

SOVIET RELATIONS WITH GREAT BRITAIN

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Russia's relations with Great Britain have been marked by chronic tension. In the nineteenth century, the British were keenly aware of tsarist Russia's expansion into Central Asia and of the eventual menace that such expansion might hold for lands in the British Commonwealth, particularly India. Twice during that century the British invaded Afghanistan to forestall what they perceived as a Russian threat to occupy the country and use it as a staging area for an attack on India. Prophetic of George Kennan's "X" telegram of 1946 and the U.S. policy of containment, the British realpolitician Lord Palmerston said in 1853: "The policy and practice of the Russian government has always been to push forward its encroachments as fast and as far as the apathy or want of firmness of other governments would allow it to go, but always to stop and retire when it was met with decided resistance and then to wait for the next favorable opportunity." The British decided to show resistance that same year when Tsar Nicholas I (1796-1855) hoped to enhance Russian power and influence over another area: the Black Sea region and Ottoman Empire. War broke out between Russia and Turkey in October 1853 over a dispute about religious rights in the Holy Land. When Great Britain and France joined forces with

Turkey and laid siege to Sevastopol – Russia’s naval base in the Crimea – the Russians were forced to forsake Sevastopol in September 1855 and accept defeat. The Treaty of Paris (March 30, 1856) that ended the war was a serious diplomatic setback for Russia, since it guaranteed the integrity of Ottoman Turkey and obliged Russia to surrender southern Bessarabia, at the mouth of the Danube. The Crimean War failed to settle Russian-British rivalry, but it did impress upon Nicholas’s successor Alexander II the need to overcome Russia's backwardness in order to compete successfully with Britain and the other European powers.

A further result of the Crimean War was that Austria, having sided with Great Britain and France, lost the support of Russia in Central European affairs. Russia joined the Triple Entente with Britain and France in 1907 more as a result of the widened gap between Russia and the two Germanic powers and improved relations with Britain’s ally, Japan, than out of any fondness for Britain and France. When the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated (June 28, 1914), Russia was not prepared to see Austria-Hungary defeat Serbia – a Slavic country – and the great powers’ mobilization systems and interlocking alliances undermined all international attempts to avert a general war. The general disruption caused by this first world war contributed to the February and October 1917 revolutions. The Bolshevik Revolution enraged the British for several reasons. Vladimir Lenin and other communists called on the workers in all countries to overthrow their capitalist oppressors and characterized the world war as a result of rivalry between capitalist and imperial countries like Britain. Lenin also called for Russia’s withdrawal from the war and signed a separate peace treaty (Brest-Litovsk) with the Germans in

1918. To Britain, a special source of annoyance was Soviet support of national liberation movements in the empire, and of anti-British sentiments and actions in the Middle East. To avenge the Brest-Litovsk treaty and alarmed that the Germans might transfer troops to the western front, the British, French, and Japanese intervened in Russia's Civil War, transporting troops to Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, and Vladivostok and later funneling material and money to the White armies opposing Lenin and Trotsky's Red Army. Winston Churchill (Minister of Munitions in 1917) made no secret of his antipathy toward Bolshevism, aiming to "strangle the infant in its crib."

Soviet policy toward Britain during the 1920s and 1930s was full of contradictions. On the one hand, Stalin tried to expand his diplomatic and commercial contacts with this archetypical "imperialist" power, as part of its efforts to win recognition as a legitimate regime. On the other hand, he and his colleagues in the Kremlin remained wary of an anti-Soviet capitalist alliance and worked for the eventual demise of the capitalist structure. With the League of Nations weakened by the withdrawal of Japan and Germany, the Versailles Peace Treaty openly flaunted by Hitler's rearming, and the world economy crashing, Stalin watched the British Prime Minister Chamberlain's actions carefully, hoping to form an ally with Britain as protection against Germany. When Chamberlain capitulated to Hitler in Munich in 1938, Stalin decided to form a pact with the Nazis the following year. But on June 22, 1941, Hitler renounced the nonaggression treaty and invaded the Soviet Union, thus precipitating the "grand alliance" between Britain, the Soviet Union, and United States. Churchill's cynical words reveal his true

feelings about Stalin and the Slavic country to the east: “If the Hitler had invaded Hell, I would find something nice to say about the Devil in the House of Commons.”

After twenty million lives lost in Russia and incalculable destruction, the Allies defeated the Axis Powers, World War II ended, and the Red Army occupied Albania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary. Relations between Britain and the Soviet Union chilled rapidly. Churchill warned of the hazards of growing Soviet domination of Europe (a descending “iron curtain”) in a historic March 5, 1946 speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. The formation of two military alliances, NATO (1949) and the Warsaw Pact (1955) solidified the Cold War, which lasted until 1989.

After World War II, the Soviet Union perceived Britain to be an “imperialist power in decline,” especially after Britain relinquished most of its colonies. Nevertheless, Britain remained an important power in Soviet eyes because of its nuclear forces, influential role as head of the British Commonwealth, and close ties with the United States. In general, however, it can be argued that Soviet relations with Britain have taken a back seat to Soviet relations with France (especially during the de Gaulle period) or with West Germany (especially during the Brandt period). This may be because, unlike West Germany, Britain was a united country and was thus not susceptible to Soviet political pressures exerted through the instrument of a divided people. Moreover, due to its size, the British Communist Party had less influence in electoral politics than the French Communist Party. Given its close trade ties with the United States, Britain was less dependent economically than other West European states on Soviet and East European trade

and energy resources. Britain also fulfilled its duties as a NATO member, while France withdrew in 1966 from NATO military activities.

Even after the collapse of communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Soviet-era division of Europe has continued to influence Russia's foreign policy toward Britain and other Western European countries. Although the Warsaw Pact was disbanded, NATO admitted three former Soviet allies (Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic) in 1999. Some Russian hardliners apparently believe NATO will embrace all Russia's former allies and deprive it of its traditional European buffer zone. Nevertheless, the terrorist attacks by *al Qaeda* on New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 have fostered closer ties between Russian President Boris Putin and British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other Western leaders. New security threats that transcend state borders – global networks of suicidal terrorists, chemical and biological warfare, international organized crime, cyberwar, and human trafficking – all underscore the need for greater cooperation among sovereign states.

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