
Security, Sovietization, and Stalinism: Stalin's 'Plan' for Post-War Eastern Europe

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Traditionally, scholarly discussion of Josef Stalin's plans for post-war Eastern Europe has revolved around a sharp dichotomy: Stalin was either an ideologically motivated Marxist-Leninist bent on Communist revolution (the orthodox interpretation), or he was a security-starved pragmatist motivated by *Realpolitik* rather than revolutionary fervor (the revisionist claim). The "new Cold War historiography"¹ has in many ways revived these sterile terms of debate. An examination of the Stalinist worldview, however, reveals that there is no necessary conflict between the imperatives of Stalin's "ideology" and "national security." The two antimonies actually merged in the dictum of "socialism in one country," which enabled the Soviet dictator to equate the narrow interests of the Soviet state with that of the Communist movement as a whole. An *ideologically motivated* Stalin, therefore, was not necessarily a *revolutionary* Stalin. Indeed, Soviet wartime planning documents, the National Front strategy, and the actual course of sovietization demonstrate that Stalin placed the demands of Soviet security interests and the maintenance of cordial relations with the West ahead of any penchant for Communist revolution. In the mid-1940s, Stalin did not plan for Communist takeovers in Eastern Europe; such takeovers were instead the product of significant changes in the post-war security landscape.

Stalinist ideology: conservative 'Marxism-Leninism'

Some of the most prominent scholars of the "new Cold War historiography" in both Russia and the West have placed ideology at the center of Cold War studies once again. Echoing the claims of the "orthodox" historians and political scientists that preceded them,² these scholars claim not only that Stalin was an ideologue but that, as a committed Marxist-Leninist, he was also a revolutionary ideologue. John Lewis Gaddis, the doyen of Cold War studies who once gave short shrift to ideological factors, now places Stalin's worldview at the center of the Cold War struggle.³ According to Gaddis, Stalin "never gave up on

the idea of an eventual world revolution, but he expected this to result . . . from an expansion of influence emanating from the Soviet Union itself.”⁴ Guided by Marxist internationalism, Stalin apparently “never abandoned his commitment to world revolution.”⁵ To buttress these claims, Gaddis makes reference to a number of documents that have come to light since the end of the Cold War, which are thought to demonstrate not only the sincere revolutionary sentiments of the Generalissimo, but also those of his Chinese comrade, Mao Zedong.⁶ Eduard Mark, a pioneer contributor to the new Cold War history, does not deny that sovietization fulfilled Stalin’s security concerns but he also maintains that a “socialized Europe” was “the ultimate aim of [Stalin’s] policies . . . an aim deeply rooted in his regime’s ideology and his personal beliefs.”⁷ Russian historians Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, while highly sensitive to the security motivations of the Soviet state, also suggest that the “messianic prescriptions of revolutionary-imperial ideology loomed large in the political environment in which Soviet leaders struggled, rose, and fell.”⁸

Despite their differences, all of the authors cited above share a common position: that a subjective commitment to world socialist revolution played an independent role in Stalin’s foreign policy, apart from (but not always trumping) the Soviet Union’s narrow security concerns. This renewed emphasis on ideology is a welcome and important one. Beliefs, ideas, identities, and worldviews—the myriad factors which compose and shape ideology—clearly play an important, if not always immediately apparent, role in the construction of foreign policy. Such factors, moreover, are neglected in the sometimes sterile calculus of revisionist and post-revisionist scholars, for whom economic imperatives or geopolitical balancing—not ideological predilections—are the primary drivers of historical events. The revisionists and post-revisionists make the valid point that Stalin’s concern for security clearly overrode an ideological commitment to Communist revolution; but they tend to bend the stick too far, effectively denying that ideology had any significant role to play in Stalin’s foreign policy.⁹ An explanation of how and why Stalin’s perception of threat and opportunity was different from, for example, Harry Truman’s was never fully developed. A focus on ideology enables scholars to delve more deeply into the thought processes and concerns of policy-makers, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the subject in question.

In the debate between revisionism and orthodoxy (and their contemporary variants), there is an unfortunate dichotomy: Stalin is either an ideologue or a

security hawk, but not both. This dichotomy is unfortunate because it rests upon an assumption that Stalin's ideology was essentially that of Marxism-Leninism. Therefore, when he sacrificed revolutionary opportunities abroad in favor of Soviet security interests, he must have acted non-ideologically (the revisionist argument); when he pursued sovietization in Eastern Europe, he must have acted with revolutionary intent (the orthodox claim). In fact, however, Stalin's Marxism-Leninism differed in at least one very significant respect from Lenin's ideology. Once this is appreciated, it is possible to understand how Stalin could have reconciled his ideological commitments with the imperatives of Soviet national security; in short, how he may have been a subjectively sincere communist *and* non-(even anti-) revolutionary in practice.

The conservative aspects of Stalin's rise to power within the Soviet Union in the late 1920s have been widely noted, especially with regard to Soviet domestic policies. The reactionary implications of what Leon Trotsky dubbed the Soviet "Thermidor"¹⁰ are no less significant in the realm of foreign policy, where Stalin's dictum of "socialism in one country," first enunciated in 1924, heralded a sea-change in Soviet orientation. Previously, Lenin and the Bolsheviks regarded the prospect of world socialist



Figure 1 Joseph Stalin, c. 1942. U.S. Office of War Information photograph.

revolution (particularly in Western Europe and especially in Germany) as necessary both for the long-term survival of the Soviet state and for the full

development of socialism (regarded an impossibility in economically backward Russia alone).¹¹ With the failure of revolution in Germany, the exhaustion and weariness of the Soviet population, and the growing “practical” orientation of Bolshevik party apparatchiks, “socialism in one country” had widespread and strong appeal. The concept suggested that the USSR could develop socialism entirely by its own efforts, without waiting (or struggling) for proletarian revolutions in the West.¹² The Soviets relegated world revolution, while still the ultimate Communist ambition, to the distant future. Constructing socialism came to depend not upon the fortunes of world communism, but rather upon the craftiness of Kremlin diplomacy vis-à-vis the bourgeois states. Moreover, since the Soviet Union was the world’s first and only socialist state, it claimed a hegemonic paternalism over the Communist movement as a whole. The interest of international communism became indistinguishable from the USSR’s narrow state interests.¹³

The conservative implications of “socialism in one country” for Soviet foreign relations are most starkly evident in the transformation of the Communist International (Comintern). Initially conceived as the “general staff of the world revolution,” under the dictates of “socialism in one country,” the Comintern became simply another instrument for the realization of Moscow’s foreign policy goals, much to the detriment of local Communist parties.¹⁴ As the Kremlin’s line swung from one extreme to the next, so too did that of local parties: they replaced “Third Period” hostility to Social Democracy, once Hitler rose to power, with “Popular Fronts” to oppose fascism. Popular Fronts then fell out of favor with the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, revived when they once again perceived fascism as a danger in 1941. The Comintern itself eventually dissolved in 1943 to free up resources for “special committees” tasked with indoctrinating prisoners of war from Axis countries, thereby improving the possibilities for a negotiated peace.¹⁵ In all cases, the security needs of the Soviet Union came first; the local requirements of the Communist movement came second (if at all).

An abiding, perhaps even paranoiac, concern for “security” was therefore characteristic of Stalin’s worldview, a worldview conditioned by the imperatives of “socialism in one country” and “capitalist encirclement.” Historians should not take a willingness to place Soviet security ahead of communist revolution abroad as an indication that Stalin was non-ideological, but rather that he subscribed to his own particular, conservative brand of Marxism-Leninism: Stalinism. Indeed,

in other aspects of foreign policy concern (such as the question of inter-imperialist rivalries), Stalin remained very much wedded to, and influenced by, old Leninist shibboleths. An appreciation of the dual nature of Stalinist ideology—revisionist and orthodox Leninist regarding world revolution and inter-imperialist rivalries, respectively—is vital to an understanding of Soviet war-time planning for Eastern Europe and the National Front strategy.

Wartime expectations: Sovietization discouraged

Hoping to shed light upon the Kremlin's post-war plans and expectations, in 1995, Russian historian Vladimir Pechatnov published a paper surveying a number of wartime documents that had recently become available through the Russian Foreign Ministry Archives. Written by three prominent Soviet diplomats—Ivan M. Maisky, Maxim M. Litvinov, and Andrei A. Gromyko—between January 1944 and the summer of 1945, the documents “were attentively read by [Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav] Molotov, and two of Litvinov’s papers were even sent all the way up to Stalin.”¹⁶ To be sure, the documents reflected the particular thinking of those diplomats who were closest to the West, and therefore probably more optimistic about the possibilities for Big Three cooperation beyond wartime. However, the very fact that they compiled and circulated the documents within the highest political echelons suggests that their broad contours were acceptable to the Soviet leadership, and Stalin himself.¹⁷ It is instructive, therefore, to examine those positions that the diplomats shared in common.

First, Maisky, Molotov, and Litvinov clearly wrote from the standpoint of Soviet security interests. Questions of world revolution and class struggle were not simply secondary; they were almost entirely absent. Indeed, not only were their objectives wholly related to Soviet national security, they were also rather narrowly defined: maintaining the USSR’s 1941 borders, preventing the reemergence of a hostile Germany and Japan, and ensuring “friendly governments” along the Soviet border, particularly in Eastern Europe.¹⁸ These concerns would form the core of Soviet aims in the immediate post-war period.

More surprising is unanimity over the mechanism by which the Soviet Union could hope to achieve these aims: “Big Three” cooperation. The three diplomats agreed that enduring cooperation between the USSR, U.S., and UK was not only possible and desirable in the post-war period, but also necessary: a

condominium would police the world against a renewed fascist or military threat, legitimize the USSR's security objectives, and provide economic assistance to a Soviet Union devastated by continental warfare.¹⁹ Stalin seems to have adopted this perspective very early in the war, as evidenced by his "unabashed enthusiasm" for Roosevelt's "Four Policemen" model.²⁰ Interestingly, the three diplomats took "Big Three" cooperation for granted, and nowhere in their strategic documents do they advance alternative post-war plans.²¹ The diplomats deemed the alliance relatively stable, with one possible threat . . . socialism. Litvinov warned that new socialist revolutions would turn America and the Soviet Union into "two opposing poles of social tension," but absent such revolutions, there were "no grounds to expect that relations between the USSR on one hand, and the USA and England on the other, would be bad."²² For his part, Gromyko asserted that the U.S. "would be sympathetic to and facilitating in establishing bourgeois-democratic political regimes in Western Europe, first of all in Germany," except, that is, in cases of "socialist revolution."²³

Thus, the Soviet leadership faced a familiar predicament: national security versus social revolution. Given the Stalinist conception of "socialism in one country," it is not surprising that the diplomats were unanimous in their acclamation of the former. They conceived the plan for a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe largely in geostrategic terms, with the proviso that the states in such a sphere maintain "friendly" governments. Sovietization of the sphere and the imposition of socialism, they acknowledged, would be intolerable for the USSR's "Big Three" partners. While Maisky and Gromyko recognized the spontaneous emergence of "Soviet-type governments" as a possibility, according to Pechatnov, "it sounded both as an ideologically correct statement and a warning at the same time."²⁴

Given the actual course of post-war relations—a sharp escalation of hostilities between the USSR and its wartime allies followed by swift sovietization of Eastern Europe—it is difficult to appreciate that the Kremlin anticipated the very opposite to occur. Ideology played an important role in this expectation. Wedded to the orthodox Leninist concept of imperialism, particularly its emphasis on "inter-imperialistic contradictions," the three diplomats—and Stalin—fully expected rivalry and tension between Britain and the U.S. to break out after victory in war. The Soviet Union, as a bystander to this imperial conflict, would be able to maneuver for advantage by playing one power off against the other.

Although they acknowledged the danger of unified imperialist hostility to the Soviet Union, it was expected that adroit management of inter-imperialist conflict, combined with Soviet caution, would suffice to dispel that threat.²⁵ In order to maintain both friendly governments in his Eastern European sphere of influence and cordial relations with his wartime allies, however, Stalin needed a specific strategy. The concept of a “National Front” codified that strategy.

National Front strategy: Blueprint for Sovietization?

In many ways, the “National Front” strategy as conceived by the Soviet leadership and implemented by the Communist parties of Eastern and Western Europe was a logical extension of the Popular Front policies of the 1930s. Whereas the Popular Front mandated coalitions between Communists and “progressive” anti-fascist forces, the National Front added one more step, postulating coalitions between Communists and any non-fascist bourgeois party. To this end, the Communist parties of Europe took pains to present themselves as responsible political actors committed, at least in the near term, to bourgeois democracy and a mixed economy. Accordingly, local Communist parties (often under Moscow’s duress) purged from their programs any reference to large-scale expropriations of property, collectivization, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Nationalism, socioeconomic reform, anti-fascist bourgeois democracy, and Allied solidarity were the new watchwords of the day. Through these policies, Communist parties were to build significant domestic support and utilize parliament to follow their “own national road to socialism.”²⁶

The National Front strategy raises the question of motivation: did Stalin intend all along for National Front coalitions to pave the way for sovietization, or was the strategy an end in itself? In his work on the issue, Eduard Mark surveys newly available documents from Russia, Eastern Europe, and the West to suggest that Stalin intended the former. As discussed above, Mark is a proponent of the view that a revolutionary ardor animated Stalin, and sovietization was the necessary culmination of his plans for the region (and not, therefore, to fulfill security needs). In making this claim, Mark asserts: 1) that the strategy took shape “sufficiently early in the war” that it could not be regarded as a defensive measure against Great Britain and the United States; and 2) communication within the Communist parties of Eastern Europe made clear that the “final purpose” of the

strategy was a Soviet-style political regime and economy.²⁷ For Mark, the National Front strategy was simply a temporary expedient intended to quietly sovietize Eastern Europe while maintaining cooperation with the U.S. and UK. Ultimately, when cooperation floundered, Stalin chose sovietization over continued cooperation with the West.²⁸

Mark's argument is seriously encumbered, however, by his almost instinctive willingness to equate the National Front with sovietization.²⁹ Mark musters very little direct evidence for this claim, aside from noting that a Romanian Communist Party leader referred to the party's "final purpose" in a 1945 speech. Such an allusion should not be taken too seriously. All Communist parties formally had a "final purpose;" the important question is how, concretely, they strove (or did not strive) to achieve it. In this regard, the evidence is not favorable to Mark's thesis. Stalin, undoubtedly, would have liked to both sovietize Eastern Europe *and* maintain cooperation with the U.S. and UK simultaneously. However, as evidenced by the documents of the three diplomats, the dictator and his colleagues were acutely aware that they could not have their cake and eat it too. The socialist transformation of Europe even carried out gradually, with popular support, would have still been a wrenching social, political, and economic process, and would have garnered the ire of Stalin's would-be Atlantic allies.

In fact, one can invert all of the evidence marshaled by Mark to reach a very different, more plausible explanation of the underlying motivation of the National Front. Stalin, guided by the twin notions of "socialism in one country" and "inter-capitalistic contradictions," believed that cooperation between the Soviet Union, U.S., and UK was both a desirable and an achievable post-war goal, and was willing to delay (indefinitely, if necessary) socialist revolution in Europe to achieve it. This created a problem, however: how to secure "friendly governments" in the Eastern European sphere of influence. Clearly, they could not countenance sovietization, as it would immediately alienate the Atlantic powers. Bourgeois democracy, however, also posed a problem, as there would always be the danger that an anti-Soviet political party could come to the helm and tear asunder Moscow's hard work. The National Front aimed to solve this difficulty. Communist parties, completely loyal to Moscow, would reinvent themselves as progressive, left-nationalist forces and secure a significant influence over the domestic politics of their respective countries. Bourgeois political parties and institutions, and the fundamentals of a capitalist economy, however, would remain.

Understood in this way, Stalin's National Front strategy (and the resulting People's Democracies) was not a component of a grand sovietization plan, but rather an end in itself. As long as Soviet cooperation with the U.S. and UK held, and the East European governments remained "friendly," Stalin would have been satisfied with the status quo in Eastern Europe.

The actual course of sovietization in Eastern Europe confirms this analysis. As the Red Army rolled through Eastern Europe in 1944-45, it (and, by extension, its masters in the Kremlin) became the new political power broker. Stalin could have instituted virtually any political, economic, and social system he wished in the countries of Eastern Europe (except, perhaps, Albania and Yugoslavia). His decision to tightly retain Soviet and local Communist party control of the armed forces and the security apparatus indicated that Stalin was prepared, if necessary, to exercise strong coercion to get his way. As long as the Eastern European governments proved to be "friendly," however, Stalin was willing to retain the bourgeois political structure and norms and refrain from overt manipulation. In the immediate post-war period of 1945-46, the strongest hints of creeping sovietization occurred in Romania and Poland—countries that were to be tightly controlled because of their geostrategic significance and tradition of anti-communist and anti-Soviet politics.³⁰ Conversely, sovietization measures appeared less pronounced in Czechoslovakia, the Eastern European country that was "objectively" most ripe for socialism, but also the country where indigenous Communist support was sufficiently strong to allay Stalin's security concerns. In heavily industrial East Germany, meanwhile, Stalin actively restrained political and economic sovietization, fearing that socialism could only inhibit his ambition to secure a unified, Soviet-friendly (but not necessarily socialist) Germany.³¹ Thus, even before the overt push for sovietization began with the foundation of the Cominform in September 1947, Stalin dictated the pace and scope of political and economic change not by any concern for socialist transformation as such, but rather by the narrow security concerns of the Kremlin.

Mark challenges this security-centered explanation of the National Front by pointing out that Stalin seems to have readily abandoned cooperation with the Allies when the National Front strategy began to flounder. According to Mark, Stalin viewed the alliance with the U.S. and UK as "relative and contingent," while the sovietization of Eastern Europe possessed "absolute" value because it would fulfill both his revolutionary and security ambitions.³² Again, however, Mark

underestimates Stalin's security concerns while misunderstanding his ideology. Stalin's push for sovietization stemmed from two factors, which historians must consider in tandem: the apparent failure of his "inter-capitalistic contradictions" prediction and the looming failure of the National Front strategy. It had been clear, even from 1946 onwards, that the U.S. and UK, rather than squabbling amongst each other, had formed an alliance against the Soviet Union. Stalin, it seems, partially recognized this reality,³³ but it was not until mid-1947, with the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan that he viewed this condominium as a direct threat to Soviet power and influence in Europe.³⁴ Stalin may very well have continued to push for cooperation with the Allies if assured that governments within his Eastern European sphere of influence would remain friendly. As it was, however, local Communist parties, even in Czechoslovakia, were losing popularity and influence.³⁵ Yet even after the establishment of the Cominform and the imposition of the Soviet-style "dictatorship of the proletariat" model throughout Eastern Europe, expectations of collaboration stayed Stalin's hand in Eastern Germany. There, Stalin prevented any large-scale economic expropriations until after the Atlantic powers rejected his 10 March 1952 "note," a final proposal for a united, neutral, and non-socialist Germany.³⁶

The preponderance of evidence—from Stalin's own guiding ideology and past behavior, to the expectations of and plans of Soviet diplomats during World War II, to the concept and implementation of the National Front strategy—taken together, establishes that Stalin did not plan for Communist takeovers in Eastern Europe in the mid-1940s. Historians should not credit that such takeovers did occur to revolutionary zeal, as the orthodox school and "new Cold War historiography" commonly suggest, but rather to Stalin's acute security concerns. A focus on security does not mean that Stalin was not ideologically motivated. On the contrary, Stalin's national security concerns were a strong component of, and were in turn, shaped by his conservative brand of Marxist-Leninist ideology. The sovietization of Eastern Europe was not pre-ordained precisely because Stalin founded his ideology upon a concern for "socialism in one country" over world revolution. If Stalin's collaboration with the Atlantic powers had proven more fruitful, and if the Communist-led National Fronts had yielded greater fruit, the period of "People's Democracy" may have had much greater longevity.

Notes

1. Norman M. Naimark, "Post-Soviet Russian Historiography on the Emergence of the Soviet Bloc," *Kritika* 5, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 562.
2. For an example of orthodox claims, see Hugh Seton Watson, *The New Imperialism* (London: The Bodley Head, 1971), 75-77. Like most orthodox historians, Seton-Watson tempers his claim that the Soviet Union was committed to world socialist revolution with the observation that the Soviet dictatorship reserved the right to dictate the terms: "The Soviet regime had become the blueprint for socialism. Nothing else was socialism." (p.76)
3. For a discussion of Gaddis's reversal, see Melvyn P. Leffler, "The Cold War: What Do 'We Now Know?'" *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (April 1999), 503.
4. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 292-93.
5. *Ibid.*, 163.
6. For a broader discussion of Gaddis's latest work and its problems, particularly the lack of attention given to Stalin and Mao's security concerns, see Leffler, 508-516.
7. Eduard Mark, "Revolution by Degrees: Stalin's National-Front Strategy for Europe, 1941-1947," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, no. 31 (February 2001), 45.
8. Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 276.
9. Leffler is perhaps the strongest example of this tendency in the contemporary literature, although even he does not deny that ideology and culture had an important impact upon how the Soviets perceived threat and the manner in which they responded. See Leffler, 517.
10. Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Dover, 2004 [1968]), chap. 5.
11. Lenin outlined the strategic significance of world revolution in Bolshevik ideology in a speech delivered in November 1918. In it, Lenin stated, "the complete victory of the socialist revolution in one country alone is inconceivable, and demands the most active co-operation of at least several advanced countries, amongst whom we cannot include Russia. That is why the problem of the extent to which we succeed in broadening the revolution also in other countries, the extent to which we succeed meanwhile in warding off imperialism, has become one of the main problems of the revolution." See "Speech on the International Situation, November 8," in V.I. Lenin, *On the Foreign Policy of the Soviet State* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, no date), 123.
12. Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *Russia and the World, 1917-1991* (London: Arnold, 1998), 30-31.
13. Vladimir O. Pechatnov, "The Soviet Union and the Outside World, 1944-1953," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume I: Origins*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 5.
14. Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 12.
15. *Ibid.*, 18.

16. Vladimir O. Pechatnov, "The Big Three After World War II: New Documents on Soviet Thinking about Post War Relations with The United States and Great Britain," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, no. 13 (May 1995), 15.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 16.

19. Ibid., 17.

20. Mark, 12.

21. Pechatnov, "The Big Three," 16.

22. Ibid., 5.

23. Ibid., 7.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. For a discussion of the ideological elements of the National Front, see Mark, 17-20.

27. Mark, 6-7, 30.

28. Ibid., 44.

29. In fact, there are moments in his article in which he uses the terms interchangeably, causing considerable confusion for this reader. Witness, for example, point 6 on page 7 of his work.

30. Norman Naimark, "The Sovietization of Eastern Europe, 1944-1953," in eds. Leffler and Westad, chap. 9.

31. Pechatnov, "The Soviet Union and the Outside World," 103, 110. Of course, Stalin initially entertained a "program maximum" of a unified, "Soviet" Germany, but seems to have concluded that it was no longer a realistic option once it became clear that the population of West Germany was moving away from, not towards, the Soviet Union.

32. Mark, 44-45.

33. See, for example, the correspondence between Molotov and Stalin in Vladimir O. Pechatnov, "'The Allies are Pressing on you to Break your Will,'" *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, no. 26 (September 1999).

34. Mastny, 30-35.

35. Naimark, "The Sovietization of Eastern Europe," 189-191.

36. Wilfrid Loth, "The Origins of Stalin's Note of 10 March 1952," *Cold War History*, 4, 2 (January 2004): 66-88.

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