

Ideology, calculation, and improvisation: spheres of influence and Soviet foreign policy 1939–1945

GEOFFREY ROBERTS¹

Abstract. This article examines Soviet foreign policy during the Second World War in the light of new evidence from the Russian archives. It highlights the theme of spheres of influence and the relationship between the pursuit of this goal by the USSR and the outbreak of the Cold War. It argues that the Cold War was the result of an attempt by Moscow to harmonise spheres of influence and postwar cooperation with Britain and the United States with the ideological project of a people's democratic Europe.

Introduction

For the USSR the Second World War was an economic and human catastrophe of gigantic proportions. Politically and militarily, however, the war presented Moscow with a series of opportunities to achieve one of the main foreign goals of the Soviet state: the security of the socialist system. The chosen means to achieve this goal was the establishment of a sphere of influence in Eastern and Central Europe—a zone of Soviet strategic and political predominance unchallenged by any other great power. If there was one single underlying and persistent theme of Soviet foreign policy during the war it was to create a series of friendly regimes on the USSR's western flank. Initially this goal was sought in the context of an alliance with Nazi Germany. Following the Nazi attack on the USSR in June 1941, Moscow then attempted to conclude a broad-based, pan-European spheres of influence agreement with its new British ally. That most famed Soviet spheres of influence deal—the Churchill-Stalin 'percentages agreement' of October 1944—was more mythical than real, but in the middle years of the war Soviet officials did formulate grandiose plans for a postwar trilateral global condominium of Great Britain, the USSR and the United States. Nor was there anything imaginary about Soviet insistence at the end of the war on a military and political zone of Soviet security in Eastern Europe. In the event, however, this latter goal was achieved not through diplomacy, but by a combination of force of arms and local communist political mobilisation and manipulation. The culmination of this drive for security through spheres of influence was, ultimately, a Soviet-dominated and a communist-controlled Eastern Europe.

The expansion of Soviet influence and control in Eastern Europe has appeared to many historians as a purposeful and coherent pattern of territorial and political expansion. But there were a number of different phases of Soviet spheres of

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influence policy, each with a distinctive character and motivation. In the first phase (1939–40) the policy was one of a limited spheres of influence agreement with Nazi Germany designed to meet immediate and urgent security needs (mainly, staying out of the war and limiting German eastern expansion). In the second phase (1940–41) there was a Soviet striving for the negotiation and construction of a security bloc in the Balkans as a counter to German hegemony in Europe following the fall of France in June 1940. In the third phase (1941–42) the emphasis was on reaffirming the right to territory gained as a result of the Nazi-Soviet pact as well as arriving at postwar security arrangements with Britain (and the United States). In the fourth phase (1943–44)—what might be called the Grand Alliance phase—the construction of a sphere of influence across Eastern Europe became bound up with, and in some respects subordinated to, a much larger project of Soviet-British-American global trilateralism. The fifth and final phase, at the war's end, was characterised by the unilateral imposition of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. It was this development that precipitated the postwar denouement of Soviet spheres of influence policy—the outbreak of the Cold War and the division of Europe. But blocism, antagonistic coalitions and camps, and ideological, political and economic warfare with the West was never the desired outcome. The sphere of influence that Moscow initially wanted was designed to meet Soviet security requirements while being compatible with the construction of a co-operative, stable and peaceful postwar international order. It was certainly not the intention to provoke the counter-construction of an anti-Soviet western bloc.² Indeed, it is the great paradox of the Cold War that it came about not because of a communist threat to the West or the inevitability of inter-systemic conflict between the American and Soviet superpowers but because Moscow assumed that it would be possible to establish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and have good relations with Britain and the United States.

In the successive episodes of Soviet wartime spheres of influence policy the immediate motivators of strategy and action were calculations of security, power and diplomacy combined with a large element of improvisation in the face of circumstances and the responses and actions of other players. Such a characterisation of the mainsprings of wartime Soviet diplomacy can now be buttressed by a considerable body of new evidence—published³ and unpublished⁴—from the Russian archives; evidence which makes possible the telling of a more detailed and nuanced story of Moscow's foreign policy decision-making during the war.

² See A. Resis, 'Spheres of Influence in Soviet Wartime Diplomacy', *Journal of Modern History*, September 1981.

³ Recently-published documentary evidence includes *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki*, 23 (1940–1941), Moscow, 1995 (book 1) and 1998 (book 2); *Komintern i Vtoraya Mirovaya Voyna*, Moscow, 1994 (part 1) and 1998 (part 2); *SSSR i Germanskii Vopros*, 1 (1941–1945), Moscow, 1996; O. A. Rzheshhevskii (ed.), *Voyna i Diplomatitsya: Dokumenty, Kommentarii (1941–1942)*, Moscow, 1997 (English Translation: O. A. Rzheshhevsky (ed.), *War and Diplomacy: The Making of the Grand Alliance*, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996); *Vostochnaya Evropa v Dokumentakh Rossiiskikh Arkhivov*, 1 (1944–1948), Moscow, 1997 and *Tri Vizita A. Ya. Vyshinskogo v Bukharest 1944–1946: Dokumenty Rossiiskikh Arkhivov*, Moscow, 1998.

⁴ Access to Russian archives remains restrictive and difficult but I have been able to consult a range of files on the war period in the foreign ministry archive (Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii—AVP RF), in the repository for pre-1952 communist party materials (Rossiiskii Tsentralnyi Khraneniya i Izucheniya Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii—RTsKhIDNI), and in the government/state archives (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii—GARF). These materials form the basis of a forthcoming study of 'The Soviet Union and the Grand Alliance, 1941–1947'.

At the same time, this new evidence can also help to clarify our understanding of the role of ideology in wartime Soviet foreign policy. As formulated by Walter Carlsnaes⁵, the problem of ideology in foreign policy analysis is that of determining the impact of doctrine on belief (and hence action). In the Soviet case the question concerns the relationship between the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism (particularly those relating to views and analyses of international relations) and the perceptions, experiences, expectations and projections of Stalin, Molotov and other foreign policy decision-makers. The more evidence we have of internal deliberations on foreign policy the greater the indications of how and to what extent ideology figured in the processes of reasoning leading to decision and action. As we shall see in the narrative that follows, during the early part of the war ideology played a somewhat muted role in foreign policy decision-making. As the war progressed, however, ideology—aims, beliefs and discourses—assumed more and more prominence.

As many commentators have noted, there was in Soviet foreign policy a triple fusion of power, interests and ideology.⁶ The maintenance of Soviet state security and power was defined as an ideological goal and its pursuit deemed to be in the long-term interests of socialism and communism. Equally, more strictly ideological goals could also define and shape the purposes of state power in the international arena. As we shall see, in the case of the spheres of influence policy what began as a calculated, pragmatic response to circumstances was ultimately transformed by ideology from a narrow power politics project into a design for the radical reshaping of the European political and international order. The goal became a people's democratic Europe. Although intended by Moscow as a counterpart to a peacetime grand alliance with Britain and the United States, it was perceived in the West as a policy of seeking 'ideological lebensraum' in Europe.⁷ This mismatch between Soviet intentions and Western perceptions was, arguably, the critical factor in the origins of the Cold War.

The Nazi-Soviet pact: spheres of influence in the Baltic, 1939–40

Despite the persistence of the Soviet wartime pursuit of a sphere of influence the only explicit and formal agreement concluded by Moscow in this period was the Nazi-Soviet pact of August-September 1939. In a secret additional protocol attached to the German-Soviet non-aggression treaty of 23 August 1939 Poland was divided into German and Soviet spheres of influence and Finland, Estonia and Latvia allocated to a Soviet sphere of influence in the Baltic. Under the terms of the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty of 28 September 1939 the German-Soviet demarcation line in Poland was adjusted and, in a further secret protocol, Lithuania was reallocated to the Soviet sphere of influence in the Baltic.⁸

⁵ W. Carlsnaes, *Ideology and Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

⁶ See R. A. Jones, *The Soviet Concept of 'Limited Sovereignty' from Lenin to Gorbachev: The Brezhnev Doctrine* (London: Macmillan, 1990), ch. 6.

⁷ V. Rothwell, *Britain and the Cold War, 1941–1947* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 145.

⁸ On the Nazi-Soviet pact: G. Roberts, *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1995), chs. 5–6.

The Soviet decision for a spheres of influence agreement with Nazi Germany was the result of three main factors. Firstly, the breakdown in mid-August 1939 of the Anglo-French-Soviet negotiations for a triple alliance against Germany.⁹ Secondly, Moscow's preference for neutrality in the coming German–Western war over Poland. Thirdly, the security offered by the promise of German self-exclusion from the Baltic States and from Eastern Poland. It is also apparent from a detailed examination of the discussions and negotiations leading to the pact that this fundamental reorientation of Soviet foreign policy was the result of a somewhat hasty and *ad hoc* decision-making process. Uncertain of the consequences of Soviet participation in a less than satisfactory triple alliance with the Western powers, Stalin and Molotov opted at the last moment for what seemed to offer the best short-term security and defence advantages for the USSR.

The Soviet decision for a pact with Nazi Germany certainly had an ideological backdrop. Stalin and Molotov's intense suspicion of the Western powers was reinforced by doctrines concerning the capitalist-imperialist threat to the USSR. The signing of the pact with the erstwhile enemy was indeed rationalised in ideological terms; for the Comintern, for example, it meant the abandonment of the anti-fascist popular front politics of the 1930s (at least for a time). The decision itself, however, was based on perceptions and calculations in which ideology played only a marginal role. Moreover, in adopting this course of action Stalin and Molotov, it seems, had no clear idea of its precise practical outcome. This only emerged in the wake of Germany's rapid conquest of Poland in early September 1939. In response Moscow decided to invade and occupy its sphere of influence in Poland and subsequently to incorporate Western Byelorussia and Western Ukraine into the USSR. Annexation and incorporation was also the ultimate fate of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. But initially Moscow was content with mutual assistance treaties and military bases and a friendly disposition on the part of the governments of the three Baltic States. The total Soviet-Communist takeover of these states in summer 1940 was fired by internal political upheavals in the region triggered by Moscow's decision to occupy them militarily and to demand the establishment of new, friendlier and more manageable governments—itsself a panicky response to Hitler's stunning defeat of France.¹⁰

Finnish resistance to Moscow's demands for a mutual assistance treaty, territorial adjustments and military bases resulted in a Soviet attack on Finland at the end of November 1939. The ensuing Soviet military campaign was conducted within the ideological and political context of a radical programme of achieving a people's democratic or socialist Finland. However, when it came to the peace treaty of March 1940 Soviet ambitions were limited to relatively moderate demands for territory and military bases. Moscow's willingness to end the war on these terms was motivated by various political and strategic calculations: for example, the military cost of a campaign of conquest and the danger of Anglo-French intervention on behalf of the Finns. But important, too, was the dashing of ideological expectations concerning the popular response in Finland to the outbreak of war. Ideological conviction

⁹ See M. J. Copley, *1939: The Alliance That Never Was and the Coming of World War*, vol. 2 (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).

¹⁰ See G. Roberts, 'Soviet Policy and the Baltic States, 1939–1940: A Reappraisal', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, November 1995.

and rhetoric was constrained by political reality and strategic and other priorities.¹¹ A similar process seems to have been at work at the end of the Second World War when, in infinitely more favourable circumstances than in 1940, the USSR chose neither to occupy Finland nor to pursue or encourage its internal sovietisation. Indeed, even Finland's incorporation into the postwar Soviet sphere of influence was highly limited in character.¹²

The importance of the Nazi-Soviet pact for the future course and evolution of Soviet spheres of influence policy cannot be over-emphasised. It initiated a practice and tradition of such deals, including secret ones. It defined what became for the Soviets the content of a sphere of influence agreement—basically, exclusive freedom of political and diplomatic manoeuvre in a country or designated area. It also provided the context and stepping stone for an ambitious attempt in 1940 to significantly expand the Soviet sphere of influence on the USSR's western borders.

Spheres of influence in the Balkans, 1940–41

For nearly a year after the Nazi-Soviet pact, Moscow's foreign policy goals focused primarily on exploiting the advantages of the spheres of influence agreement with Germany covering Poland and the Baltic States. That did not mean that other security concerns were entirely neglected. This period also saw important diplomatic initiatives in the Balkans. Activity focused on relations with two states: Bulgaria and Turkey. In the case of Bulgaria, Moscow attempted (unsuccessfully) to draw the country into the Soviet orbit by the proposed signature of a mutual assistance treaty. In the case of Turkey the main effort was directed at preventing the country's integration into an Anglo-French bloc in the Balkans and at enhancing Moscow's influence and control over the Dardenelles.

Although there was a degree of coordination with the Germans, Soviet policy in the Balkans during this period was generally unilateral in character. There was no suggestion of a spheres of influence policy in the sense of a desire for agreement with other players in the region on zones of interest and priority. A Soviet policy of spheres of influence in the Balkans only emerged after the Italian entry into the war in June 1940.

The possibility of negotiations with Italy about a common and agreed approach in the Balkans had been the air for some time, but discussions had been stymied by the virtual breakdown of Soviet-Italian relations following the outbreak of the Winter War with Finland. However, the position began to change on the eve of Italian entry into the war. On 3 June Molotov asked Schulenburg, the German

¹¹ Roberts, *The Soviet Union*, pp. 112–15; D. W. Spring, 'The Soviet Decision for War Against Finland, 30 November 1939', *Soviet Studies*, April 1986; T. Vihavainen, 'The Soviet Decision for War Against Finland, 30 November 1939: A Comment', *Soviet Studies*, April 1987; and M. I. Meltukhov, "'Narodny Front" dlya Finlyandieli? (K Voprosy o Tselyakh Sovetskogo Rukovodstva v Voine s Finlyandieli 1939–1940gg)', *Otechestvennaya Istoriya*, 3 (1993).

¹² See J. Nevakivi, 'A Decisive Armistice 1944–1947: Why Was Finland Not Sovietized?', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 19:2 (1994); M. Majander, 'The Limits of Sovereignty: Finland and the Question of the Marshall Plan in 1947', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 19:3 (1994); and M. Korobochkin, 'Soviet Policy Towards Finland and Norway, 1947–1949', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 20:3 (1995).

ambassador in Moscow, about a reported statement by von Mackensen, the German ambassador in Rome, that following Italy's imminent entry into the war there would be a peaceful resolution of Balkan issues between the USSR and the Axis powers.¹³ On 6 June the Soviet military attaché in Bulgaria cabled that Germany and Italy were intent on excluding Soviet influence from the Balkans.¹⁴ On 10 June Italy declared war on Britain and France. Three days later, on 13 June, Molotov had a positive and friendly discussion with Rosso, the Italian ambassador.¹⁵ On 18 June Gorelkin, the Soviet ambassador in Rome, reported that Mussolini was said to be committed to the maximum improvement and development of Italian-Soviet relations.¹⁶ On 20 June Rosso told Molotov that Rome remained committed to the 1933 Italian-Soviet pact of friendship, non-aggression and neutrality. He continued that while Italy was striving to improve its position in the Mediterranean it had no pretensions in relation to the Balkans, apart from trade and political friendship.¹⁷ Shortly after that, on 23 June, Schulenburg confirmed to Molotov that the von Mackensen statement did represent the German view on the Balkans. Molotov pressed for clarification as to what this meant, but received none.¹⁸

In this uncertain situation—Italian entry into the war, the surrender of France, possible Turkish involvement in the conflict,¹⁹ contradictory signs of German and Italian policy in the Balkans—Moscow did two things. Firstly, it delivered an ultimatum to Rumania demanding the return of Bessarabia and, for good measure, North Bukovina as well—a territory with a Ukrainian population, but one to which the Soviets had never laid claim before.²⁰ This was territory the Russians were not prepared to bargain about in the event of a general settlement with Italy and Germany in the Balkans. Secondly, on 25 June Moscow began to feel out the prospects for a spheres of influence agreement in the Balkans. In a formal statement to Rosso, Molotov offered recognition of Italian pre-eminence in the Mediterranean in return for recognition of Soviet predominance in the Black Sea. The statement also set out the Soviet position on the various territorial disputes in the Balkans, noted the positive character of Soviet-Bulgarian relations, and proposed a joint Soviet-Axis agreement in relation to Turkey. Presenting the proposal to Rosso, Molotov said that 'the statement was clear and definite and could provide a working basis for a durable agreement between Italy and the USSR. When in autumn 1939 the USSR and Germany began to speak in clear language they quickly agreed on co-operation'.²¹

Despite Molotov's gloss, this was all very vague, not so much a spheres of influence proposal as a possible prelude to one. The only really definite thing about

¹³ *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki*, 23 (hereafter DVP), doc. 178. Also: *Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939–1941*, (New York: Didier, 1948 [hereafter: NSR]), p. 14.

¹⁴ *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, 3 (1990).

¹⁵ DVP, doc. 200.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, doc. 209.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, doc. 210.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 217.

¹⁹ On Soviet concerns about the possibility of Turkey entering the conflict following the Italian declaration of war see e.g. Molotov's discussion with the Turkish ambassador on 3/6/40 in DVP, doc. 176.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, docs. 217, 225, 229, 232, 236, and 238. NSR, pp. 155–63.

²¹ DVP, doc. 224. For an English translation of the Italian version of the formal statement see J. Degras (ed.), *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy*, 3 (1933–1941) Oxford, 1953 pp. 457–8. See also Schulenburg's report on the Rosso-Molotov meeting in NSR, pp. 160–1.

the statement was its assertion that the Soviet Union had a view and role to play in relation to Balkan affairs. This was a point the Russians made to the Germans, too, in a leaked memorandum on Stalin's discussion with British ambassador Cripps on 1 July 1940. According to this memorandum Stalin had told Cripps that in his 'opinion no power had the right to an exclusive role in the consolidation and leadership of the Balkan countries. The Soviet Union did not claim such a mission either, although she was interested in Balkan affairs'.²²

The emergence of a specific Soviet policy of spheres of influence in the Balkans was prompted by a developing crisis in relations with Germany in summer 1940. Among Moscow's worries were, first, Rome and Berlin's silence about Soviet involvement in Balkan affairs; second, the USSR's exclusion from discussions leading to the Italo-German arbitration of territorial disputes between Rumania, Hungary and Bulgaria (the so-called 'Vienna Award' of 31 August 1940); and, third, by mounting evidence that German power and influence was growing across the board in Europe, even encroaching on the Soviet sphere of influence in the Baltic (i.e. Finland).²³ Moscow's response to all this was to attempt a new Nazi-Soviet pact centred on a spheres of influence agreement in the Balkans.

The catalyst and opportunity for an extension of Soviet-German spheres of influence arrangements to the Balkans was a letter from Ribbentrop to Stalin on 17 October inviting Molotov to discussions in Berlin about the USSR's relationship to the recently formed tripartite alliance between Germany, Japan and Italy.²⁴ Stalin replied on 21 October, accepting Ribbentrop's invitation on Molotov's behalf.

In a Stalin directive to Molotov dated 9 November Soviet aims in the forthcoming discussions were set out. First, to find out what German aims were in relation to the tripartite pact, especially regarding the project of a 'New Europe' and borders in Europe and Asia and the role of the USSR therein. Second, to explore the possibility of an agreement defining the spheres of interest of the USSR in Europe and the Near and Middle East, but not to conclude any such agreement until further talks with Ribbentrop in Moscow. Third, to make clear that Finland and Bulgaria ('the main question in the negotiations') were in the Soviet sphere of interest. Fourth, to establish that there would be no discussions or decisions about Turkey, Rumania, Hungary and Iran without Soviet participation. Fifth, to find out what the Axis intended in relation to Greece and Yugoslavia (Greece had been invaded by Italy on 28 October).²⁵

Molotov arrived in Berlin on 12 November. He found himself faced not with negotiations about a new spheres of influence agreement but with the offer of a junior partnership in a German-dominated Axis alliance directed against the British

²² NSR, p. 168. For the Soviet record of the Stalin–Cripps discussion, which contains no such statement by the Soviet leader, see DVP, doc. 240.

²³ Ibid., docs. 288, 291, 348, 361, 366, 367, 373, 385 and 402; NSR, pp. 173 ff.

²⁴ DVP, docs. 446, 458 and NSR, pp. 207–13, 216. Ribbentrop's letter was dated 13 October but was not delivered until the 17th. See also DVP, docs. 408 and 425.

²⁵ 'Direktiviy I. V. Stalina V. M. Molotovu pered Poezdtkoi v Berlin v Noyabre 1940g'. *Novaya i Noveishaya Istoriya*, 4 (1995). Also published in DVP, doc. 491. On the nature and provenance of this document and an assessment of the Molotov visit to Berlin: L. A. Bezymenskii, 'Vizit V. M. Molotova v Berlin v Noyabre 1940g. v Svete Novykh Dokumentov', *Novaya i Noveishaya Istoriya*, 6 (1995).

empire. Instead of friendly discussions about spheres of influence there were blazing diplomatic rows between Molotov and Hitler and Ribbentrop.²⁶

Back in Moscow, on 25 November Molotov delivered the Soviet response to the German proposals. The USSR was willing to join the tripartite pact providing that (1) Germany withdrew its military units from Finland; (2) the USSR concluded a mutual assistance pact with Bulgaria, including the establishment of military bases that would safeguard the security of the Dardanelles; (3) the area south of Batum and Baku in the general direction of the Persian Gulf was recognised as the centre of Soviet aspirations (as opposed to India and the Indian Ocean, proposed by the Germans); (4) an agreement was signed with Turkey that would provide for Soviet army and navy bases on the Bosphorus and the Straits (as opposed to just a revision of the Montreux Convention which would close the Dardanelles to foreign warships); and (5) Japan renounced its rights to coal and oil concessions in North Sakhalin.²⁷

On 25 November, too, the Soviets renewed their proposal to Sofia for a Soviet-Bulgarian pact of mutual assistance pact. That same day Stalin confided in the Bulgarian communist and Comintern leader Georgei Dimitrov, adding to the information about the Soviet offer to Bulgaria that 'our relations with the Germans are outwardly correct, but between us there are serious tensions'.²⁸ This turned out to be something of an understatement. There never was a German reply to the Soviet counter-proposal. On 18 December Hitler signed the directive authorising Operation Barbarossa. The Soviet project of a spheres of influence agreement in the Balkans collapsed in the face of a blatant and unilateral expansion of German power in the region that served as a prelude to 22 June 1941.

Soviet spheres of influence policy and Great Britain, 1941–42

During the period of the Nazi-Soviet pact Moscow (more precisely Stalin and Molotov) became accustomed to the idea of formulating, discussing and negotiating wide-ranging spheres of influence arrangements with other powers. That this practice retained a central place in diplomatic strategy and tactics after the German attack is apparent from the next episode in Soviet spheres of influence policy. In December 1941 British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden travelled to Moscow to discuss an Anglo-Soviet treaty of alliance. On 18 December Eden met with Stalin who proposed that there should be two Anglo-Soviet agreements, one on mutual military aid and one on the settlement of postwar problems. To this second agreement, said Stalin, should be attached a secret protocol which would deal, in outline, with the question of the reorganisation of European borders after the war. Stalin then proceeded to make a series of detailed suggestions on postwar borders and

²⁶ The Soviet documents on the discussions, including the exchange of telegrams between Stalin and Molotov, are published in DVP, docs. 497, 498, 500, 502, 507, 510, 511, 512 and 515. For the German records: NSR, pp. 217–58.

²⁷ NSR, pp. 258–9; DVP, doc. 548.

²⁸ Diary entry of Dimitrov, cited by Bezymenskii, *op. cit.*, p. 142. On Soviet policy in relation to Bulgaria see DVP, docs 532, 549 and 551 and *Komintern i Vtoraya Mirovaya Voina*, part 1, (Moscow 1994), docs. 127 and 132.

other matters—suggestions embodied in a draft of an ‘additional protocol’ submitted to the British delegation.

First, the USSR’s borders would be those extant in June 1941 (i.e. incorporating the Baltic States, Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine, Bessarabia and North Bukovina, and the territory ceded by Finland in March 1940). The Soviet-Polish frontier should run more or less along the ‘Curzon Line’ and Poland compensated for loss of prewar territories in the east by its expansion into German territory. Second, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Albania and Yugoslavia should be re-established as independent states within their prewar borders—in the latter case including gains at Italy’s expense (e.g. Trieste). Third, in return for maintaining its neutrality Turkey should get the Dodecanese islands and some Bulgarian and, perhaps, some Syrian territory. Fourth, Germany should be weakened by various measures of disarmament and dismemberment. Fifth, Britain should have a military alliance with Belgium and Holland, including provision for British military bases in the Low countries (and, possibly, Norway and Denmark as well). (On the postwar future of France, Stalin deferred to British opinion.) Sixth, the USSR would have military alliances with Finland and Rumania and there would be provision for the establishment of Soviet military bases in those two countries. Seventh, overseeing postwar reconstruction and the maintenance of peace would be a military alliance of ‘democratic states’, headed by some kind of central council or other body.²⁹

On the face of it this was a somewhat extraordinary proposal—an Anglo-Soviet settlement of the postwar order in Europe, only six months into the Soviet-German war and with the Wehrmacht still at the gates of Moscow and Leningrad! However, Eden’s visit coincided with the development of the Red Army’s counterstroke in front of Moscow into a general counter-offensive. Stalin, it seems, believed that victory over Germany was a matter of months, not years. The time was right for the settlement of a number of postwar issues.³⁰ Moreover, the Soviets had reason to believe that the British might be prepared to talk about the kind of deal proposed by Stalin.

Even before Soviet entry into the war the British had hinted at or proposed some kind of general settlement. For example, in October 1940 London had proposed an agreement that in return for the USSR’s benevolent neutrality there would be consultations on the postwar settlement, *de facto* recognition of Russian territorial acquisitions in Eastern Europe and British economic assistance to Soviet defence preparations.³¹ Perhaps more important, the genesis of the Eden visit to Moscow seemed to suggest to the Russians that the British Foreign Secretary was making the trip precisely in order to negotiate such a wide-ranging deal.³² Moreover, from the Russian point of view, there was nothing particularly controversial about what they proposed. The maintenance of the 1941 Soviet borders was a given, which the British had hinted many times they were prepared to ultimately accept. Territorial

²⁹ Soviet transcript of Stalin-Eden meeting of 16 December 1941 and Soviet draft of ‘additional protocol’, reproduced in O. A. Rzheshhevskii, ‘Vizit A. Idena v Moskvu v Dekabre 1941g. Peregovory s I.V. Stalinym i V.M. Molotovym’, *Novaya i Noveishaya Istoriya*, 2–3 (1994), no. 2, pp. 90–100. For an English translation of this and other documents on Soviet-British negotiations in 1941–1942 see Rzheshhevsky, *War and Diplomacy*, (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996).

³⁰ See J. Erickson, ‘Stalin, Soviet Strategy and the Grand Alliance’, in A. Lane and H. Temperley (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of the Grand Alliance, 1941–1945* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 143.

³¹ DVP, doc. 460. Also docs. 444, 447.

³² See Rzheshhevskii, 3, pp. 110–14 (diary report by Molotov of meeting with Cripps on 19/12/41).

transfers from Axis states was no big deal when hundreds of thousands of Russians were being killed. The proposed Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe involved two countries, Finland and Rumania—both enemy states. And what could be more natural, in view of recent events, than British bases in Holland and Belgium? True, some of the proposals offended the principles of the Atlantic Charter, but both Britain and the USSR in endorsing Roosevelt's idealistic projections had entered caveats designed to ensure flexibility when it came to the protection of national security and national interest.³³

Moscow's expectations and reasoning, however, were quickly dashed by Eden. Under no circumstances would the Foreign Secretary countenance such a deal without first consulting the War Cabinet, Washington, and the Dominions and without considering its implications for the principles of the Atlantic Charter. In response, Stalin and the Soviet side changed tack, placing the emphasis almost wholly on an agreement recognising the USSR's existing borders. But Eden would not concede even this. The discussions broke up in some disarray and on 22 December Eden returned to London.

In April 1942 the British finally responded formally to Stalin's proposals of the previous December. What they offered politically was a series of anodyne generalities about wartime and postwar co-operation which committed them to nothing and conceded none of the essential Soviet demands. On 22 April, Stalin wrote to Churchill that in view of the differences between the Soviet and British positions he proposed to send Molotov to London for negotiations.³⁴ Shortly after, Ambassador Maiskii informed Eden that Moscow insisted on, in effect, acceptance of the USSR's 1941 borders (including that with Poland) and some kind of secret agreement on postwar Soviet military alliances with Finland and Rumania. This was Molotov's theme, too, in his discussions with Eden and Churchill towards the end of May.³⁵ But the negotiations got nowhere and seemed set for deadlock. Then a curious thing happened. Molotov abandoned all his demands and agreed to sign a simple treaty of alliance on wartime cooperation and mutual assistance in the postwar period. Molotov had been instructed by Stalin to accept what the British were offering. The reversal in the Soviet position was clear. On 24 May Molotov had cabled Moscow that the proposed Anglo-Soviet treaty was 'unacceptable . . . an empty declaration which the USSR does not need'. Replying the same day, however, Stalin stated:

We have received the draft treaty Eden handed you. We do not consider it an empty declaration but regard it as an important document. It lacks the question of the security of frontiers, but this is not bad, perhaps, for it gives us a free hand. The question of frontiers, or to be more exact, of guarantees for the security of our frontiers at one or another section of our country, will be decided by force.³⁶

Stalin's turnabout on the Anglo-Soviet pact was prompted by military exigency. The war was going badly again on the Eastern Front and the opening of a Second Front in the West was now Moscow's priority. For the next two years a central theme

³³ W. LaFeber (ed.), *The Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York: John Wiley, 1971), pp. 32–5.

³⁴ *Stalin's Correspondence with Churchill, Atlee, Roosevelt and Truman, 1941–1945*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1958), doc. 40.

³⁵ The Soviet record of Molotov's talks in London in May 1942 are translated in Rzheshesvsky *War and Diplomacy*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, docs. 37–38.

of Moscow's diplomacy was the search for an agreement with Britain and the United States on the opening of a Second Front.³⁷ At the same time, in 1943–1944, a much more fundamental reorientation of Soviet foreign policy was in progress. In this period Moscow committed itself to achieving postwar security through a peacetime grand alliance with Britain and the United States. The project of security through spheres of influence was not so much abandoned as reconceptualised: a division of Europe and the world into American, British and Soviet spheres of influence would be the foundation stone of a postwar alliance between the USSR and the Western powers.

Spheres of influence and the Grand Alliance, 1943–44

A key event in the transition to the grand alliance phase of Soviet spheres of influence policy was the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers, October 1943.³⁸ The Moscow Conference was the first of the big wartime tripartite meetings convened to discuss allied policy and perspectives on the postwar world. Although it was conceived initially as just a preparatory meeting for the forthcoming Teheran conference of the 'Big Three' it developed into a detailed and formal allied negotiating forum. Indeed, no allied conference of World War II had a more complex and wide-ranging agenda. Among the decisions, declarations and discussions were ones concerning the establishment of the United Nations, the setting up of inter-allied negotiating mechanisms, the postwar treatment of Germany and Austria, the occupation regime in Italy, policy on Persia and Turkey, and various aspects of Soviet-East European relations. At its conclusion the conference was hailed, not least in the Soviet press, as a major breakthrough in the development of allied cooperation, unity and friendship.³⁹ Privately, the Soviet foreign ministry lauded the conference as 'a big event in the life of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs' which 'all PCFA workers must study in detail . . . and, if possible, make proposals on the realisation of its decisions.'⁴⁰

The Soviets had approached the Moscow Conference intent on highlighting military priorities and issues within the allied coalition, particularly the question of British and American commitment to the opening of a second front in western

³⁷ L. V. Pozdeeva, 'The Soviet Union: Territorial Diplomacy', in D. Reynolds, W. F. Kimball and A. O. Chubarian (eds.), *Allies at War* (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 362–3; A. Filitov, 'The Soviet Union and the Grand Alliance: The Internal Dimension of Foreign Policy', in G. Gorodetsky (ed.), *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917–1991* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), p. 98; *Sto Sorok Beceed s Molotovym* (Moscow, 1991), pp. 69–70; Erickson, 'Stalin, Soviet Strategy and the Grand Alliance', p. 145; and I. V. Zemskov, *Diplomaticheskaya Istoriya Vtorogo Fronta v Evrope*, Moscow 1982.

³⁸ The summary in this section is based on research on Soviet preparations for the Moscow Conference I conducted in the AVP RF. Compared to Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam the Moscow Conference has been neglected by historians, but see: K. Sainsbury, *The Turning Point* (Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 4; V. Mastny, *Russia's Road to the Cold War* (New York, 1979), pp. 111–22; and idem., 'Soviet War Aims at the Moscow and Teheran Conferences of 1943', *Journal of Modern History*, September 1975.

³⁹ The American records of the conference are in *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1943*, 1; the British records in FO371/37031; and the Soviet records in *Moskovskaya Konferentsiya Ministrov Inostrannykh Del SSSR, SSHa i Velikobritanii (19–30 Oktyabrya 1943 g.)*, Moscow, 1984.

⁴⁰ AVP RF F.0511, Op.1, D.1, L.72.

Europe. In relation to the many political issues on the conference agenda (submitted for discussion by London and Washington) the intention was to adopt a reactive rather than a proactive role, to probe Anglo-American aims rather than to reveal Moscow's own.⁴¹ In responding to Western proposals, however, the Soviets were forced to define and clarify their own aims and orientations.

Preparations for the conference also inspired an internal reorganisation of the postwar planning machinery within the Soviet foreign ministry. As early as January 1942 the politburo had agreed to the establishment of a Commission for the Preparation of Diplomatic Materials. Work had not progressed very far, however, when in summer 1943 this commission was superseded by two specialist commissions: an armistice terms commission headed by Voroshilov, the former defence minister, and a commission on peace treaties and the postwar order headed by Litvinov, Molotov's predecessor as foreign minister and ambassador to the US before his recall to Moscow in 1943. It was in his capacity as head of this key commission that Litvinov played a major role in Soviet preparations for the Moscow Conference. After the conference a third commission was added: a commission on reparations head by Ivan Maiskii, erstwhile ambassador to Great Britain.⁴²

The political-ideological framework for the work of these commissions was an inter-allied one—the assumption that the peace and the postwar order would be shaped jointly with the British and Americans. This can be illustrated by reference to the central, defining issue of the commissions' planning for the peace: the postwar treatment of Germany. The overarching goal of Soviet policy towards Germany was the annihilation of German power and the elimination of the German threat to Soviet security. This aim was to be achieved by the long-term occupation of Germany, by its disarmament and denazification, by the dismemberment of the German state and by the extraction of extensive reparations. Crucially, these policies were to be implemented jointly with Great Britain and the United States. The desire to cooperate with the West on the containment of Germany lay at the heart of the Soviet commitment to a postwar grand alliance.⁴³

Where did the policy of spheres of influence fit into the grand alliance perspective embraced by Moscow from 1943 onwards? This was the question pondered by Soviet planners working in the postwar preparations commissions. Perhaps the earliest answer was that formulated by Litvinov in a lengthy report to Molotov on 9 October 1943. Litvinov posed the question: how should postwar security be safeguarded—through collective security organised by a successor to the discredited League of Nations or on the basis of Great Power-controlled zones of security? Western, especially American, opinion favoured a new international organisation. But such an organisation, Litvinov argued, would not be able to function effectively as a security organ without the enforcement power of the Big Three and without a division of the world into American, British and Soviet zones of responsibility.

⁴¹ See, for example, the pre-conference briefing report prepared by deputy Foreign Affairs commissar Vladimir Dekanozov: 'K Predstoyashchemu Soveshchaniyu v Moskve Trekh Ministrov', F. 6, Op. 5b, Pap. 39, D. 6, LL. 52–58. This document is also printed in *SSSR i Germanskii Vopros*, doc. 59.

⁴² 'Zanyatsya Pogotovkoi Budushchego Mira', *Istochnik*, 17 (1994/5).

⁴³ The internal processes of Soviet policy discussion and decision-making on the German question can be followed in detail in *SSSR i Germanskii Vopros 1941–1949*.

Litvinov also thought that it might be possible to incorporate such a regional division into the formal structures of a new international organisation.⁴⁴

Litvinov subsequently developed his line of thinking in a series of documents composed in his capacity as head of the postwar order commission. Other middle-ranking policymakers developed similar themes in their reports. The essence of this thinking about the postwar world was that spheres of influence were not just compatible with a peacetime grand alliance: they constituted its essential foundation. Spheres of influence would provide the means for each individual great power to safeguard its security while a trilateral division of the world would separate the interests and hence minimise the conflicts of the Big Three. But there would also be extensive allied co-operation within the United Nations and other inter-allied institutions, especially in relation to various 'neutral zones' which would be controlled by no single power. In sum, postwar allied political and military unity would keep Germany down, prevent the realignment of Europe into hostile and competing blocs, and provide the context for the settlement of inter-allied differences over security and other interests.

Informing this vision of the postwar world were a series of ideologically-influenced referents. First, that there was an objective, economic basis for the USSR's co-operation with Britain and the United States; second, that between Britain and the US there were inter-imperialist contradictions and rivalries that would keep the two states divided after the war; and thirdly, that out of the war was emerging a new, democratic Europe with a strong communist and left wing influence that would constitute a highly favourable political context for socialist-capitalist relations and co-operation over the long-term.⁴⁵

This perspective of a peacetime grand alliance based on a benign spheres of influence deal was by no means universal in Soviet circles, however, particularly among officials rooted in the Comintern tradition. Deputy foreign minister A. Lozovsky (previously an official of the Comintern), for example, argued that intense social antagonisms between socialism and capitalism were inevitable after the war and that the main postwar aim of Soviet diplomacy should be the prevention of the formation of a British-American Western bloc ranged against the USSR.⁴⁶ Another example of this trend in Soviet thinking was the overturning in 1945 of the wartime decision by the Communist Party of the United States to liquidate the party into a more loosely organised 'Communist Political Association' that would support a continuation of allied cooperation into the postwar period. In Moscow the party's liquidation was viewed (at least by some) as being based on an exaggeration by

⁴⁴ 'Vopros o Sovmestnoi Otvetstvennosti za Evropu v Protivopolozhnost Voprosu ob Otdelnykh Raionakh Otvetstvennosti', AVP RF F. 6, Op. 5b, Pap. 39, D. 5, LL. 36–50. This document is also printed in *SSSR i Germanskii Vopros*, doc. 62.

⁴⁵ On Soviet thinking about the postwar world: V. 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', Working Paper 13, Cold War International History Project, July 1995; A. M. Filitov, 'Problems of Post-War Construction in Soviet Foreign Policy Conceptions during World War II' in F. Gori and S. Pons (eds.), *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943–1953* (London: Macmillan, 1996). A number of the relevant documents are printed in *SSSR i Germanskii Vopros*.

⁴⁶ See T. Yu. Koyetkova, 'Voprosy Sozdaniya OON i Sovetskaya Diplomiya', *Otechestvennaya Istorija*, 1 (1995), pp. 34–5. This reference was drawn to my attention by S. Pons, 'La Place de L'Italie dans la Politique Exterieur de L'URSS (1943–1944)', *Communisme*, 49/50 (1997).

CPUSA National Secretary Earl Browder of the prospects for postwar American-Soviet co-operation.⁴⁷

Where did Stalin and Molotov stand in relation to these perspectives? Publicly and in diplomatic conversations they strongly endorsed the perspective of postwar unity and cooperation with the Western powers. Direct evidence of their private thinking remains scant but the indications are that while they went along with Litvinov's global trilateralism they also shared Lozovsky's traditional concerns, which pointed toward a more conflict-ridden postwar relationship with the West. Stalin and Molotov also faced the problem that it was far from clear how the grand bargain envisaged by Litvinov could be negotiated in practice, especially when the British and particularly the Americans were so implacably opposed to spheres of influence. Stalin and Molotov's resolution of this dilemma when the time came was what might be called a *de facto* spheres of influence scheme—the unilateral creation of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe on the one hand, the implicit acceptance of an Anglo-American sphere of influence in the Mediterranean and Western Europe, on the other. Discussion of specific issues regarding activities within the respective spheres of influence was not precluded and neither was the possibility of negotiating a broad-based programme of postwar co-operation between Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. But the bottom-line for Soviet security was a series of friendly regimes along the USSR's borders.

October 1944: spheres of influence as percentages?

Where does the so-called 'percentages agreement' of October 1944 fit into this unfolding scenario? Traditionally, it has been seen as the inception of the postwar division of Europe. However, close examination of that infamous encounter between Churchill and Stalin reveals that Moscow was not seriously interested in any spheres of influence agreement with the British alone, and certainly not one based on 'percentages'.

The story of the percentages agreement first came to light in the 1950s in Churchill's memoirs. Churchill recalls that at a meeting in Moscow on 9 October 1944 he said to Stalin:

Let us settle about our affairs in the Balkans. Your armies are in Rumania and Bulgaria. We have interests, missions, and agents there. Don't let us get at cross-purposes in small ways. So far as Britain and Russia are concerned, how would it do for you to have ninety per cent predominance in Rumania, for us to have ninety per cent of the say in Greece, and go fifty-fifty about Yugoslavia?

Then came that famous piece of paper on which these percentages were written down, with the addition of a 50–50 split in Hungary and a 75–25 split in Russia's favour in Bulgaria. Stalin ticked this paper and then said Churchill 'might it not be

⁴⁷ The CPUSA's 1944 decision to change to a political association was reversed following the publication in April 1945 of a critical article in the French CP journal *Cahiers Du Communisme* by Jacques Duclos. The Duclos article was in fact largely a translation of an article that had already appeared in the CPSU central committee's confidential internal information bulletin on international affairs, *Voprosy Vneshnei Politiki* in January 1945. Even the translation from Russian to French was done in Moscow. See RTsKhIDNI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 754, LL. 72–94.

thought rather cynical if it seemed we disposed of these issues, so fateful to millions of people, in such an off-hand manner? Let us burn the paper'. Stalin replied: 'no, you keep it'.⁴⁸

It's a good story, but not necessarily true. Churchill's account and presentation of the meeting and of his conversation with Stalin has been questioned from a number of points of view. Both specialist studies⁴⁹ and recently-published documentation⁵⁰ reveal that the October 1944 conference between Churchill and Stalin was far from being the occasion of a Soviet-British division of the Balkans. The Russians, for their part, had no need for such an agreement nor did they desire one.

Important to understanding what actually transpired in Moscow in October 1944 are three prior developments in inter-allied relations.

The first concerns the character of the allied control machinery and occupation regime established in Italy following its defeat in 1943. At first, the Soviet side, on the initiative of Stalin, proposed joint allied control of the Italian occupation. This, it seems, was in line with the then Soviet strategy of pan-European allied co-operation and control in all liberated states. In the event, however, the Soviets gave way to Anglo-American proposals that reduced their role in Italy to a purely advisory and consultative capacity.⁵¹ Of interest as well is Stalin's intervention in Italian internal politics in early 1944. This was a period when the Moscow-based leadership of the Italian Communist Party was considering strategy and tactics in the new conditions in Italy. On Stalin's advice Togliatti agreed to participate in the post-fascist Badoglio government, to refrain from calling for the abolition of the Italian monarchy and to work for anti-fascist national unity. This was the origin of the PCI's famous 'Salerno turn' of March 1944. Stalin presented his policy advice in terms of the pressing needs of the anti-German struggle and the maintenance of the Grand Alliance—which lends itself to an interpretation of motive in terms of diplomacy, geopolitics, and, perhaps, spheres of influence. However, Stalin's intervention was also a matter of the communist politics of this period: the politics of national unity and popular fronts as a strategy for the achievement of people's democracy and then socialism in Europe. Stalin meted out similar advice to French

⁴⁸ W. Churchill, *The Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1962), pp. 196–7.

⁴⁹ A. Resis, 'The Churchill–Stalin Secret "Percentages" Agreement on the Balkans, Moscow, October 1944', *American Historical Review*, April 1978; P. Tsakaloyannis, 'The Moscow Puzzle', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21 (1986); P. G. H. Holdich, 'A Policy of Percentages? British Policy and the Balkans after the Moscow Conference of October 1944', *The International History Review*, February 1987; L. Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, 3 (London: HMSO, 1971); G. Kolko, *The Politics of War*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 140–61; and Mastny, *Russia's Road*, pp. 207–12.

⁵⁰ The Soviet record of the Stalin-Churchill meeting of 9/10/44 is reproduced in O.A. Rzheshesky, 'Soviet Policy in Eastern Europe 1944–45: Liberation or Occupation?', in G. Bennett (ed.), *The End of the War in Europe, 1945* (London: HMSO, 1996). Russian transcripts of the meetings on 14/10/44 and 17/10/44 are reproduced in *Istochnik*, 1995/4 (17). Soviet reports of the Molotov-Eden meetings of 9/10/44 and 16/10/44 are in *Sovetsko-Angliiskie Otnosheniya vo vremya Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny 1941–1945* (hereafter SAO), 2 (Moscow, 1983), docs. 140 and 147, which also contains an informational letter dated 21/10/44 from Vyshinskii to the Soviet ambassador in London on the discussions. For the British records of the various meetings see J.M. Siracusa, 'The Meaning of Tolstoy: Churchill, Stalin and the Balkans, Moscow, October 1944', *Diplomatic History*, Fall 1979.

⁵¹ Mastny, *Russia's Road*, pp. 105–8; Sainsbury, *The Turning Point*, pp. 69–80; and W. H. McNeill, *America, Britain and Russia: Their Co-operation and Conflict, 1941–1946* (Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 306–10.

communist leader Maurice Thorez in November 1944.⁵² In this period, as in later times, detente with the West did not, for the Soviets, mean an end to internal processes of social and political change in the capitalist world.

The second development was the British effort in summer 1944 to arrive at a military *spheres of action* agreement with Russia in the Balkans. Basically, the British wanted a free run for its operations in relation to Greece; in return, they offered a free hand to Moscow in relation to its impending operations against Rumania. Moscow deferred to the Americans on this proposal and only agreed to a 3 month trial period when Washington apparently assented, but then backed off in the face of further protests from the latter that it smacked of spheres of influence. In some ways the Churchill percentages proposal was an extension of this earlier, abortive initiative.⁵³ There had also been another important development and this was the surrender and Russian occupation in September 1944 of Bulgaria, Rumania and (imminently) Hungary.⁵⁴ The question arose as to the armistice terms for these three former Axis states and, more importantly, the character of the allied occupation regimes that would govern these countries after their surrender. What the admittedly confused and fuzzy haggling in Moscow over percentages was really about, was who would run the allied control commissions that would shortly emerge. This is clear from both the Soviet and British documents on the talks, including the famous Churchill–Stalin discussion of 9 October. What these documents also show is that for the Russians this was a minor issue. From Moscow’s point of view the more important discussions concerned Poland, Germany and Turkey. Indeed, the Soviets had no inkling that the issue of the allied control commissions was coming up⁵⁵ and when it did they were well aware of American objections to any kind of spheres of influence deal.⁵⁶ Most important, how the allied control machinery would work in Rumania, Bulgaria and (later) Hungary⁵⁷ was a foregone conclusion for the Russians: it would work the same way it did in Italy. The country or countries which occupied would control the occupation. If the British wanted to encapsulate this situation in percentage terms, Moscow, though bemused, had no objections. In the event, the outcome was a series of agreements establishing allied control commissions which the Soviets controlled—with no mention of percentages.

The fact that there was no Stalin–Churchill spheres of influence agreement does not mean that there was no Soviet spheres of influence policy in the Balkans in 1944–45. There was such a policy. A policy of securing in different ways and forms and in varying degrees the exclusion of Western influence from the region (and from the rest of Eastern Europe) and the establishment of friendly governments that would accept Moscow’s leadership and meet Soviet security requirements. That strategy did not necessarily entail a policy of isolation and purely unilateral action

⁵² See M. M. Narinskii, ‘Tolyatti, Stalin i ‘‘Povorot v Salerno’’’ in O. A. Rzeshevskii (ed.), *Vtoraya Mirovaya Voyna*, Moscow, 1995 and *Istochnik*, 1995/4 (17) for the Stalin–Thorez conversation.

⁵³ Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, pp. 115–23.

⁵⁴ On the military and political background to the Soviet investment of the Balkans, see J. Erickson, *The Road to Berlin* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1983) ch. 6.

⁵⁵ On 8 October Stalin messaged Roosevelt that he did not know why Churchill was coming to Moscow. At the Molotov–Eden meeting on 9/10 there was no hint of any percentages proposal (SAO, 2, doc. 140).

⁵⁶ For example, on 13/10 Gromyko, ambassador in the United States, telegraphed that Hopkins had told him that Roosevelt was very unhappy about American exclusion from Soviet–British discussions on Balkans (*Sovetsko–Amerikanskiye Otnosheniya vo vremya Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny 1941–1945*, 2 (Moscow, 1984), doc. 135).

⁵⁷ Inter-allied relations regarding Greece and Yugoslavia constitute distinct and separate stories.

to protect the Soviet security position. Far from it. When Churchill journeyed to Moscow the Soviets were still very much committed to a collaborative solution to the problem of peace and security in the postwar world (particularly in relation to Germany) and would remain so for some time to come. Nor did pursuit of a sphere of influence necessarily mean the communist subversion of Eastern Europe. As Stalin told Churchill at their meeting on 14 October: ‘The Soviet Union had no intention of organising Bolshevik Revolution in Europe. He, Churchill could be certain of this in relation to Rumania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia’.⁵⁸ Stalin’s intentions, however, were not fixed and his were by no means the only intentions that mattered. What happened would depend on the outcome of the Soviet effort to harmonise a policy of spheres of influence with the maintenance of postwar allied unity.

Conclusion: towards the Cold War

The main lines of the story of the establishment of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe at the end of the war are well known.⁵⁹ In the wake of the defeat of Germany and its allies in Eastern Europe there emerged a series of anti-fascist coalition governments in the region. Moscow used its military and political power to ensure, at a minimum, strong communist representation in these governments. The Soviet task in this respect was greatly facilitated by the rapid growth of the East European communist parties into a mass political force—with levels of popular support in the respective countries ranging from perhaps 20 per cent to 50 per cent of the electorate. It is also clear that the implementation of the Soviet spheres of influence policy was far from uniform. In some countries Moscow was determined to keep a firmer grip (Rumania, Bulgaria, Poland) than in others (Hungary and Czechoslovakia). In some countries (e.g. Yugoslavia) the local communists pursued more radical, socialistic policies than in others (e.g. Finland). It is also becoming increasingly clear that although the Soviets exercised (or attempted to exercise) close control over the political affairs of the East European states in the early postwar period,⁶⁰ the national communist leaderships also enjoyed much autonomy at the local level and themselves influenced Moscow’s foreign policy to a considerable degree. The character of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe was shaped from below as well as directed from above.⁶¹

⁵⁸ The quote is from the *Istochnik* document cited in n. 50.

⁵⁹ An old but good summary remains G. Lundestad’s, ‘The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe 1943–1947’, in his *The American Non-Policy Towards Eastern Europe 1943–1947* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1975).

⁶⁰ In the case of Poland, Soviet control mechanisms are documented in *SSSR-Polsha: Mekhanizmy Podchineniya 1944–1949gg* (Moscow, 1995). See also A. Polonsky and B. Drukier (eds.), *The Beginnings of Communist Rule in Poland*, (London: Routledge, 1980) and *NKVD i Polskoye Podpolye 1944–1945 (po ‘Osobym Papkam’ I.V. Stalina)* (Moscow, 1994).

⁶¹ On Soviet relations with its East European communist allies in the early postwar period there are various essays in Gori and Pons, *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943–1953*; N. Naimark and L. Gibianskii (eds.), *The Establishment of the Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944–1949* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); M. M. Narinskii, et al. (eds.), *Kholodnaya Voina: Novye Podkhody, Novye Dokumenty* (Moscow, 1995); L. N. Nezhimskii (ed.), *Sovetskaya Vneshnyaya Politika v Gody ‘Kholodnoi Voyny’ (1945–1985)* (Moscow, 1995); and A. O. Chubaryan, et al. (eds.), *Stalin i Kholodnaya Voina* (Moscow, 1998).

In relation to the longstanding debate about the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe—whether or not the later full-scale communization of the region was intended from the very beginning—it seems clear from recent evidence that Moscow's initial aims were limited to the establishment of a series of friendly regimes that would protect Soviet security. However, that security goal of an East European buffer zone became linked to a more radical political-ideological project. This was the goal of a Europe of People's or New Democracies: a continent of progressive left-wing regimes in which the communists would play a leading role. Hence the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe was conceived as part of a wider political space of security in which Moscow's interests would be safeguarded by regimes of people's democracy.

How did Moscow expect to be able to harmonise the people's democracy project—which applied to Western as well Eastern Europe—with the maintenance of the Grand Alliance after the war? First, people's democracy was conceived as a transitional form in which elements of the socialist future would coexist with the capitalist present—and would continue to do so for some time to come. People's democracy was a long-term strategy for socialism but not an immediate threat to the existence of capitalism. Second, the creation of people's democracy was seen as a function of internal socio-political developments in different countries. These internal developments were the terrain of a political struggle between the forces of democracy and social progress and the forces of reaction, including those in Britain and the US.⁶² People's democracy was, moreover, a powerful social phenomenon that could not be held back or controlled by any international alliance. Third, the Soviets were prepared to defer to Western interests in areas deemed to be in the latter's sphere of influence. The classic example in this respect concerns Greece. As early as 1943 Moscow had begun to define Greece as falling within a British sphere of influence.⁶³ During the war the Soviets practised a policy of non-interference in the affairs of the country, except to encourage the communist-led partisans to seek a compromise with Royalist and right-wing forces. For their part Stalin and Molotov never tired of deflecting Anglo-American complaints about the exclusion of Western influence from Eastern Europe by pointing to Soviet forbearance in relation to Greece. After the war Moscow was very circumspect in its support for the communists in the Greek civil war, even after the start of the Cold War.⁶⁴

A peacetime Grand Alliance, a people's democratic Europe, a demarcation of Soviet and Western interests—this was Moscow's alternative to the Cold War. But the political feasibility of the Soviet alternative depended on the Western perception and response to Moscow's foreign policy. And the problem was that the USSR's grand alliance partners saw Moscow's sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and the

⁶² This theme of progressive versus reactionary political forces dominates the reports on internal developments in various European countries published in the central committee's biweekly confidential bulletin on international affairs, *Voprosy Vneshnei Politiki*. The files of the bulletin for 1945–1946 are in RTsKhIDNI, F. 17, Op. 128, D. 49, 94.

⁶³ AVP RF, F. 6, Op. 5b, Pap. 1, D. 1, LL. 89–93.

⁶⁴ See A. A. Ulunian, 'The Soviet Union and the Greek Question, 1946–1953', in Gori and Pons, *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943–1953*; I. D. Smirnova, 'Gretsiya v Politike SSHA i SSSR 1945–1947 gg.', *Novaya i Noveishaya Istoriya*, no. 5, 1997; and M. Narinski, 'L'URSS et le problème de sphères d'influence et de frontières en Europe, 1939–1947', in C. Baechler and C. Fink (eds.), *The Establishment of European Frontiers after the Two World Wars* (London: Peter Long, 1995), p. 437.

people's democratic project as threatening, as presaging Soviet expansionism and communist subversion on a continental scale. Consequently, there were various postwar Western counter-moves, which culminated in the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine in 1947. These counter-moves were in turn viewed by Moscow as threatening to its vital security and political interests and only encouraged the application of a firmer grip on Eastern Europe and the pursuit of an ever-more radical communist strategy in the Soviet sphere of influence. The end-result of these mutually-interlocking threat perceptions was the abandonment of the people's democracy project, the outbreak of the Cold War and the full-scale communist takeover of Eastern Europe.⁶⁵

For the next 40 years Eastern Europe was viewed by a Moscow as a sort of 'geo-ideological'⁶⁶ space of Soviet security: the USSR's sphere of influence in Eastern Europe would be guaranteed by communist party control and ideological conformity with the Soviet model of socialism. Only with the advent of Gorbachev was this conception of Soviet security interests in Eastern Europe radically revised. Ironically, what Gorbachev sought was a version of the original postwar Soviet conception of people's democracy in Eastern Europe—a reformist communism that would harmonise with long-term coexistence and collaboration with the capitalist West.⁶⁷ As in the 1940s it was a project that proved to be stillborn.

⁶⁵ I develop this argument further in G. Roberts, *The Soviet Union in World Politics: Coexistence, Revolution and Cold War, 1945–1991* (London: Routledge, 1998), ch. 2. On the transmutations of the people's democracy idea see also W. O. McCagg, *Stalin Embattled, 1943–1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978).

⁶⁶ The phrase is from N. Gould-Davies, 'Ideology and International Relations', unpublished paper, BISA Annual Conference, University of Sussex, December 1998, p. 21.

⁶⁷ On Gorbachev's yearning for a return to the era of people's democracy and the grand alliance, see A. D'Agostino, *Gorbachev's Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1998).