircraft industry during the war, lost his positions in the Party Secretariat and the Organizational Bureau (he, however, was quickly pardoned by Stalin). What the dictator wanted was to demonstrate that war accomplishments did not protect against purges. Adding insult to injury for the veterans and for millions of others, in late 1946, Stalin cancelled the public celebration and the national holiday on Victory Day; instead, people got a day off on New Year's Day.

Some downgraded veterans woke up to the horrid realities of Stalin's rule. It was at this time that the NKGB began to monitor all Soviet military leaders, and some of these conversations have now reached historians. These records include private conversations between army general Vasily Gordov and his former chief of staff, General Fedor Rybalchenko, on New Year's Eve in 1946. Gordov, a ruthless army commander at Stalingrad, Berlin, and Prague, was one of Zhukov's sympathizers and lost his high position. Anger and alcohol loosened the tongues of both generals. They agreed that people in the West lived incomparably better than Soviet people, and that life in the countryside was downright miserable. Rybalchenko said that "people are angry about their life and complain openly, on trains and everywhere. Famine is unbelievable, but newspapers just lie. Only the government lives well, while people are starving." Gordov wondered aloud if there was a way to work and live abroad ("in Finland or in Scandinavian countries"). The generals regretted the absence of Western assistance and feared that Stalin's policy of confrontation with the Anglo-American bloc would end up in war and Soviet defeat. Rybalchenko concluded: "I think before ten years elapse they will whip our ass. Everybody says there would be war. Our prestige has been declining abominably! Nobody will support the Soviet Union."⁹⁶

The discontented military was fully aware of Stalin's role in instigating new purges. When Rybalchenko proposed that Gordov should beg Stalin for forgiveness, the latter only scoffed at this proposal. He exclaimed with pride, characteristic of the postwar elite: "Why should I go and debase myself?" Three days later, alone with his wife, Gordov confessed that his trip to the countryside (before his "elections" as a deputy of the Supreme Soviet) made him "completely reborn." "I am convinced that if today we disband collective farms, tomorrow

there will be order, market, everything in abundance. People should be left alone; they have the right to live better lives. They won these rights in the battle!" Stalin, concluded Gordov, "ruined Russia."⁹⁷

Such criticism of Stalin among Soviet elites was still rare.⁹⁸ But discontent was growing by the end of 1946, when a severe drought struck the most fertile lands in Ukraine, Crimea, Moldova, the Volga region, and the central region of Russia, the Far East, Siberia, and Kazakhstan. This natural calamity, combined with the lack of manpower and resources after the war, created the danger of mass famine.⁹⁹ But it was Stalin and his policies that, instead of averting famine, caused this man-made catastrophe, similar to the famine of 1932–33.

As in the 1930s, Stalin refused to admit that a disaster was taking place and preferred to denounce "wreckers" and "speculators," who were allegedly responsible for the bread shortage. The Kremlin leader had huge "strategic" grain reserves that he had ruthlessly accumulated for war needs. Now he refused to release this grain for consumption. Stalin also had 1,500 tons of gold in state coffers to buy food abroad. Molotov and Mikoyan later recalled that Stalin banned the sale of gold. He even rejected food assistance from the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration to Russia (while allowing some assistance to Ukraine and White Russia). At the same time he pledged to send Soviet food to Poland and Czechoslovakia, as well as to French and Italian Communists.¹⁰⁰

Stalin returned to the prewar policy of impoverishing the Soviet people, especially the peasantry and agricultural workers, in order to provide money for industrial rebuilding and rearmament. Between 1946 and 1948, taxes on peasants increased by 30 percent, and by 1950 they had jumped by 150 percent. The state also refused to pay back the war bonds, billions of rubles that had been "borrowed," in fact confiscated, from the Soviet people. Instead, new reconstruction bonds were imposed on the struggling citizenry.¹⁰¹

Stalin certainly knew how many people resented the authorities and him personally. But he also knew that only the elite presented a real danger. Mikoyan recalled: Stalin "knew that the main feature of the Russian *muzhik* was his patience and endurance."¹⁰² The purges that aimed at undermining the elites' pride and autonomy gradually turned into a new round of terror against them. In 1945 and 1946, there was a decline in the number of indictments by the NKVD's Special Commission, from 26,600 to 8,000, but by 1949 the level had jumped to 38,500.¹⁰³ In January 1947, General Gordov, his wife, and General Rybalchenko were arrested and imprisoned, along with other military figures and their family members.¹⁰⁴ The purges were still limited, and they proceeded very quietly, without public denunciations. But within a couple of years, when the Cold War

polarized the world and Stalin's position became unshakeable, the Kremlin dictator began to spill the elites' blood on a growing scale.

STALIN "CONSOLIDATES" SOVIET SOCIETY

Norman Naimark observes that "war provides cover for rulers to carry out projects of ethnic cleansing" and "provides the opportunity to deal with a troublesome minority by suspending civil law." For Stalin, the growing confrontation with the West provided a chance to restore full control over the elites. It also gave him a justification for the Russification of Soviet elites and bureaucracy and the consolidation of Soviet society with the help of strong nationalist themes and a rigid ethnic hierarchy.¹⁰⁵

The campaign against "cosmopolitanism," an official cover for anti-Semitic policies, was a major part of this consolidation. Stalin's suspicion of Jews began to grow with the onset of the Cold War. He began to imagine a conspiracy of Soviet Jewish elites, Jewish organizations in the United States, and Jews in his immediate entourage. Since the 1920s, many Politburo members, including Molotov, Voroshilov, Mikhail Kalinin, and Andrei Andreev, had married Jewish women, and now this began to feed Stalin's suspicions.¹⁰⁶ In 1946, Zhdanov passed Stalin's order down through the ranks: accelerate the removal of "cosmopolitan" cadres, primarily ethnic Jews, from the Soviet bureaucracy, including from the key positions of Soviet propaganda, ideology, and culture. The first blow, reflecting the new priorities, was against the Soviet Information Bureau (Sovinformburo), the voice, known throughout the world, of Kremlin wartime propaganda. Zhdanov bluntly told the official who had trouble understanding precisely who the cosmopolitan enemy was in his agency to "get rid of the synagogue there." Soviet Jews had served the Soviet regime, filling the ranks of the professional and cultural elite for two decades. Now it was time to purge them.¹⁰⁷

In spring 1948, prominent Zionists appealed to Moscow to send "fifty thousand" Soviet Jews as "volunteers" to Palestine to help them against the Arabs, promising, in return, sympathy to Soviet interests. Soviet officials and experts on the Middle East reacted with great skepticism; the prevalent view was that the class nature of Zionism would definitely put Zionists on the side of the United States, not the USSR. Surprisingly, despite his growing anti-Semitism, Stalin overruled the skeptics and authorized massive military assistance to the Zionists through Czechoslovakia. In May 1948, even before the war in Palestine ended, the Soviet Union recognized the state of Israel *de jure*, even before the United States had done so. Molotov asserted in the 1970s that "everybody, except Stalin and

myself," had been against this decision. He explained that to avoid recognizing Israel would have allowed the enemies of the USSR to depict it as opposed to Jewish national self-determination.¹⁰⁸ But more probably, Stalin concluded that supporting the Zionist movement could be his only tool to weaken British influence in the Middle East. Also, he must have hoped to exacerbate the British-American tensions over Zionism and even to gain access to the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁹

However, Israel, as most experts predicted, quickly began to lean on the United States. Also, the phenomenal show of support for Israel among world Jewry, including Soviet Jews, startled the Kremlin leader. Even Voroshilov's wife, Ekaterina (Golda Gorbman), said to his relatives on the day Israel was proclaimed: "Now we have our own country, too." The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC) had already become in Stalin's eyes the hotbed of Jewish nationalism connected to Zionist circles in the United States and Israel. Stalin knew that many Soviet Jews saw the head of the JAFC, the famous actor Solomon Mikhoels, as their informal national leader. At the end of the war, they appealed to Molotov, his wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, Voroshilov, and Kaganovich to help set up a Jewish republic in Crimea. Even before the recognition of Israel, the dictator began to take measures to eliminate what he imagined as a potential Zionist conspiracy inside the Soviet Union. In January 1948, the MGB (the successor to the NKGB), at Stalin's order, killed Mikhoels, staging it as a road accident. By the end of 1948, other leaders of the JAFC were arrested and interrogated. Among many other things, they were accused of an alleged plot to turn Crimea into a Zionist-American beachhead inside the Soviet Union. In January 1949, Molotov's deputy, Lozovsky, the former head of the Sovinformburo and the political supervisor of the JAFC, was arrested. Molotov's wife was also arrested. Molotov recalled that "his knees began to shake," when Stalin read at the Politburo the materials collected against Polina Zhemchuzhina. The same fate befell the wives of Soviet "President" Mikhail Kalinin and of Alexander Poskrebyshv, Stalin's personal secretary.¹¹⁰ These, as it turned out, were only the first steps toward a colossal campaign against a "Zionist conspiracy" that culminated shortly before Stalin's death with the arrests of the "Kremlin doctors affair" and the announcement that these doctors allegedly prepared, on the instructions of an American Zionist center, the assassination of Soviet political and military leaders. Soviet Jews, including many in the Soviet bureaucracy and cultural elites, expected imminent arrest and deportation to Siberia.¹¹¹

The central role of Crimea in the JAFC case indicated Stalin's continuing obsession with the southern flank of the Soviet Union and unsuccessful pressures on Turkey and Iran. In 1947-48, Turkey became a recipient of American financial and military assistance and a key American regional ally. Iran was mov-

ing in the same direction. Meanwhile, Stalin's unfulfilled promises to the peoples of South Caucasus began to backfire as well. The Communists of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, all Stalin's appointees, acted like quarrelling housewives in a communal kitchen. After the dream of returning "ancestral lands" in Turkey did not materialize, the leaders of Georgia and Armenia began to scheme against Azerbaijan. Armenia's party secretary, Grigory Arutynov, complained that he had no room to settle and resources to feed the repatriates (although, instead of the projected 400,000 Armenians, only 90,000 arrived in Soviet Armenia). He proposed to resettle Azeri peasants, living on Armenian territory, in Azerbaijan. He also suggested transferring Nagorny Karabagh, a hilly area historically disputed between the Azeris and the Armenians, from the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan to the Soviet Republic of Armenia. Bagirov responded with counterarguments and counterclaims. Georgians and Armenians hinted to Moscow about the growth of "Armenian nationalism" in the region.¹¹²

In December 1947, Stalin accepted Arutynov's proposal to resettle Azeri peasants outside of Armenia. However, he did not support the redrawing of the republic's borders. And at some point, he decided to resume the "ethnic cleansing" of South Caucasus from suspicious and potentially disloyal elements. In September 1948, a fire on the steamer *Pobeda* (Victory), which was bringing Armenian repatriates, triggered Stalin's suspicions. From his Black Sea dacha he cabled to Malenkov: "There are American agents among the repatriates. They prepared a terrorist act on the steamer 'Pobeda.'" On the next day Malenkov cabled back: "You are right, of course. We will take all necessary measures." The Politburo immediately passed the order to stop repatriation.¹¹³ In April and May 1949, the Politburo decreed that all "Armenian nationalists" (including some repatriates from all over the world), as well as all "former Turkish citizens" from Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, be deported to Kazakhstan and Siberia. Greeks were also deported. The deportations from South Caucasus in 1944-49 involved 157,000 people.¹¹⁴ This "cleansing" did not end the nationalist tensions. Still, Stalin managed to bring the regional politics, destabilized by his foreign policy adventures, back under control.

Simultaneously, Stalin delivered a lethal blow to the "Leningraders," meaning those party and state officials from the Russian Federation, especially Leningrad, who had been ethnic Russians and had become popular among the Russian public during the war. These officials hoped that Stalin would continue to rely on them for postwar reconstruction. This group included Nikolai Voznesensky, the Gosplan head; chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Federation and member of the Party Orgburo Mikhail Rodionov; Central Committee secretary and Orgburo member Alexei Kuznetsov; and first secretary of Leningrad's

Communist Party organization Petr Popkov. They were protégés of Andrei Zhdanov and had been in charge of Leningrad's heroic defense during the 900 days of the German siege. Beria and Malenkov, threatened by this group's ascendancy, did everything to compromise the Leningraders in Stalin's eyes and finally succeeded. The Kremlin launched an investigation into the "Leningrad affair," as well as the "Gosplan affair" against Voznesensky. In February and March 1949, Stalin dismissed Voznesensky, Rodionov, Kuznetsov, and Popkov from their positions. After several months, the MGB arrested them, along with another 65 high officials and 145 family members and relatives. The "investigation" used appalling methods of torture. Stalin made the Politburo members, including Malenkov and Minister of Defense Nikolai Bulganin, attend interrogations personally. On October 1, 1950, 23 high officials, including Voznesensky, Rodionov, Kuznetsov, and Popkov, were executed. About the same time, the arrested generals, including Gordov, Rybalchenko, and Grigory Kulik, were also shot.¹¹⁵

Within a few short years, Stalin had successfully stolen the glory of victory and the fruits of peace from the Soviet people, victors in World War II. Of course, he could not have done this without the support of millions of willing collaborators, including military and civilian elites. Many war veterans slipped from heroic roles back into the position of "cogs" in the state machinery. They welcomed and supported the transformation of the USSR into a world empire and superpower. Reawakened chauvinism and nationalism and ideological belief in the aggressive hostility of "Western imperialism" toward the Soviet Union—all these factors contributed to the powerful amalgam that made millions of Soviet citizens subscribe in good conscience to Stalin's postwar plans.¹¹⁶ Many veterans came to regard the Soviet empire and its security buffer of Central Europe as the necessary substitute for bread, happiness, and a comfortable life after victory. They also compensated for the permanent lack of domestic security by projecting their fears outside, by resurrecting the cult of Soviet military power, displaying overt hostility toward the West, and embracing a new anti-Americanism. This became the core of the Soviet collective identity for decades to come.¹¹⁷

While appealing to the impulses of Russian chauvinism, state propaganda and the media excoriated Jewish "cosmopolitans." During the purge of Jews from Moscow State University, Anatoly Chernyaev listened to his friend, a war veteran, explaining to him: "For several years the party has been fighting against Jewish domination. It is cleansing itself from the Jews." At this same time, another brave young veteran spoke up against anti-Semitism. He immediately lost his party membership and disappeared from the university.¹¹⁸ The anti-Semitic purge gave those who supported anti-Semitic policies a false sense of solidarity and power akin to what many Germans had felt under Hitler. Another witness described

such types: “The war had given them a taste of power. They were incapable of critical thinking. They studied to be masters of life.”¹¹⁹

At one of the anti-cosmopolitan meetings at Moscow State University, Professor Sergei Dmitriev asked his colleague what the reason for this campaign could be. The answer was: “War. People must be prepared for a new war. And it is approaching.”¹²⁰ The intensifying Cold War certainly helped Stalin to justify his anti-Semitic campaign, as well as the deportations of Armenians and Greeks, as well as of Ukrainians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. It helped him consolidate the Russian core of his “socialist empire.” The winds of a new war also helped Stalin to stamp out any potential discontent and dissent among the elites. The majority of state officials and military officers in the Soviet Union were convinced that the West was on the offensive and had to be contained.

This perception grew when the United States tested two atomic bombs at the Bikini atoll in the Pacific in July 1946. The tests took place just two weeks after the Americans presented their plan of “international control” of atomic energy and on the eve of the Paris Peace Conference (July 29 to October 15, 1946), convened to negotiate the peace treaties with Germany and its satellites. Two Soviet observers witnessed the tests and reported to the Kremlin leadership on its results. One of them, Major General Semen Alexandrov, a geologist and the chief engineer of the uranium explorations for the Soviet atomic project, brought the film on the tests to Moscow and showed it in the Kremlin, as well as to his friends and colleagues.¹²¹

Few in the Soviet political class had any doubt that the American atomic monopoly had become the tool of U.S. postwar diplomacy and that it threatened Soviet security. Even the most intelligent and sophisticated party members could not escape the forcefulness of Stalin’s zero-sum vision of the new postwar situation. Writer Konstantin Simonov experienced the Soviet war saga from the tragic defeats of the summers of 1941 and 1942 to the triumph in Berlin and identified himself with the “generation of victors.” In early 1946, the Politburo sent him and a small group of other journalists and writers to the United States on a propaganda mission. The contrast between American affluence and Soviet ruin was almost unbearable for him. He was also disturbed by the first waves of anti-Soviet backlash that lapped on American shores. Upon his return home, Simonov wrote a play, *The Russian Question*, in which U.S. imperialists, politicians, and newspaper magnates seek a preemptive war against the Soviet Union. The play’s main character, a progressive American journalist, seeks to denounce this cabal. He travels to the Soviet Union and sees with his own eyes that Russians do not want another war. The play was a crude caricature of American politics and media, but without a doubt Simonov passionately believed in what he wrote. How

could the Soviet Union threaten anyone, when it had suffered so many losses? Yet, at the same time, he was also convinced that without postwar mobilization and reconstruction the Soviet Union would be pushed around and perhaps be crushed by the awesome American power. Stalin liked Simonov's play. *The Russian Question* was serialized in journals, read on radio, and staged on countless stages of the Soviet Union and seen by millions. Ten years later, Simonov still subscribed to the idea that in 1946 the Soviet Union had a stark choice—to grow strong quickly or perish.¹²²

Stalin's goal was a "socialist empire," invincible and protected on all its flanks. But this project suffered from inherent flaws. Successful empires throughout human history, among them Roman, Chinese, and British, used other factors in addition to naked force to establish control over huge disparate territories. They recruited indigenous elites, often tolerated ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, and promoted free trade and communications.¹²³ Stalin's socialist empire used powerful ideology, nationalism, and social engineering to refashion society and elites. It introduced the uniformity of state industrialization and party systems. At the same time, it took away civil freedoms, wealth, cooperation, and human dignity and offered instead an illusion of social justice.

The socialist empire exploited the patience, illusions, and suffering of millions of Russians and non-Russians, the people populating its core. It also exploited the faith of millions of true believers in Communism in Europe and Asia, where Marxism-Leninism played the role of a secular religion. This pyramid of faith and illusions was crowned by the cult of Stalin himself, the infallible leader. The leader, however, was mortal: inevitably, Stalin's death would produce a crisis of legitimacy and a succession struggle among his heirs.

Most important, the Soviet Union faced a confident and dynamic rival in the West. The United States, with its financial, economic, and military power, helped to rebuild the countries of Western Europe and Japan as free market economies and mass consumption societies. The struggle against the West left Stalin no opportunity to prevail. This became most painfully clear in Germany, where the Soviets confronted major problems when they tried to turn their zone of occupation into the linchpin of their empire in Central Europe.