



## SOVIET POLITICS IN EASTERN EUROPE IN 1944-1945 BY THE EYES OF WESTERN POLITICIANS AND ANALYSTS AND THEIR VISION OF THE ROLE OF THE SOVIET UNION IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD

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### **Abstract**

*The article describes the international situation of the USSR in the post-war period, analyzing the statements of Western politicians, media publications and the activity of researchers. The division of the spheres of influence between the members of the anti-Hitler coalition is analyzed from the point of view of historical and geopolitical conditionalities.*

**Keywords:** *sphere of influence, Eastern Europe, USSR, post-war cooperation, USA, Great Britain, "Iron Curtain".*

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As a result of magnificent military victories of the Red Army, such countries as Romania, Finland and Bulgaria, in August – September 1944, withdrew from the fascist coalition. Only Khorthy Hungary remained in Hitler's military block. The political and military isolation of



Nazi Germany in Europe became a reality. From the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea the Red Army men defeated the Wehrmacht, freeing countries of Eastern Europe.

As the Russian historian Valery Yungblyud notes: “long before the war ended it became clear that the USSR’ transformation into one of the determining factors of international life is one of the primary and most significant consequences of the victory over fascism. If the pre-war period was characterized by the USSR having an outlier status in the world that was divided by warring western powers, now the USSR was to take, in a certain way, a very equitable, and leading role” [27, p. 66].

According to another Russian historian A. Iu.Sidorov, “western evaluations of Moscow’s foreign policy intentions related to 1943-1944 were based on the fact that USSR was not preparing to make Eastern Europe “Soviet”” [20, p. 160]. As, in May 1943, George Davis reported to President Roosevelt: “the Russia’s position is to avoid any interference in the internal political affairs of other states” [15, p. 398].

Ambassador W. Standley wasn’t so adamant in his conclusions. He considered that “the Soviet government hasn’t still defined its post-war political line”, but it will be prepared “with its characteristic realism for any scenario” [15, p. 424]. A. Harriman, who replaced W. Standley in Moscow, telegraphed to K. Hell in April 1944 the following: “The Soviet Union currently is not concerned with the establishment of communist regimes in Europe although it seems that its clearly formulated task is to ensure necessary political conditions for the communist parties to the full extent” [15, p. 579].

Western-European diplomats shared similar views. Thus, in August 1944, Archibald Kerr wrote to the Foreign Office: “All leads us to believe that the regime has abandoned the theory of the world revolution and that the political communist parties in foreign countries were considered now exclusively as its means (where it may be appropriate) for pursuing their interests, as they expanded. These will be the interests of Russia as a state which now is far from revolutionary one” [15, p. 626]. The representative of French Committee of National Liberation in London, M. Dejan expressed the similar opinion: “the USSR strives to create area of political security formed by continuous chain of friendly countries on its bordering territory in Europe and Asia... The Soviets are willing to respect the independence of these countries; they are not demanding an exceptional influence there, but they do not want



to endure there the regimes or governments that are constantly hostile towards the USSR. They are intending to replace the “cordon sanitaire” with a “security belt” [15, p. 459].

Even W. Churchill, in his interview with the French ambassador to the London, Sh. Korben, came up with the idea that “the Russians currently actually agree to respect the independence and sovereignty of the Balkan countries, needless to say, only if they will not be ruled by any anti-Soviet governments. It seems that “sovietization” or the “russification” of South-Eastern Europe is not the aim of Moscow’s foreign policy” [15, p. 668]. Nevertheless, Franklin Delano Roosevelt once told A. Harriman in a moment of candor that “he was not much disturbed if the countries bordering the USSR will be made sovietized or not” [14, p. 128].

On August 9, 1944, in the memorandum “Soviet Policy in Europe”, A. Eden marked that British post-war policy “must be based on Anglo-Soviet alliance” [15, p. 619]. The Joint Intelligence Committee of United Kingdom also considered that after the end of the war the USSR foreign policy will be influenced by the cooperation with Britain and the United States. “This triumvirate will be able to solve the disputes of smaller countries”. The Soviet Union will consider its neighboring countries as “its natural sphere of influence” and “a security belt.” The JIC summarized that after the war the USSR policy will not imply “aggressive territorial expansion” [15, p. 688-689, 689-690, 691].

In September 1944, the “Life” magazine published the article written by a very authoritative man in the business world, Eric Johnston, the president of the American Chamber of Commerce, about his visit to the Soviet Union. After visiting Moscow, Leningrad, the Ural, Siberia and Asian republics, he came up to the three main conclusions: 1. When peace is again restored, Russia and the US will possess the greater share of the world’s military and industrial power. 2. Although their social and political systems are polar opposite, they have no insoluble economic or territorial conflicts. 3. The destiny of the world, to a great extent, depends upon the understanding and cooperation between Russia and the US. Eric Johnston had an optimistic view upon the future of Soviet-American relations: “If both parties play direct and fair, in no time we can work together and do great things” [10, p. 62]. His views were pivotal for millions of Americans to have a correct perception of the Soviet Union as ally.



Not everyone in the west was pleased with this outcome. It was in 1944, in his work “Russia seven years later”, with regard to the rapid advance of the Soviet Army into Europe Kennan wrote the following: “Keeping in mind that security concerns have always been a priority for the Soviet official authorities’ psychology, I also noted that they hoped to solve the problem of security of their own regime by spreading revolutionary movements in other countries... Judging by the success of military operations, the Kremlin possesses the means to achieve its goals, whether West likes it or not. By the end of the war the Soviet troops will occupy almost all Eastern European regions. I indicated that in these circumstances it is not so important whether Soviet leaders will enforce communism in the countries occupied by the Soviet troops. It is important for them to gain power, as it is, but the form of this power can be determined by practical considerations. For the small Eastern European countries, I noted in this connection, the main point is not the problem of communism or capitalism as itself, but the problem of choice between a real independence or a proper one, or an indirect dependence on Russia” [11].

As far as the Kennan’s thesis that East European states were facing a choice of “independence or dependency”, we cannot agree with the author. First of all, in fact, there was no such dilemma at the end of the war, since these countries ended up under Soviet influence. A certain dilemma could arise only hypothetically in the future, but not as in the Kennan’s statement: “independence or dependence.” The dilemma could and can exist only in a completely different variant: “dependence on the East or on the West.” But even this formula depends less on the countries of Eastern Europe, and more on the other factor, that is, the external one, namely – which great power is stronger at a given historical time and has a real leverage to advance its interests in the region. Small states can have only a relative independence and only if they comply with two basic conditions, namely, they have a very effective economic and political system and have a real possibility to balance between two or more centers of power, maintaining an equal distance to each of them.

A prominent Yale Sovietologist D. Dallin, like Kennan, was not optimistic about post-war cooperation with Moscow, considering that in the coming years a conflict can occur and there was no solution for avoiding it. From the point of view of Russia’s security, Dallin argued, its interests in the post-war world were most consistent with a policy,



moreover geopolitically justified, to strengthen the Moscow-Paris-London-Washington axis. In practice, the Stalinist leadership, due to ideological rigor, will prefer unilateral actions and will engage in “political mobilization of the European East” and the creation of a puppet belt along the Warsaw-Berlin-Prague-Belgrade line [27, p.71, 72].

“Dallin was not alone in his conclusions, notes W. Jungblyud. Something similar at the same time was written by the former US ambassador to the USSR, W. Bullitt ... Bullitt’s ideas also did not receive recognition either in the White House or among fellow-diplomats. Thus, it is not about a universally recognized position, but about a peculiar opinion that could spread and even become dominant only after the Cold War became a fact” [27, p. 72-73]. This idea, although at a slightly different angle, was supported by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who noted that “Soviet leaders never believed in the possibility of existence of democratic and at the same time “Soviet-friendly” governments, that is why in Central and Eastern Europe they preferred to establish the Governments that were fully dependent on Moscow” [1, p. 287-288].

Immediately after the completion of the Yalta Conference, J. Kennan wrote to his friend and colleague C. Bohlen: “Why can’t we come to a worthy and definite compromise ... to calmly divide Europe into spheres of influence, to remove Russians from our sphere and to stay ourselves away from their sphere? This is the best that we can do for ourselves and for our friends in Europe” [27, p. 728].

After the war, Kennan further deepened these ideas in his reminiscences: “The cessation of the war in Europe meant at the same time a turning point in the history of Soviet diplomacy. The position of the Soviet Union has changed significantly thanks to the advance of the Soviet Army towards the center of Europe. Stalin’s dream of creating a protective zone along the western borders of Russia came true... The full cooperation with Russia that our people expect is not at all an essential condition for maintaining world peace, since there is a real balance of power and the division of spheres of influence...

I was almost the only person in the highest echelons of American power who insisted on recognizing de facto the delineation of spheres of influence that already existed in Europe. I did this for two main reasons. Firstly, I was convinced that we did not need to hope for an opportunity to influence events in the countries that had already entered the



sphere of hegemony in Russia, in which the Communists dominated and whose peoples were isolated from the West. In this case, I did not see why we should facilitate the tasks of the Russians operating in these regions and share a moral responsibility with them. I think, we could only declare that we have nothing in common with all this ... Thus, I advocated the delimitation of “spheres of interests” in Europe, because I did not believe in the possibility for us to effectively influence the events that took place in the areas controlled by the USSR. I did not believe in the possibility of European cooperation as such” [11].

To be frank, in the Kennan’s own view, his opinion was not far supported by all in the USA, at the end of the war. They did not object to the historically justified and geopolitically grounded territorial claims of the USSR. Thus, the English ambassador, Lord Halifax, reported in London from Washington: “The fact that the Soviets are interested in the Dardanelles and Tangier, did not cause any exceptional suspicions here ... The return of Russia to pre-revolutionary areas and methods of foreign policy is considered in the United States a process of restrained optimism, which does not aggravate the situation that has been established here” [27, p. 67].

In late 1944, “The New York Times” wrote in an editorial that ongoing cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union is so important to the whole world that the remaining distinctions “should not be allowed to interfere in our relationship”. In the same context, the BBC commentator J. Hersh declared on December 11, 1944, that disagreements within “The Big Three” should not lead to the recognition that any of the main allied powers has a preferential right to virtue [10, c. 58].

The famous American international specialist A. Johnson wrote in 1945: “I accept the fact of Russian hegemony in Eastern Europe as a historian. What happened - happened, and what happens - will happen. Who are we in order to fight with the inevitable?” The task of the West, in his opinion, was to prevent the spread of communism from the English Channel to Gibraltar [27, p. 67]. This position differed from that was expressed by Kennan, not by that some allowed, while others did not even consider the possibility of creating “spheres of influence” in post-war Europe. The disparities were different, namely, Kennan did not see the possibility of fruitful cooperation with the USSR, while the supporters of the Roosevelt-Hopkins course were sure that it was not only possible, but also absolutely necessary and fully consistent with



American interests.

An Englishman J. Roberts claims that “If there was any definite and sustainable direction in the Soviet foreign policy during the war, it was a direction to create a number of friendly regimes on the western borders of the USSR” [19, c. 75]. Referring to the events of 1944-1945, he notes that “the sphere of influence established by Moscow was intended solely to ensure the security of the Soviet Union, it was assumed that it would be compatible with the stable and peaceful international order created after the war” [19, c. 76]. Furthermore, the author explains that “achieving security in the eastern European buffer zone was associated with a more radical political and ideological project” [19, p. 90].

This idea was expressed in more detail by the Italian historian Giuseppe Boffa: “With all the arguments of a general nature, one goal was clearly marked by Stalin and he put it forth as of a primary importance. It was the goal that it was necessary to secure guarantees that the entire aggregate of Eastern European countries will not longer be the former anti-Soviet “sanitary cordon”, but a belt of the States that were friendly to the Soviet Union. Since it was the Red Army that liberated these countries, paying dearly for their freedom, any other decision seemed to Moscow an attempt to deprive the USSR of the fruits of the victory that was reached by great efforts. To be frank, in this case the Soviet Union adopted the concept of an old-regime Russia’s power...

However, Stalin’s policy was not exhausted by these attitudes ...The very desire to enlist the friendship of the countries that were liberated by the Red Army inevitably entailed deep political transformations, which were revolutionary in many respects. It should be borne in mind, therefore, that while the first aspect of Stalin’s policy, namely, at that time its continuity with respect to the past found a certain understanding among Western partners, its second aspect, that is, the revolutionary effect generated by it, vice versa, aroused an acute concern among them...

The opponents of spheres of influence in 1944 were, primarily, Americans<sup>1</sup>, because the idea of dividing into “spheres” was an obstacle to their global post-war project. However, spheres of influence already existed, and

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<sup>1</sup> First of all, opponents of the “spheres of influence” were Secretary of State C. Hull and Ambassador to Moscow A. Harriman, and among the British, their ambassador to the USSR A. Clark-Kerr. And by the end of the war, Foreign Office also took over these positions [15, p. 545-547, 635, 639, 756, 771].



there was nowhere to go from this fact. The United States had Latin America ... England had the Commonwealth of Nations and the empire ... The tripartite bodies created on the eve of Tehran, that is, the Control Commission for Italy and the European Advisory Commission, in practice played a particularly secondary role. In Italy, the political situation developed under Anglo-American trusteeship, and the Soviet side was deprived of the opportunity to seriously influence its evolution ... Under similar conditions, the Soviet Union had no other way to realize its political goals in Eastern Europe, but only to create, in its turn, its own sphere of influence. It should be said that when Stalin realized exactly what the real state of affairs was, he not only not to dispute, but also respected the predominance of Anglo-American interests in Western Europe.” [6, c. 215-216].

In one of the documents of the State Department of the late 1944, it was noted that, “judging by the available signs, the general mood of the peoples of Europe tends to the left in favor of far-reaching economic and social reforms” [5, p. 171]. Another special document prepared by the US Foreign Ministry stated that “as a result of the war in Europe, fundamental and revolutionary changes occurred in the correlation of the military power of states ... It is necessary to note such an exceptional circumstance as the recent phenomenal growth of the military and economic power of Russia, which was previously in a hidden state; this growth, most likely, will turn out to be epoch-making in its influence on future politico-military international relations and will soon reach maximum sizes corresponding to Russia’s resources.”

At the same time, it was noted that the relative military and economic power of Britain weakened. The Department of State considered that if the United States and Britain had joined the war against the USSR, then they “could not have defeated the USSR under the existing conditions... In other words, we would have been drawn into a war in which we could not have won” [21, c. 44].

Here is how W. Churchill assessed the situation in Eastern Europe at the end of 1944: “The political situation, at least in Eastern Europe, was far from satisfactory. In Greece, a balance was, indeed, established, although unreliable, and it seemed that pretty soon it would be possible to form a free democratic government there on the basis of universal suffrage and secret ballot. But Romania and Bulgaria appeared to be in the power of the Soviet military occupation. Hungary and Yugosla-



via became a battlefield, and Poland, although freed from the Germans, only changed one conqueror to another” [25, p. 503].

“During November 1944, in three European countries, that is, Belgium, Italy, and Greece, in which the main part of the allied forces were British troops, a political crisis arose,” wrote the analyst R. Sherwood, who was close to Roosevelt and Hopkins. It seemed that England supported the most conservative elements in these countries against the liberal and left elements, who offered the most active resistance to the German and Italian fascists” [26, p. 546-547]. This policy was criticized by the new Secretary of State Edward Stettinius, which caused Churchill’s rage and indignation [3, p. 500; 7, p. 338-340].

The British Embassy in Rome openly intervened in the government crisis. In this regard, the discontent of the American liberal elements has further intensified. On December 5, Stettinius released the following statement: “Our government has always held the position that the issue of the composition of the Italian government is a matter for the Italians themselves.” He added that “this policy refers even more to the formation of governments in the liberated territories of countries belonging to the United Nations.” Churchill did not particularly like this last statement, since it clearly applied to Belgium and even more to Greece [26, p. 548-549].

Although Churchill admitted that “both in Greece itself and in Greek circles abroad, a sharply negative attitude towards the monarchy reigned” [25, p. 292], the British government supported the royal power. Already after the Germans retreated from Greece, British troops entered its territory and unleashed hostilities against Greek patriots in order to prevent the left-wing forces led by communists from coming to power in this country [25, p. 486-488, 500-501]. The situation in Greece was terrible,” Sherwood wrote. - On the streets of Athens there were serious battles between the British troops and the fighters of the Resistance groups ...It was only known that the British troops engaged in the “liberation” of Greece, were killing Greek patriots who fought against the Germans in their time” [26, p. 551]. Hopkins, as well as the head of the Canadian government Mackenzie King, made non-public criticism of Churchill’s Greek policy [25, p. 491-492]. Only Stalin was silent. Churchill wrote to M. King that “Stalin has still not made any official statement about our actions” [25, p. 492].

However, the British prime minister justified this policy with “commu-



nist danger”: “Communism raised its head behind the victorious Russian front. Russia was the savior, and communism was the gospel that she carried with her. “In Europe, “there was a sharp increase in communist influence, which preceded and followed the advancement of powerful armies controlled from the Kremlin” [25, p. 440]. On March 11, 1945 Churchill wrote to Eden about the need to save Italy “from the Bolshevik plague” [15, p. 749]. These fears began to appear in the USA, as R. Sherwood wrote: “The situation in Romania in mid-March testified to the fact that the Russians decided to create governments in Eastern Europe that would correspond to their own interpretation of the word “friendly”... However, Romania was a satellite of the Nazis, and at that time few people were particularly interested in her fate” [26, p. 596].

Although it is not true that the fate of Romania was of no interest to anyone [2]. For example, Churchill did not like at all that under the pressure of the USSR, whose actions “absolutely contradicted the whole spirit of democracy”, the pro-Soviet government was brought to power in this country. However, he writes, “if I put too much pressure on [Stalin], he could say: “I did not interfere in your activities in Greece, why don’t you give me the same freedom of action in Romania?” This would lead to a comparison of our and his goals. Neither side could convince the other” [25, p. 552]. The British could not resist the actions of the Soviet side in Romania for the reason that they themselves in Greece acted in even greater conflict with the “spirit of democracy.”

Already on May 12, 1945, in a letter to the American president, Churchill spoke of the “Iron Curtain”. He writes that “I am deeply concerned about the situation in Europe... I have always sought friendship with Russia, but just like you, I am deeply concerned about the misinterpretation of the Yalta decisions by the Russiansю., the combination of Russian power and the territories under their control or occupation... An iron curtain descends over their front. We do not know what is happening behind it... In short, from my point of view, before our strength disappears, the problem of a settlement with Russia eclipses all other problems ”[25, c.632-633]. The British Prime Minister Truman wrote about the Iron Curtain on June 4, and he called the decision of the Americans to withdraw the Allied forces within their occupation zones as their “funeral ringing” [25, p. 647, 648].

The problem of recognition of new governments of Eastern Euro-



pean countries was also discussed at the Potsdam Conference [4, p. 181, 316-317, 474]. In May 1945, Churchill ordered “a military cabinet to draw up a plan for a possible attack against Stalin, which was to lead to the destruction of Russia”, “to force it to submit to the will of the United States and the British Empire” [8, p. 126; 12, p. 79; 17, p. 98; 23]. Military operations were to begin as early as July 1 by the united forces of the USA, England, British dominions, the Polish Expeditionary Force and 10 Wehrmacht divisions, followed by the buildup of the German contingent, possibly up to 40 military units [8, p. 135; 17, p. 100; 23].

However, after reviewing the prime minister’s demand, on May 24, Chief of General Staff Alan Brooke wrote in his diary: “Tonight I carefully read the report on the possibility of a war with Russia in the case of future complications in relations between our countries. We were instructed to study this issue. Obviously, the assumption is fantastic, and our chances of success are nil. Now Russia is practically omnipotent in Europe” [8, p. 126]. The conclusion of the British army officers was unequivocal and categorical, that is, it is impossible to win a military victory over the USSR [8, p. 135-138; see also: 9, p. 130-131; 12, p. 80].

These findings came down to the following: “According to our conclusion: a) when embarking on a war with the Russians, we must be prepared for a total war, long and expensive at the same time; b) the numerical superiority of Russians on land makes it extremely doubtful whether it is possible to achieve limited and quick [military] success, even if consistent with political views, this will correspond to the achievement of our political goals” [17, p. 104].

However, despite it, planning for an anti-Soviet war was begun. In the memorandum of the headquarters of military planning under the Committee of chiefs of staff of Great Britain we read the following: “Security of the British Empire” which was submitted to the Committee of chiefs of staff on June 29, 1945 [17, p. 99-104; 24, p. 99-104], the USSR was officially called the main enemy<sup>1</sup>. This document noted that it “aims to determine the strategic goals of our foreign policy and outline the basis on which to base our long-term plans for the defense of the empire”. A number of military-political events were outlined in it,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the USSR identified the United States as the main enemy only in 1950.



that is, the establishment of special relations with the United States, the creation of military blocs and a network of bases around the world [24, p. 99-100]. As the Russian historian O. Tsarev noted, “The document was prepared from the standpoint of real politics and is devoid of any ideology. Due to its special secrecy, he is absolutely frank and devoid of propaganda cover in discussions about human rights, totalitarianism and democracy. However, the proposed solutions were already overwhelming for post-war Britain. The memorandum was reported to Stalin on November 6, 1945” [24, p. 99].

In this regard, O. Rzheshvsky writes: “Did the Soviet leadership know about the Britain’s plans for the war against the USSR? Indirectly, this was confirmed in 1998 by D. Erickson, a prominent expert on the history of the Soviet armed forces, a professor at the University of Edinburgh. In his opinion, Churchill’s plan helps explain “Why Marshal Zhukov unexpectedly decided in June 1945 to regroup his forces, received an order from Moscow to strengthen the defense and study in detail the deployment of troops of the Western Allies. Now the reasons are clear: obviously, Churchill’s plan became known in advance in Moscow, and the Stalinist General Staff took appropriate countermeasures.” Soviet intelligence in England was one of the most effective... In Moscow, they knew about Churchill’s plan and drew the appropriate conclusions” [16; 18, p. 46 (with reference to: 13, p. 20-21); 22, p. 298].

Declassified Soviet intelligence documents related to this matter are essential for understanding the true picture of events and assessment of their magnitude. The first information about the preparation by the British military department of the operation “The Unthinkable” arrived in Moscow on May 18, 1945 and was reported to I.V. Stalin and V.M. Molotov [22, p. 298-299].

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