

U.S. Foreign Policy: Key Events of the Cold War

Branislav L. Slantchev

Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego

Last updated: February 3, 2016

The Americans had severe difficulties in accommodating the Soviet security demands in Eastern Europe and could not bring themselves to accept that the installation of communist regimes there was out of legitimate security concerns instead of a prelude to the assertion of communist power over the rest of the world. The more the Americans resisted these demands, the more the Soviets focused on consolidating their position in Europe. The Soviets themselves could not bring themselves to accommodate the American demands for a politically liberal capitalist economic order. They feared that the encirclement of the USSR by pro-Western hostile regimes would stifle them and that it would inevitably be buttressed by resurgent American imperialism. The more the Soviets insisted on implementing their social system, the more the Americans refused to cooperate with them. There had been prominent voices in the U.S. advocating *engagement* with the Soviets and even as late as 1947 the Soviets were trying to cooperate with the Americans and considered participating in their development assistance plan. But it was not to be.

The fear and mistrust on both sides fed on each other, and every move came to be interpreted as yet another evidence of concealed aggressive design by the other side. Neither was willing to make the bold dramatic gesture that would reassure the other: the risks of being wrong were just too great. The Americans held the nuclear weapon monopoly but they were withdrawing their army from Europe. The Soviets had no nukes but the Red Army was astride in Eastern Europe and remained an overwhelming force there. If one gave way in attempt to cooperate but was mistaken about the motives of the other, there would be precious little to do when the other took advantage of that cooperation. The Cold War was not inevitable — if security interests were paramount in both countries, then conceivably some non-confrontational policy could have reassured the two governments and allayed their mutual suspicions — but several key events between 1945 and 1949 inexorably led to it anyway.

1 Two Confrontations in the Middle East, 1946

The problem of misperception feeding hostility and mistrust could be seen in two crises, both of which erupted and were resolved in 1946, and both of which served to solidify the fear in the U.S. and the Soviet Union that the other side was out to get it.

1.1 Iran: Azeri Communists vs. Oil Concessions

The first crisis was over the disposition of **Iran**, which the U.K. and the Soviet Union had jointly occupied in 1941 to secure the lines of supply to the USSR. During the war 30,000 American troops also moved there to facilitate the transport of these supplies. The allies had agreed that Iran would regain its sovereignty after the war and all three occupying forces were to withdraw their troops after the surrender of Germany. By September 1945 both the U.S. and the U.K. had complied with that agreement but the Soviets dallied. Instead of leaving their zone in Northern Iran, they created a communist party with a base among the Azeri population there. The party promptly declared itself the representative of the people there, disbanded the local branches of Tudeh, the Tehran-based communist party, and set about arming a peasant's militia, which captured all government offices by the end of November. They also supported the so-called **Mahabad Republic** proclaimed by the Kurds in December 1945. When the Iranian government sent troops to reassert its control in the region, the Soviets blocked their passage. They sent military advisers and provided for the cooperation between the Azeris and the Kurds. By the end of 1945, the Soviets appeared intent on dismembering Iran and setting up communist regimes in its northern territories.

The U.S. government became seriously alarmed about the possibility that the Soviets were on the move, acquiring territories and influence that would bring them to the Indian Ocean. Washington brought the Iranian case to the United Nations, where the newly formed Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed Resolution 2 (January 30, 1946) that urged Iran and the USSR to resolve their conflict about the occupying Soviet troops. In March, the Soviets promised immediate withdrawal but did not implement it. Instead, UNSC passed another resolution on April 4 (Resolution 3) that accepted that the Soviet troops could not be removed by the deadline and requested that the USSR withdraw them as soon as possible. Even this was watered down in Resolution 5 (May), which deferred the withdrawal until after the Iranian government could confer with the Soviets and submit a report to the U.N. The U.S. did not limit itself to the diplomatic demarche through the U.N.: Secretary of State Byrne made thinly veiled threats to get the Soviets to comply.

In April, the Soviets appeared to relent. The Red Army left Iran, abandoning its Azeri creations and Kurdish allies in the lurch. In December, the Shah sent the Iranian army, which crushed the rebels. The leaders of the Azeri enclave fled to

the Soviet Union and the Kurds were executed. Iran remained territorially intact and the episode set the tone for the close cooperation between the Shah and the U.S. The American government interpreted this episode as providing evidence for the expansionist designs the Soviets were suspected of harboring. After all, Iran did not represent a threat to the USSR nor was it supposed to function as a buffer state. Moreover, the ready retreat the Soviets beat when faced with diplomatic pressure and implicit threats of force by the U.S. also vindicated the notion that Soviet aggression could be contained on the cheap with resolute action. This greatly affected Washington's desire to cooperate with the Russians elsewhere in the region as well.

But what about the Soviets? Their behavior was puzzling: why would Stalin assert control of Northern Iraq, sponsor the creation of potentially separatist enclaves, and then abruptly reverse his policies permitting their suppression and with the entailing damage to the credibility of his foreign policy commitments? If the expansionist desire was so strong to risk these costs, why abandon the attempt so quickly even before the U.S. made any actual moves beyond issuing diplomatic statements? To understand the Soviet motivation, we need to look at the agreement the Soviets concluded with the Iranian authorities on April 4 (the day of UNSC Resolution 3) in Moscow. The joint communique they issued stated:

Provisions: (1) Soviet troops to evacuate Iranian territory completely within a month and half from March 24, 1946. (2) Agreement on establishment of a mixed Soviet-Iranian oil company to be submitted to the Iranian Mejlis for confirmation within 7 months after Mar. 24, 1946. (3) Iranian Azerbaidzhan recognized as an internal concern of Iran.¹

The Soviets had traded their communist and Kurdish allies along with their enclaves for oil. Instead of having their expansionist designs thwarted by a vigorous American response, they seemed to have compelled the Iranian government to agree to provide them with oil concessions in exchange for the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

The Soviet quest for oil in northern Iran went back to 1943, when the Iranian government began negotiations with the American Standard Oil Company for concessions in the south. Alarmed at the prospect of American influence in the region, the Soviets derailed these negotiations. Their interest in Iranian oil stimulated, in 1944 the Soviets pressed for oil concessions in the north of the country roughly equivalent to what the Iranians had given the British with the Anglo-Iranian oil company. Since such concessions would give the Soviets extraction rights over 150,000 square kilometers of Iranian territory, neither Tehran nor the Western allies wanted it.

With their demands for concessions rebuffed, the Soviets decided to try to circumvent the government and get their wishes fulfilled by the Majlis. Since the

¹Robert M. Slusser and Jan F. Triska, eds. *A Calendar of Soviet Treaties, 1917-57*. Stanford University Press, 1959. The text is on pp. 209.

parliament had recently prohibited the Prime Minister from granting oil concessions and even negotiating about them, the Soviets had to reconfigure the Majlis. The idea was to gain a majority there, and for this they had to obtain the 54 seats controlled by the northern regions. Consequently, in early 1945 the Soviets instructed coordinated with the Tudeh party and asserted support for the Azeris and the Kurds and their long-standing demands for recognition of political rights and autonomy. The Tudeh Party, loyal to Moscow, promoted the cause to the point that the alarmed government in Tehran cracked down on the party and declared martial law in August, 1945. The repression provoked an uprising in the north, and the Soviet forces stationed there prevented the government troops from restoring order. It was at this point that the USSR helped found the two pro-Soviet parties in the enclaves, greatly upsetting their Tudeh proteges in the event. The Soviets insisted that they were not protecting any movement toward independence because the Azeris and the Kurds were merely asking Tehran to respect their rights. The Azeri party in fact informed the American, British, and Soviet consuls that it would send their own representatives to the Majlis. But even the Tudeh leadership worried that this might have been a step too far as it could easily be seen (and it was) as the first step toward the dismemberment of the country. It did not matter that the Soviets had immediately put paid to any talk of naming the enclave Southern Azerbaijan because it could raise fears that the Azeris intended to join it to the Soviet Union's Republic of Azerbaijan.

The Iranian government also watched with growing concern the unfolding crisis in Turkey (to which we shall turn next) and decided to negotiate with the USSR. The Prime Minister resigned, and the new one, Ahmad Qavam, purged government officials hostile to the Soviets. He then went to Moscow in February where he was informed that Stalin was still keenly interested in obtaining oil concessions in Iran. Qavam could not have been surprised — previous Soviet proposals had been rejected by his predecessors in government as early as October 1944. This time, however, the Soviets offered a compromise: they would withdraw their troops in exchange for a joint Iranian-Soviet oil company with a majority Soviet share. Unlike concessions they would operate themselves, this arrangement would not permit them territorial control in Iran while still giving them the revenue from oil production. Nevertheless, Qavam refused and when the March 2 deadline for the evacuation of Allied troops from Iran passed with only Soviet forces remaining there, he contacted the Americans again who told him to stand firm and assured him of their support. The Soviets sent a letter demanding the exchange even before the Iranians went back to the U.N. with their complaint. This time the Cabinet acquiesced and the April 4th agreement was the result.²

The sudden abandonment of the Azeris and the Kurds to their inevitable fate

²Kristen Blake. *The U.S.-Soviet Confrontation in Iran, 1945–1962: A Case in the Annals of the Cold War*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2009.

can readily be understood in this context. When the Azeri communists complained about being deceived by the Soviets, Stalin replied that since there was no “profound revolutionary crisis” in Iran, the Leninist preconditions for a communist victory did not exist and the Azeri movement was artificially sustained by the presence of Soviet troops, which could not continue because it “undercut the foundations of our liberationist policies in Europe and Asia.” In fact, leaving Iran would render Soviet “liberationist policy more just and efficient.” In this extraordinary letter to the leader of the Azeris Stalin also blandly explained that the USSR had pressed for maximum concessions and created a threat (the movement in Iranian Azerbaijan) to force the government to make them, which was a technique that “every revolutionary knows.” He finished by advising the Azeri to “behave reasonably and seek with our moral support the demands that would legalize essentially the existing factual position of Azerbaijan.”³

Stalin’s analysis was correct: there were no preconditions for an indigenous communist victory in Iran, and removing the protective shield provided by the Red Army quickly exposed the “existing factual position” there. While the Soviets pressed for the ratification of their oil company by the Majlis, the Tehran government obtain American financial assistance and agreement to sell a token amount of weapons. At the end of October, Qavam announced the elections for the Majlis would be held on December 7 (thus placating the Soviets) and that the government was sending forces to the provinces to maintain order during the elections. The Soviets warned Qavam not to suppress the Azeri communists but after consulting the the Americans the Prime Minister ordered the military to go ahead. On December 11, the Iranian forces took control of Iranian Azerbaijan and the communists fled. The Soviets did nothing except pressuring Tehran to hold the promised elections.

The elections finally took place on January 12, 1947 but the Majlis would not meet until after all credentials of the new deputies had been verified. By then events in Turkey and Greece had moved the Truman administration to make a firm commitment to resist what it regarded as communist aggression, which in turn emboldened the Iranians. In June, Qavam told the British that the government was preparing to renege on its agreement with the Soviets but that in order to appear even-handed it would have to attack the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) as well.⁴ On October 22, the Majlis rejected the creation of the Soviet-Iranian Oil Company and passed

³Letter from Joseph V. Stalin to Ja’afar Pishevari, Leader of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, 8 May, 1946. The full text is translated in Natalia I. Yegorova. “The ‘Iran Crisis’ of 1945–46: A View from the Russian Archives.” Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Working Paper No. 15, May 1996. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-iran-crisis-1945-46-view-the-russian-archives>, accessed February 1, 2016.

⁴There was a great deal of nationalist opposition to the AIOC arrangement, which was giving the British government more income from taxing the company than Iran was obtaining in royalties and taxes. Between 1945 and 1947, the British got an average of 16 million pounds per annum in taxes to the Iranians’ average of 6 million pounds per annum in revenue.

a law that committed the government to renegotiating the AIOC terms with the British. On December 1, Qavam informed the Soviets of the result, chalked it up to nationalist sentiment, and cited the discussion of AIOC's concessions as evidence of impartiality.⁵ Moscow could do nothing about this brazen move: betraying their erstwhile allies and letting them be destroyed had left the Soviets without a power base in Iran, and sending the Red Army back in without even a fig leaf for a pretext was out of the question. In fact, the Soviets got worse than nothing out of this crisis because of the consequences it had for American and Iranian foreign policy.

From the Soviet perspective, then, the episode provided proof of American (and British) duplicity. Even as their own companies were extracting tremendous revenues from Iranian oil concessions, they had conspired with Tehran to deny analogous treatment to the USSR. Moreover, the Iranian government used its ever-closer links with Washington to launch a diplomatic offensive through the UNSC and, eventually, a military intervention in northern Iran where they crushed Soviet-friendly groups who were merely seeking to obtain political rights and autonomy. Moscow would intensify its propaganda against the perfidious regime in Tehran and became far less willing to cooperate with the Americans as well.

1.2 Turkey: Intimidation and Commitment

Stalin's negotiating tactic of asking for the whole earth and hoping for an acre backfired even worse in a crisis with **Turkey** that briefly produced a war scare in 1946.⁶ The dispute began in 1945 when the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality (1925) expired. In June, the Soviet Foreign Minister **Vyacheslav Molotov** informed the Turkish ambassador about the price of maintaining their friendship: revision of the **Montreux Convention**, settling of outstanding territorial disputes, and joint defense of the straits.

These were serious demands. The Russian Empire had spent centuries fighting with the Ottoman Empire, clawing its way toward the **Bosphorus** and the **Dardanelles**, the two straits that connect the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara and the latter to the Aegean. The two straits and the Sea of Marmara are collectively referred to as the **Turkish Straits**. These straits were very important to the Russians because they provided the sole sea line from their only warm water ports to the trade routes of the Mediterranean (and from there, to the rest of the world). Blocking the straits meant that no supplies could be shipped to Russia and this had been a major contributing factor to Russia's defeat in the **Crimean War** in 1854–56, which

⁵John H. Bamberg. *The History of the British Petroleum Company, vol. ii, The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928-1954*, Cambridge, 1982, p. 385.

⁶It was Truman who wrote that "[t]here is too much loose talk about the Russian situation. We are not going to have any shooting trouble with them but they are tough bargainers and always ask for the whole earth, expecting maybe to get an acre." Letter to John Garner, September 21, 1946. Quoted in Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994, p. 249.

they lost to the combined forces of Britain, France, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire. The Soviets were also very sensitive to their vulnerability to a closure of the straits by Turkey. The Montreux Convention of 1936 had given Turkey full military control of the straits — this included the re-fortification of the Dardanelles — and guaranteed unrestricted passage of all merchant vessels in peacetime. It permitted Turkey to close the straits to all foreign warships in wartime and also authorized it to refuse transit to merchant ships from countries at war with Turkey. Additional limitations applied to the passage of warships from non-Black Sea powers in peacetime. Only warships from Black Sea powers, which of course included the USSR, were allowed unrestricted passage in peacetime.⁷

The Soviets were unhappy with Turkey having allowed the passage of non-Black Sea warships during the war and shortly after. Stalin was on record with a prewar opinion that a “small” (by Soviet standards) country like Turkey held the USSR “by the throat”. Molotov’s note amounted to a demand for the Soviets to take military control of the straits, complete with a base on Turkish soil. The disputed territory included the provinces of Kars and Adrahan that the Russians had conquered in 1878 but ceded back to Turkey in 1921. Molotov pretended that the 1921 agreement was invalid because it had been extracted under duress during a moment of temporary weakness when the communists were at war with Poland. Now the Soviets claimed the territories on behalf of the Georgian and Armenian republics, respectively.

Since these extravagant ideas were not official demands, the Turks indicated willingness to discuss the Convention but ignored the rest. Stalin brought up the matter at the Potsdam conference in a manner that left little doubt that the terms were flexible. By late spring the Soviets had dropped the territorial dispute altogether and it made no further appearance in the incident. Moreover, although the Soviet diplomats were cagey about what they meant by “joint defense”, they sometimes indicated that it might not require permanent Soviet bases in Turkey.⁸ While the diplomats were conspicuously failing to clarify what they meant, U.S. and British intelligence began to note ominous movements of Soviet troops in the Balkans, especially in Bulgaria. It appeared that the USSR were preparing to intimidate Turkey just as the crisis in Iran itself was escalating in a similar fashion.

The U.S. did not have a strategy to deal with a threat against Turkey. In fact, at this time the government had not yet defined the Middle East as vital to American interests. As the Soviet pressure mounted, however, Truman and his Cabinet had to ponder the likely outcomes of a confrontation between the USSR and Turkey. The British appeared incapable of offering any meaningful support to Turkey, so it fell

⁷The convention remains in force to this day with only some minor adjustments.

⁸The Soviets eventually renounced their territorial claims formally after Stalin died in 1953. For an analysis of the crisis that argues that the Soviet demands were moderate and the U.S. government did not believe war was likely, see Melvyn P. Leffler, “Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945–1952,” *The Journal of American History*, 71:4 (March), 1985, 807–25.

to the Americans to do so. Without a firm commitment to defend them, the Turks might capitulate to Soviet demands, allowing the communists to expand their influence into the Middle East. The last remaining bulwark against that expansion there was the British Empire, but it could do nothing without the United States. American policy-makers concluded that cooperation with London would be essential for any effective resistance to the communist threat. The Middle East began to loom larger in American strategic thought.

The news of a Soviet-Iranian deal arrived in the spring 1946, but even though the Red Army quickly evacuated Iran, it did no such thing in the Balkans. The Soviet press maintained a tone of unremitting hostility toward Turkey and the Anglo-Saxon imperialists, and numerous reports arrived noting that Soviet officers had become particularly belligerent and talked openly about a surprise attack on Turkey. George Kennan, among others, warned not to overestimate the Soviet desire to fight. In fact, a consensus had developed in the U.S. administration that the Soviets were highly unlikely to deliberately instigate a major war with the Western powers. But this was not the problem, for the crux of the issue was that they might push the Turks too far in the belief that the West would not help them. But as the U.S. had now resolved to defend the Middle East — and Turkey, unlike Iran, was considered to be the key to that defense — if the Turks decided to resist, then the Soviets might unleash a war that would involve the U.S. anyway. The fear seems to have been that the Soviets would underestimate the credibility of the American commitment and challenge Turkey in a way that would trigger war.

While the administration was trying to make sense of the Soviet strategy, the crisis suddenly escalated. On August 7, 1946, the Soviets delivered a formal diplomatic note that demanded a revision of the Convention (which was acceptable) and provisions for joint defense of the straits (which was not). No mention was made of the two provinces, which represented a recession in the original Soviet position. On the other hand, the Soviets had taken over the Baltic states after first placing military bases there for “joint defense” purposes. In the context of ratcheting up of tensions that had been going on for months and the crystallizing American commitment to Turkey, Washington went into crisis mode. A week later Truman approved a memorandum, whose conclusion was that the Soviet Union was seeking to subjugate Turkey and could only be deterred if the U.S. showed itself ready to resist that aggression by force of arms if necessary. The President had asserted that he would follow the memo’s recommendations “to the end” and when Secretary of State **Dean Acheson** asked whether he understood that this might mean war, Truman replied that “we might as well find out whether the Russians were bent on world conquest now as in five or ten years.”⁹

⁹Quoted in Eduard Mark, “The War Scare of 1946 and Its Consequences,” *Diplomatic History*, 21:3 (Summer), 1997. Mark argues that the U.S. government took the possibility of war very seriously both because the Soviet demands were, in fact, unreasonable and because of persistent reports of Soviet troop movements and indirect evidence for their preparation for war. As a result, the

The administration took steps to make its commitment clear: it plainly told the Soviets that the notion of joint defense of the straits was unacceptable and warned that armed aggression against Turkey would be something the UNSC would have to deal with. To underscore the seriousness of these words, the U.S. moved its newest and most powerful aircraft carrier, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, on station in the eastern Mediterranean and reinforced the American naval group there. Since the American public was not ready to assume a hostile stance against the Soviets on hypotheticals, the administration muddied the waters by issuing a press release that pointed to vague “interests” and insisted that there was nothing unusual about that deployment. New intelligence reports came in great numbers: Stalin had halted demobilization, publicly supported Bulgaria in its claims to Turkish territory, sent infiltrators among the Georgians in Turkey to stir separatism, and moved large numbers of troops to Romania and Bulgaria. The British reports were more alarmist than the American, but then MI-6 (the British intelligence service) had a dense network of agents in the Balkans and the Americans did not. The administration took the British reports very seriously. In early September, it estimated that the Soviets would need about 250,000 troops to attack Turkey and that they already had about 230,000 in Bulgaria. Rumors abounded that the Soviets were also augmenting their forces there under cover of darkness. Although many of these reports would turn out to have been vastly exaggerated, the administration’s concern over a possible Soviet invasion of Turkey was real. Correspondingly, the American preparation for war was real. This was, in fact, the first time that the U.S. developed a plan for war with the Soviet Union, the so-called **Griddle**, which outlined how the U.S. could act to prevent Turkey’s fast collapse in a war against the USSR. The plan called for sending aid to Turkey, becoming the impetus behind the **Truman Doctrine** that would publicly commit the U.S. to doing precisely that in 6 months. The Air Staff similarly developed plans for atomic strikes against the Soviet Union (these were approved in December).

The Truman administration did not want to make public threats just yet even obfuscated its implicit ones (the dispatch of military forces to the Mediterranean). Had this been all that Stalin had to go on, he might have pushed forward with his intimidation tactics. As it turned out, however, well-placed Soviet spies were able to inform him that Truman was resolved to protect Turkey, even at a price of war with the USSR. His strategy had correctly assumed that the British would not be an obstacle, but it had hedged against the possibility that the Americans might decide to get involved. Now this possibility had become a reality and since Stalin had no plan or desire for war with the West, he had to back-pedal quickly. And this is precisely what he did.

On September 24, the Soviets sent a note to Turkey, in which they expressed in-

confrontation was not a “phoney” crisis that was never in danger of turning into a shooting war, as Leffler would argue, but a real one.

dignation that Turkey could have slandered them so badly by implying that the proposed joint defense of the Straits was somehow intended to violate Turkish sovereignty. The declared themselves willing to discuss a mutually acceptable revision of the convention but implied that they had never imagined having bases on Turkish soil.¹⁰ To make sure that the Americans and the British were getting the message, Stalin insisted that there had been no danger of war over Turkey, and stressed the possibility of peaceful coexistence without any strings attached (which contradicted everything that had happened since Molotov identified said strings). In October, the U.S., U.K., and Turkey restated their commitment to their original positions, and on the 26th the Soviets backtracked even from a review of the Montreaux Convention. The crisis was over.

The Soviet attempt to intimidate Turkey had failed even more spectacularly than their (then still impending) failure in Iran. Turkey had tried to steer a neutral course but its weakness and the persistent Soviet interest in the Straits meant that it would have to choose sides; the Western side, more specifically, if it was going to retain its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the long run. This was perhaps unavoidable and it followed the traditional alignment of Turkey with Western powers in opposition to the Russians. What might have been avoidable, however, was the firm American commitment to Turkey. With Britain exhausted by the war and incapable of fulfilling its usual role stemming the Soviets in the Middle East and Asia, Turkey became the focus of attention for the U.S. government, and the linchpin to containing the spread of communism in the region. The deterrence of the Soviets over the Turkish Straits had forced a reevaluation of the American hands-off position there, and Stalin's menacing bargaining tactics left Washington will no doubt that they could only be countered by resolute action, up to, and including, a risk of war.

The aggressiveness of Soviet diplomacy, even in bluff (for available evidence reveals no preparation for war with Turkey), fed the American suspicion that all

¹⁰In the note, the Soviets noted that Turkey had not really addressed the various violations of the Montreaux Convention they had listed in their original communique of August 7, and asserted that the current Straits regime "does respond to the security interests of the Black Sea powers and does not assure conditions in which it will be possible to forestall the use of the Straits for purposes hostile to the Black Sea powers." It then professed the Soviet government satisfied with Turkey's willingness to talk on the basis of the proposed changes to the convention (these were fairly mild), but then turned to Turkey's response to the joint defense proposals, a response that "indicated a certain distrust" that the Soviets now endeavored to dispel. The Soviets complained that the Turkish government rushed to detect a threat to its sovereignty and security "long before hearing several concrete considerations of the Soviet Government on this subject" and that merely "by considering it possible to give voice to such suspicions which had no basis at all and which moreover are incompatible with the dignity of the Soviet Union," Turkey contradicted its professed desire for friendly relations with the USSR. *A Note of the Government of the Soviet Union to the Government of the Republic of Turkey*, September 24, 1946. An English translation can be found in Harry N. Howard, ed., *The Problem of the Turkish Straits*, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Publication 2752, Near Eastern Series 5, 1947. https://archive.org/details/ldpd_10984798_000, accessed February 2, 2016.

protestations about security notwithstanding, the Soviets were out to expand their influence and perhaps even territory. This pushed Washington into a confrontational position, which in turn upset Moscow — after all, the charges the Soviets had levied against Turkey had some basis in fact. It was difficult for Stalin to accept that a non-European power like the U.S. would have so much to say about a Black Sea matter. But it had come to pass: now the U.S. was committed to the Middle East. Stalin's tactics in the Turkish Crisis were later criticized by the Soviet leadership itself (after he had died, of course). There had been no need to frighten Turkey into an alliance with the U.S., bringing American nuclear weapons to the borders of the Soviet Union. Especially so when there was no intent to actually force a solution to the satisfaction of Soviet pretensions there. This crisis was another unmitigated disaster for the Soviets.

2 The Crystallization of Hostility

The Iranian and Turkish crises of 1946 had ended up in Soviet retreats and a firm American conviction that these tactics could, and should, be resisted. Even though both situations had been resolved by early 1947, serious problems remained in the region.

2.1 Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan

On February 21, 1947, Britain notified the US that it was no longer able to aid the Greeks who had been fighting a civil war with Greek communists. The crumbling Empire had failed to regain control of Greece despite three years of fighting. This time it was not Stalin who was stirring up trouble but the Yugoslav communist leader **Josip Tito**, who was helping the fraternal side in Greece. The logic of the American position was nevertheless the same: if Greece was allowed to fall, a solid communist bloc would emerge in the Balkans, encircling Turkey. Given the various territorial disputes in the area, it would be merely a matter of time before Turkey succumbed, and after it, the Middle East and Africa. The logic, which would later be named the **Domino Theory**, was what Dean Acheson used on members of Congress to whom he outlined Truman's plan to tackle the problem.¹¹ The government wanted to extend financial and, if necessary, military aid to both Turkey and Greece. The Senators agreed but also noted that this policy would not fly with the rest of Congress unless Truman could persuade them of the reality of the danger. Or, as Arthur Vandenberg, the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, put it, the President's message to Congress better include Acheson's logic to "scare hell" out of the American people.

¹¹Acheson likened the danger to "apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one" but it would be the falling dominoes that stuck as a metaphor.

On March 12, 1947 Truman “scared hell” out of the American people in a speech before a joint session of Congress. He divided the world in two: one where the majority freely expressed its will, and another—where an armed minority forcibly imposed its will on the majority. Truman believed “that it must be the policy of the US to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.” That is, the US should pledge to aid economically and militarily any country that claimed to be fighting Communism (although the communists were never explicitly mentioned by name in the speech, everyone, including the communists, knew who Truman had in mind). The President asked for \$400 million for military and economic aid. The chickens of Stalin’s intimidating tactics had come home to roost. Since the President did not set any specific geographical limits to the policy, the **Truman Doctrine** allowed the United States to act anywhere its administration detected attempted communist expansion or subversion. Moreover, the President had shown that the fear of communism could be usefully exploited by the administration. Truman’s popularity surged.¹²

Since the U.S. had now embarked on a more deliberate course to obstruct the Soviet designs in the Middle East and the Balkans, the prospects for cooperation over Europe diminished. The Europeans weren’t doing well: their economies were sinking instead of recovering, their trade deficit with the U.S. was increasing and they were running out of dollars to pay for American goods. The patient was dying while the U.S. and the USSR squabbled over control.

On June 5, 1947, George Marshall delivered a speech at Harvard, which became the basis of the so-called **Marshall Plan** to save Europe. He proposed that the U.S. should assist the Europeans with money while they themselves set up a program for reconstruction. A week later, the British Foreign Minister (Bevin) traveled to Paris to talk to the French counterpart (Bidault). By that time the Soviets had declared the Plan a “Truman Doctrine with dollars.” Fearful that without Soviet counterweight France would be compelled to join the Western camp on wholly Anglo-Saxon terms, Bidault decided to invite the Soviets to the talks.

The Russian line immediately moderated and Molotov arrived in Paris on June 26 with 89 economic experts and clerks. The Russians were seriously considering the Plan, and this created an unexpected roadblock for the U.S. administration. With Truman so recently requesting that Congress fund foreign policy designed to counter the communist threat, it was quite doubtful that Congress would vote money to help the Soviet Union rebuild. To the great relief of the Americans, the Soviets made demands that even the Europeans would find unacceptable. Among other

¹²In Greece, the involvement went badly at first. In late 1947, the US contemplated sending 2 divisions to save the situation. However, in early 1948 Tito cut his aid and turned to strengthening his domestic position. Deprived of aid, the communists quickly lost ground and the nationalists triumphed. The civil war had nearly caused the US to get involved in something like Vietnam, but the Greek case convinced American policy-makers that they could prop conservative governments at little cost.

things, they wanted each country to establish its own recovery program, and they adamantly opposed the revival of Germany without new controls to ensure it would not return as a threat. By this time nobody in the West harbored any illusions that Germany could be kept in some sort of disarmed pastoral debility. It would have to recover and assume its prominent place in Europe if the continent was going to move forward.

After encountering stiff opposition to their plans, the Soviets quit the conference, and within a week announced a **Molotov Plan** for the reconstruction of Eastern Europe. They forbade their satellites from participating in the Marshall Plan. They had already established a centralized agency that was to provide economic aid and coordinate the production of the Eastern European countries, the **Council for Mutual Economic Assistance** (COMECON, January 1947). However, unlike the Americans who had a booming and extraordinarily productive economy (with Europe in ruins, the U.S. accounted for nearly half of the world's production), the Soviets were in desperate need of financial assistance themselves. How they planned to aid their satellites was a mystery. Nevertheless, they forged ahead now by also creating the **Communist Information Bureau** (COMINFORM), which was to coordinate the communist parties in its member states (Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Italy, and France), and ensure that they hewed to Moscow's line. In August, the Soviets purged left-wing anticommunists in Hungary and rigged the elections: all political opposition there disappeared. The USSR began tightening its control of the bloc. The Americans knew that the Soviets were reacting to the recent setbacks. Marshall told the Cabinet in November, "The advance of Communism has been stemmed and the Russians have been compelled to make a reevaluation of their position."

2.2 Fall of Czechoslovakia and Expulsion of Yugoslavia

The assertion of Soviet control in Eastern Europe took a sinister turn in January 1948, in **Czechoslovakia**. The USSR had been the sole power that had offered to intercede on behalf of the country in 1938, and when that offer was rebuffed by the West, the country was dismembered by Germany, Poland, and Hungary. During the war, the Czechs had signed a pact with Stalin that had obligated the country to become part of the Soviet bloc. The Red Army was welcomed as a liberating force, and in the 1946 parliamentary elections the communists won 38% of the vote, the largest share of any party. Czechoslovakia was the only East European country aside from Yugoslavia where an indigenous communist victory seemed possible. But even there the fairy-tale did not last long. By the end of 1947, the Czechs were pulling away from the Soviets, partly because of the lure of Western aid, but also because both President **Edvard Beneš** and Foreign Minister **Jan Masaryk** were determined to prevent the country from becoming subservient to the USSR. Stalin decided to pull it back into the Soviet orbit.

The leader of the Czech Communist Part, **Klement Gottwald**, was summoned to Moscow. Upon his return in early 1948, he demanded the elimination of independent political parties. To stress the gravity of the situation, the Soviet armies concentrated on the borders as he was forming a new government. On February 25, the communists assumed full control of the state. President Beneš surrendered and Masaryk committed suicide (or, by some accounts, was suicided) on March 10. Czechoslovakia had fallen.

Everyone remembered the last time something like that had happened: 1938. The events in Hungary and Czechoslovakia made it easy to draw parallels with the international situation on the eve of the Second World War. It looked like the U.S. was facing the same problem of deterrence with Stalin that France and Britain had with Hitler a decade earlier. Truman was not going to make the same mistake they did — there would be no further accommodation of the Soviets. On March 14, barely two weeks after the Prague coup d'état, the Senate overwhelmingly endorsed the Marshall Plan. On April 3, Congress passed the **Foreign Assistance Act** that instituted the **European Recovery Program** (ERP) and authorized spending \$13 billion. America began to pour resources into Western Europe while simultaneously providing its defensive shield and guiding its political development, to which we shall return in more detail later.¹³

The tightening of Moscow's grip on Eastern Europe did not go unchallenged even there, and it was the other country where the communists were indigenously strong that caused trouble: **Yugoslavia**. Its leader, **Josip Broz Tito**, was the commander of the communist military forces, the Partisans, that had fought against the Germans (and also against their Croatian allies, the Ustaše, as well as against the nominally anti-Axis Serb nationalist guerillas, the Chetniks). After the victory, he had organized the postwar government and was elected Prime Minister with overwhelming popular support. Because that victory was achieved by the Partisans with only limited support from the Soviets, Tito was fairly independent of Stalin. Despite being a loyal communist, Tito recognized that the development of Yugoslavia did not have to follow the Soviet lead. His open support for the communists in Greece

¹³The Europeans had originally requested \$17 billion over a period of 4 years. The aid program disbursed \$13.3 billion and ended on December 31, 1951 (six months ahead of schedule). To get a sense of the magnitude of this aid, consider that in 1947, the nominal U.S. GDP was \$250 billion, making the aid package 5.32% of the country's income. The government budget for that year was \$57.7 billion, so the program amounted to a quarter of what the administration was spending on defense, welfare, education, healthcare, and pensions. If the U.S. government were to extend such a package today, it would be about \$138 billion, which is the inflation-adjusted purchasing power of 1947-era \$13 in 2014 dollars. A more appropriate conversion would be the economy cost of that package, which measures its opportunity cost in terms of the total output of the economy; that is, it measures what society would have to forego in order to afford it. Under this measure, the Marshall Plan would cost \$902 billion in 2014. GDP data from <http://data.okfn.org/data/core/gdp-us>; budget from http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/total_spending_1947USbn conversions from <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>, all accessed February 2, 2016.

also flouted Stalin's will since the Soviet leader had promised the British he would not interfere with their control of Greece and had limited the USSR to speaking on their behalf in the UNSC. Tito's goal of annexing Trieste to Yugoslavia was also rocked the boat with the West a bit too much for Stalin's taste (he preferred to do the rocking himself). The relationship between the two leaders, uneasy from the start and already strained, came apart when the Soviets demanded that Yugoslavia comply fully with the new economic and mutual assistance pacts. In May, the Soviets criticized Tito and the Yugoslav Communist Party for failing to correct and even admit their mistakes. Tito countered by suggesting that the matter be settled at the June meeting of the COMINFORM although he harbored no illusions that Moscow would call the shots at this meeting.

On June 28, the other COMINFORM members followed the Soviet lead and expelled Yugoslavia, which would chart its own non-aligned course through the Cold War. The relations between Stalin and Tito went downhill from there. In August, 1949, Soviet and Hungarian troops massed on the borders of Yugoslavia and Stalin sent a note to its government, which stated bluntly

The Yugoslav government more and more is joining up with imperialistic circles (the west) against the USSR and is in a bloc with them. [...] Let the people of Yugoslavia know that the Soviet government looks on the present Yugoslav government not as a friend and ally but as an enemy and adversary of the Soviet Union.¹⁴

To prevent other satellites from trying to follow the Yugoslav example, Stalin purged any potential Titos and sponsored several attempts to assassinate him. Tito piled insult on injury writing to Stalin:

Stop sending people to kill me! We've already captured five of them, one of them with a bomb and another with a rifle... If you don't stop sending killers, I'll send a very fast working one to Moscow and I certainly won't have to send another.¹⁵

The defining event of 1948, however, was neither the fall of Czechoslovakia nor the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the COMINFORM. It was the severe crisis over West Berlin that the Soviets provoked; a crisis that would see the dramatic 324 days of the **Berlin Airlift**, and that would end with the creation of NATO.

¹⁴“Soviet Brands Tito ‘Enemy’, Accuses Yugoslavia of Joining Up with ‘Imperialist’ West,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, August 12, 1949. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1499&dat=19490812&id=wPQZAAAAIBAJ&sjid=lyMEAAAAIBAJ&pg=5195,626513&hl=en>, accessed February 2, 2016.

¹⁵This note was found among Stalin's papers after his death in 1953. Quoted in Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 592.

2.3 The Berlin Airlift

The recovery of Europe that the Marshall Plan was set to aid could not happen while Germany remained prostrate. In late 1947, the American, British, and French occupying forces merged their zones in West Germany, forming **Trizonia**, to pursue coordinated economic policies, the first of which was to introduce a common currency that would halt the rampant inflation. The Soviets had no interest in lifting Germany out of recession, hoping perhaps that it would fuel communist uprisings. They also worried that the measures to increase industrial production and foreign trade would cut significantly into reparations to the USSR. That worry was justified as the Western Allies were concerned that these reparations were inhibiting recovery and were anxious to limit them. On March 6, 1948 the Allies, who had met in London without the Soviets (in violation of the Potsdam Accords), agreed to take steps to bring West Germany into their camp, specifically through its participation in the Marshall Plan. The Soviets protested in vain and their attempts to intimidate the Allies by blockading land routes to West Berlin backfired: the French committed to the Anglo-American plan, and in Italy the conservatives beat the communists decisively at the polls. Every initiative from Moscow only served to consolidate the Western bloc.¹⁶

On June 17, the government of Trizonia introduced the new currency although it refrained from extending it to West Berlin. The Soviets branded the action as illegal, began insisting on searching all convoys to the city, and threatened to introduce their own currency in their zone, including Berlin. On June 23, the American military governor of Germany **Lucius Clay** began issuing the new Trizonian currency in West Berlin. This had not been authorized by Washington but Clay believed that the Soviets were not going to risk war over it. The Russians immediately denounced the entire London Program and proposed four-power talks to discuss the unification of Germany without any foreign troops. To underscore the seriousness of their demands, they cut off all surface traffic to West Berlin, and reduced the supply of food and electricity from their zone.

Berlin lay 110 miles inside the Soviet occupation zone and access to it was limited to one highway, one air corridor, and two railroads. It was strategically vulnerable, and the Allies had no formal agreement with the Soviets to guarantee access to their sectors in West Berlin. This put them in a very difficult position when the Soviets blockaded the city. It seemed that the only two choices were some form of surrender to Soviet demands in a compromise on the currency issue and forcing the blockade with armed convoys. The latter option seemed out of the question: the Soviets could thwart the convoys by simply blowing up some bridges and, worse, if they decided to challenge them anyway, the crisis could quickly escalate into a

¹⁶Much of the historical background for this section comes from Arnold Offner's *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953* and *Airbridge to Berlin: The Berlin Crisis of 1948, Its Origins and Aftermath* by D.M. Giangreco and Robert E. Griffin.

shooting incident, and from there, into an all-out war. The location of Berlin made it a hostage of no military value but the Western Allies recognized its symbolic importance. As Clay himself put it,

There is no practicability in maintaining our position in Berlin and it must not be evaluated on that basis. . . We are convinced that our remaining in Berlin is essential to our prestige in Germany in Europe. Whether for good or bad, it has become a symbol of the American intent.

He even warned the Soviets that they could not “drive us out by an action short of war as far as we are concerned.” If the Americans were serious about containing the spread of communism in Europe, then they could not afford to be dislodged from West Berlin or allow the Soviets to use it as a pawn in a bargaining game. In other words, compromise was not really an option either.

Out of sheer desperation and after consulting with the Germans, the Allies gambled with a third option: supplying the city by air. Nobody knew whether it could work: supplying over 2 million inhabitants by air alone was an operation of a scale never attempted before. It was also unclear just how long the Berliners would hold out if supplies flagged, especially once the cold and rainy months arrived. At least the option had the absence of an escalatory step to commend itself. The first plans arrived in Berlin on June 26, and two days later Truman resolved to stay in Berlin. On July 6, the Western Allies delivered protest notes to the USSR and offered to negotiate on the condition that the blockade be lifted prior to that. The Soviets rejected any conditions preliminary to negotiations on the whole German issue. On the 19th, Truman decided that the U.S. would hold out in Berlin even at the risk of war, and Marshall communicated this at a press conference where he warned that the U.S. government “will not be coerced or intimidated in any way.” The U.S. was going to see this through. One of the worst crises of the Cold War was underway.

The **Berlin Airlift** delivered about 13,000 tons of supplies daily for 324 days through 270,000 flights, and became a symbol of Western resolve (and technological capability). Enthusiastic as it was, the airlift did not immediately dispel doubts about its feasibility. Could the necessary level of supplies be maintained in the adverse atmospheric conditions of the fall and winter? It soon became obvious that the Soviets would not lift the blockade before the onset of bad weather; apparently, they also wanted to see if the airlift would fail. The organization of the airlift, however, improved and the deliveries climbed steadily until November when weather conditions deteriorated badly. The allies persevered and their efforts were rewarded on December 5, when the West Berliners went to the polls and elected a decidedly pro-Western government.

By January, the worst of the winter was over, the economic reforms were starting to bear fruit, and the flow of resources from the Marshall Plan was being felt. The airlift worked and the blockade did not.¹⁷ Even worse for the Soviets, the Western

¹⁷The Soviets had not imposed a tight blockade on goods entering West Berlin from their own

counter-blockade that cut off steel, chemicals and manufactured goods from Western Europe to the USSR and Eastern Europe, had begun affecting the Eastern bloc rather painfully. Perhaps the worst of it all was that instead of splitting the Western bloc, the crisis turned it into a monolith with its own military alliance, the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO).¹⁸ Although it would take the entry of West Germany into that alliance in 1955 to trigger the formation of the Soviet counter alliance, the **Warsaw Pact**, it was already apparent that the antagonism of the early postwar years had crystallized into two hostile blocs. The permanent division of Germany became near certainty when the West German parties drew up a Basic Law for their new republic between September and May, 1949.

On January 31, 1949 Stalin announced that the Soviet Union was prepared to lift the blockade if the West agreed to postpone the creation of a separate West German state but added that even this condition could be removed if the West agreed to lift its counter-blockade simultaneously. The Allies agreed on the latter but would not discuss the German issue. The wrangling lasted several months, but an agreement was finally reached on May 5: the two blockades would be lifted in a week. In August, the West Germans elected their first parliament, the *Bundestag*, for the **Federal Republic of Germany** (FRG). In October, the Soviets formed a new **German Democratic Republic** (DDR) in their zone of occupation. Germany would be divided, it would participate in the Marshall Plan, and there would be no guarantees that it would remain demilitarized. The Soviet Union had lost yet another confrontation with the West.

Stalin reassessed his strategy and soon the hardliners were purged. In their stead, he elevated two moderates, **Georgy Malenkov** and **Nikita Khrushchev**, both of whom insisted on solving the internal economic problems of the USSR instead of spending resources and prestige on futile confrontations with the West. When the Soviets exploded their first nuclear device on August 29, they could do so without being accused of being soft on Anglo-American imperialism. Perhaps Washington would seek accommodation, now that the Soviet Union had entered the ranks of nuclear powers? At the very least, the Americans would have to be more cautious in dealing with the USSR.

3 Soviet Interventions in Europe

The **Iron Curtain** had fallen: Europe was divided and Stalin had got his *cordon sanitaire* against the West. However, as the Yugoslav imbroglio had abundantly

sector in the city. They also did not cut off the supply of energy during the winter and did nothing to prevent the emergence of a black market in East Berlin where even Trizonian currency circulated. Unwilling to antagonize the Germans by starving them or freezing them, the Soviets did not make the blockade as effective as they could have.

¹⁸NATO was formally established on April 4, 1949 among 12 countries in North America and Western Europe.

shown, Moscow could not rely even on communist governments to remain friendly to the USSR. If they were going to have their security buffer, the Soviets could tolerate no opposition or hint of independence in their satellites. We now go over several incidents in which the USSR either came to the aid of the ruling communists against their people or intervened directly to thwart reforms Moscow disapproved of. The focus is on Eastern Europe because it is here that the Soviet empire would unravel, ending the Cold War.¹⁹

3.1 Uprising in East Germany, 1953

The first violent trouble for the Soviets came from East Germany. Under pressure from the Soviets, who sought to militarize their westernmost outpost, its communist government had been pushing heavy industry at the expense of agriculture, and causing severe dislocations in the economy. One fifth of the government's budget was devoted to military expenditures and reparations. Shortages were everywhere, and the party was moving toward implementing Soviet-style land reforms, which threatened to expropriate the last remaining property owners. The workers were also squeezed with demands for more work without a corresponding increase in their wages. The Soviet reconstruction efforts had resulted in deteriorating living standards. The embarrassing flight of large number of its citizens to West Germany was also undermining the legitimacy of the regime.

When Stalin died in March of 1953, the DDR government decided to ease up on its reforms. The Soviets, alarmed by this slide from the Sovietization program, summoned the party leaders to Moscow in early June and harangued them about the dangers of their new policies. The DDR government, however, stood its ground and, after publicly admitting to mistakes, abandoned some of the most objectionable reforms. The public perceived it as an opening: Stalin's death had raised hopes for a change and now their own government was backtracking. On June 16, construction workers in East Berlin went on strike, and within a day 40,000 others had joined them. Mass protests spread through all of the large cities and involved over a million people. The initial limited demands for lowering of the onerous work quotas escalated into political ones, and the protesters demanded the resignation of the government.

After vainly trying to talk people into returning to their homes, the DDR government turned to the Soviets for help. They responded by authorizing a detachment of their forces stationed in the country to repress the protesters. The 20,000 troops with tank support joined nearly 8,000 German security forces and crushed the uprising. It is not known how many died in that incident (probably around 100 people). The communist regime had asserted its power over its own people but in doing so with

¹⁹If you are interested in events around the world and much more discussion of American foreign policy during that period, feel free to take my *POLI 142J: National Security Strategy* class, which is dedicated to an in-depth study of the Cold War.

Soviet tanks, it had revealed its utter dependence on Moscow, where Stalin's death had not yet resulted in any appreciable changes in policy. The DDR government would not dare cross the Soviets, not so much because they feared an intervention that would topple it, but because they feared that an intervention might not come the next time its own people rose against it. It would take 45 years, but it would be precisely in this way that this regime will meet its demise.

3.2 Polish October and Hungarian Revolt, 1956

When Stalin died in 1953, the political succession in the Soviet Union was uncertain. Initially, power was shared among Lavrenty Beria (Minister of Internal Affairs and head of the security agencies), Georgy Malenkov (Chairman of the Council of Ministers), and Vyacheslav Molotov (Minister of Foreign Affairs). The unstable arrangement collapsed in June, when Malenkov and Molotov joined with **Nikita Khrushchev** (who had succeeded Malenkov as the top man in the Central Committee of the Communist Party) to arrest Beria who they feared was planning a military coup (he was executed in December). The power struggle now shifted between Malenkov, who tried to diminish the influence of the part in the state apparatus, and Khrushchev, who tried to consolidate his leadership in the party and strengthen its grip on the state. Khrushchev had also carefully cultivated close ties with **Georgy Zhukov**, whom Beria had help push aside in the months before Stalin's death. Zhukov was instrumental in ensuring that the plot against Beria would succeed, and his support during the transition ensured that the army would remain apolitical.²⁰

Beria indirectly helped Khrushchev in his power struggle: his files contained evidence of Malenkov's involvement in atrocities committed in Leningrad. In January 1955, he formally accused him of this, and the Supreme Soviet demoted Malenkov the following month. Since Molotov had no independent support base, this effectively made Khrushchev first in the collective leadership. He forged ahead with internal reforms in agriculture and sought to inspire young people to loyalty to the party. As part of his program, he tried to rehabilitate thousands of political prisoners that Stalin had sent to labor camps. Investigations of Stalin's activities now revealed to the top leadership the full scope of his atrocities. Khrushchev wanted to make this information public but was dissuaded by others (Molotov among them), who feared that a public disclosure might destabilize the regime. Instead, Khrushchev condemned Stalin and his policies in a **Secret Speech** to a closed session of the Party Congress with only Soviet delegates present on February 25, 1956. He took a

²⁰Ironically, this would eventually lead to how downfall. When the hardline Stalinists led by Malenkov tried to remove Khrushchev from power in June 1957, Zhukov opposed them and bluntly told the Central Conference of the party that "The Army went against this resolution and not even a tank will leave its position without my order!" The derailed the coup attempt but the victorious Khrushchev did not take kindly to the implied threat Zhukov's words contained and forced him into retirement from his post of Minister of Defense in October.

huge political risk for there were still many hardened Stalinists in the Party. Molotov and Malenkov began plotting to overthrow Khrushchev (it was these efforts that came to nought in 1957). In fact, when the content of the speech was leaked, there were riots in Stalin's native Georgia calling for Khrushchev's ouster. The new Soviet leader carefully limited his attack to Stalin. He discussed the purges, the cult of personality, and everything else while insisting that while the leadership was at fault and to blame for the mistakes, the system itself was fine, and especially the Party and the army. This was Khrushchev's attempt to loosen the restrictions so that the Soviet economy could improve while keeping firm control over society without resorting to repression.

It was not to be. Even though the speech was originally delivered only to the Soviet delegates, it was read to the Eastern European delegates the following night. The Poles made 12,000 extra copies and one was leaked to the West. The satellites were first shocked to learn that the supposedly unalterable truths of "capitalist encirclement," "inevitability of war," and the world division into two camps, were all unsound doctrines. Then Poland and Hungary saw an opportunity to implement reforms and began rapid de-Stalinization programs.

The trouble began in the Polish city of Poznań in June, when 100,000 people protested for food and better working conditions. The government sent 10,000 soldiers and 400 tanks to suppress the protests. This was successful but the hardliners did not have the support of the Soviet Union, so the party decided to turn conciliatory. The communists chose **Władysław Gomułka** as their new leader, and effectively authorized him to implement reforms. When Gomułka purged the party of faithful old revolutionaries (some of them still holding Soviet citizenship), the Russians engaged in some military "maneuvers," which provoked an outburst from the Poles who resented this blatant infringement on their illusory sovereignty. Khrushchev flew to Warsaw on October 19, 1956, delivered a blistering speech against the Polish changes, and demanded their reversal. He ordered the Soviet army to striking positions along the border. Gomułka was undeterred and responded by threatening to call out the Polish people to resistance. He bluntly told Khrushchev: "Turn your tanks around or we'll fight you."

Despite all the bluster, the Poles were not actively trying to break the communist monopoly on power; they seemed to be demanding more equitable position for Poland in the communist camp. For example, supplying coal to the USSR at excessively low prices had resulted in lack of sufficient supplies in Poland. Add to that the catastrophic shortfall in grain, and Poland was in a really bad economic shape. The Poles even asked the USSR for a loan. Gomułka ended up giving a speech in Warsaw where he affirmed the Soviet determination to let the Poles decide whether the continuing presence of the Red Army in their country is desirable. He then proceeded to say, to great applause, that it was in Poland's interests for them to remain there, because of NATO and of American troops in West Germany. He then denounced all those who claimed that the Polish Army was under Soviet control,

and urged everyone to go back to work for the good of the people.

The **Polish October** had been successful—Gomułka promised every Pole something (e.g. normalizing relationship with the Catholic Church) and a move to a new relationship with the USSR. (This, by the way, was a sham—once secure, Gomułka began reneging on most of the promises knowing full well that their implementation would cause the communists to lose their grip on power.) Khrushchev was reassured that Gomułka wanted reforms that would not threaten either Soviet presence in Poland or communist rule there, and so he gave in, hoping that this would be the last of this unpleasant affair.

He was wrong. The Polish October was infectious. Once the Hungarians got wind of Soviets' failure to come through on their threats, the students took to the streets on October 23 demanding that the Stalinist leader be replaced with **Imre Nagy**, a reform-minded politician, who used to be prime minister. In his anti collectivization, consumer production oriented mind-set, he was Khrushchev's analogue for Hungary, so caving into the demands of the population would not have been terrible.

At first, the Hungarian secret police attempted to suppress the students and fire upon them, killing many, but this only caused the workers to join the demonstrations. The hardliner Ernő Gerő requested Soviet help in suppressing the nascent rebellion, but the Russians demurred and asked for the request to be made in writing. However, events overtook the planned "legitimization" and Zhukov was ordered to occupy Budapest before it could happen. The Soviets relented and agreed to the election of new members to the government. Nagy himself came out on the 24th to call for order and threaten reprisals against anyone who would resist. This earned him the label of traitor, and it was widely believed that he had called in the Soviets too.

The Budapest citizens ignored Nagy, demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from Hungary and the creation of a party in opposition to the communists. The Russian delegation told Moscow that Budapest was calm while having the embassy itself be encircled by 30 tanks for protection. Unrest continued apace and threatened to sweep aside Nagy for more popular leaders. Over the next few days Nagy himself underwent a remarkable conversion, and emerged as the leader of drastic political and economic changes. On October 28, the Soviets began withdrawing the tanks they had encircled Budapest with.

It might have worked had not Nagy and events in the Middle East conspired against the Hungarians. As the Hungarian Communist Party was losing its grip on the country, the British and the French (with the possible connivance of the Israelis) were on the move in Egypt (the Suez War had begun on October 29). If the Russians allowed Hungary to slide from behind the Iron Curtain, that would be yet another loss after Egypt. Khrushchev believed that any hint of weakness would further embolden the West, and this may lead to changes in the USSR itself because "our party will not accept it if we do this." In other words, this may occasion a split in

the party, and internal turmoil, which would probably cause “fraternal” squabbling between the various communist friends in the Eastern bloc. Just as *Pravda* was printing promises that the USSR was prepared to negotiate new and more equitable relations between the Soviet Union and its satellites, the Presidium of the USSR reversed its policy toward Hungary and decided to suppress the rebellion (October 31).

The Soviet estimates turned out to be correct. Nagy was a patriot but he had badly misjudged the Russians. He took the reforms much further than the Poles had by announcing the withdrawal of Hungary from the Warsaw Pact (the country was supposed to stay neutral), and the creation of a multi-party system. This was not anything the Soviets would calmly tolerate: the first was a threat to their security belt, and the second was an overt challenge to communist rule in Hungary. The Poles had limited their reform goals and managed to calm Soviet suspicions enough, and the very boldness of the Hungarians spelled their doom.

As the world was watching the lightning war Israel, in cahoots with Britain and France, was waging on Egypt, the Russians moved in on November 4-5 and drowned the rebellion in blood. Having regrouped beyond the borders, 15 Soviet divisions with 6,000 tanks (almost twice the number the Germans had when they attacked the Soviet Union), artillery, and air support fell upon the Hungarians. Artillery fire pounded all major cities. After four days of continuous shelling, Budapest was reduced to rubble. Soviet tanks dragged around dead bodies through the streets as a warning to others. More than 3,000 people were killed and more than 200,000 fled to the West, mostly through Austria until the Russians blew up the main bridge to stem the exodus. Nagy sought refuge in the Yugoslav embassy but came out when the newly installed Hungarian regime of **János Kádár** promised him safe conduct. He was immediately captured by the Russians who shipped him off to Romania. The Russians actually tried to get him to renege on the rebellion and endorse the new regime, but he refused. He was then returned to Budapest, where the faithful communists tried him, executed him, and buried him in an unmarked grave in June 1958. By November 14, the Kádár government was in place, and order was restored. Soviet rule had been reestablished.

3.3 Prague Spring, 1968

De-Stalinization also started in Czechoslovakia, but after the events of 1956 progress there was slow and followed the lead established in the USSR. One of the problems, however, was that the Soviet development model emphasized industrialization but Czechoslovakia was already quite far advanced on that score. The economy stalled, and the reform efforts in the early 1960s proved futile. Opposition to President Antonín Novotný grew even inside the party, and in 1967 he was challenged by **Alexander Dubček**, the leader of the communist party in Slovakia. With Brezhnev’s support, Dubček replaced Novotný as First Secretary of the Communist Party

of Czechoslovakia in January 1968. The new leader launched an “Action Program” that provided for social liberalization (easing of censorship and some freedom of speech), a shift toward the production of consumer goods instead of heavy industry and armaments, introduction of market elements into the command economy (creating a hybrid model), and even hinted at the possibility of multi-party government. It also turned Czechoslovakia into a federation of two equal republics, the Czech and the Slovak, and called for improved relations with the West. The authors of the program had been careful to emphasize that the gradual transition of the country to a new model of democratic socialism (“socialism with a human face”) would be under the leadership of the Communist Party, and they called for continuing cooperation with the Soviet Union.

As the Communist Party was wrangling with what specific form the reforms, now dubbed the **Prague Spring**, should take — it was not, for instance, at all clear just what a “mixed” economy that combined planned and market features would look like — more radical reformers called for a faster pace than the gradualism adopted by the leadership. When the government loosened censorship of the media, the arguments spilled into the open, and soon anti-Soviet sentiment began to creep in. Brezhnev became increasingly worried about the tone of the discussion and the direction reforms were taking. In March, the Soviets inquired about the intent of the Czech government, and while the Hungarians and the Poles seemed to worry more about the public discussions in the media, the Soviets were concerned that democratization might spell the end of the communist party monopoly on power. In July, the Soviets and the Czechs reached a compromise: the Dubček regime would impose some restrictions on the media and cease and desist in reforms that were deemed “anti-socialist”; in return, the Soviets would withdraw their armed forces that had lingered in Czechoslovakia after exercises in June. On August 3, representatives of the USSR, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia signed the **Bratislava Declaration**, which affirmed adherence to Marxism-Leninism, and vowed to fight bourgeois ideology (by which they meant a multiparty system) and anti-socialism (by which they meant market capitalism). After warning, quite specifically, that they would intervene in a Warsaw Pact country if it ever moved toward a multiparty political system, the Soviets withdrew their armed forces from Czechoslovakia.

When the Dubček government did not vigorously reverse the objectionable reforms in compliance with the Bratislava Declaration, the governments of the other signatories resolved to act. On August 20, the armies of five Warsaw Pact countries (i.e., all except Czechoslovakia itself, Romania, and Albania) invaded with 500,000 men and 2,000 tanks. The massive assault took the country by surprise and there was minimal resistance. The Czechoslovak armed forces were surrounded in their barracks, and there were only minor clashes in the streets, in which about 100 people were killed. By the morning on the following day, the country was occupied. The Soviets initially claimed that they had been called in by the Czechoslovak government, but President Svoboda publicly denied this and declared the invasion

illegal.

The Soviets might not have been invited and were certainly not wanted but they were here to stay. In October, the Czechoslovak government finally worked out a deal whereby most of the Warsaw Pact forces (including all non-Soviet ones) would be withdrawn. The Soviets, however, left behind 4 divisions to oversee the dismantling of the policies and ensure no further resistance materializes. They would stay there until mid 1987. Dubček's reforms were abandoned, his supporters were purged, the economy was re-centralized, and censorship re-imposed. The only change that was made permanent was the division of the country into two equal republics. In April 1969, Dubček was ousted from his positions and expelled from the party.

The intervention in Czechoslovakia was justified after the fact when Moscow promulgated the **Brezhnev Doctrine** in September. Under this doctrine, one socialist nation (the Soviet Union) had the right to save another from "world imperialism" to preserve the "indivisible" socialist system. More specifically, no socialist country would be allowed to turn toward capitalism or implement any reforms that threatened the communist party's monopoly of power. Since any such development was deemed a "common problem and concern for all socialist countries," the implication was that it was a matter of collective security to deal with. In practice, this meant that the Warsaw Pact would be authorized to act to roll it back. The doctrine was implemented through various treaties between the Soviet Union and its satellites. Implicit in its formulation that it was up to Moscow to determine what constituted proper socialism, leaving wide latitude for intervention to the Soviets. The purpose of the doctrine was thus to limit the ability of national communist parties in the satellites to pursue independent policies. The doctrine remained in effect until it was pronounced officially dead by Gorbachev in 1989 even though the ability of the Soviet Union to mount military interventions in the East European satellites would become considerably circumscribed from the early 1980s.