

Chapter 2

The origins of the Cold War in Europe, 1945–50

A fragile alliance

A classic marriage of convenience, the wartime alliance between the globe's leading capitalist power and its chief proponent of international proletarian revolution was riddled from the first with tension, mistrust, and suspicion. Beyond the common objective of defeating Nazi Germany, there was little to cement a partnership born of awkward necessity and weighed down by a conflict-ridden past. The United States had, after all, displayed unremitting hostility to the Soviet state ever since the Bolshevik revolution that brought it forth. The Kremlin's rulers, for their part, saw the United States as the ringleader of the capitalist powers that had sought to strangle their regime at infancy. Economic pressure and diplomatic isolation had followed, along with persistent denunciations by American spokesmen of the Soviet government and all it stood for. Washington's belated recognition of the Soviet Union, which came 17 years after the state's establishment, was insufficient to drain the reservoir of bad blood, especially since Stalin's efforts to knit together a common front against Hitler's resurgent Germany in the mid- and late 1930s were met with indifference from the United States and other Western powers. Abandoned yet again by the West, at least from his perspective, and left to face the German wolves alone, Stalin agreed to the Nazi–Soviet pact of 1939 largely as a means of self-protection.

For its part, the United States entered the post-World War I period with nothing but disdain for an unruly, unpredictable regime that had confiscated property, repudiated pre-war debts, and pledged support for working-class revolutions across the globe. American strategists did not fear the conventional military power of the Soviet Union, which was decidedly limited. They worried, rather, about the appeal of the Marxist-Leninist message to downtrodden masses in other lands – as well as in the United States itself – and about the revolutionary insurgencies, and resulting instability, it might spark. Washington, accordingly, laboured to quarantine the communist virus and to isolate its Moscow quartermasters throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. It was like ‘having a wicked and disgraceful neighbor’, recalled President Herbert Hoover in his memoirs: ‘We did not attack him, but we did not give him a certificate of character by inviting him into our homes.’ Roosevelt’s diplomatic recognition of 1933, prompted by commercial and geopolitical calculations, actually changed very little. The Soviet–American relationship remained frigid right up to Hitler’s betrayal of his Soviet ally in June 1941. Before then, the Faustian pact between Germany and Russia had just served to intensify American distaste for Stalin’s regime. When the Soviet dictator opportunistically used the German cover to launch aggression against Poland, the Baltic states, and Finland, in 1939–40, anti-Soviet sentiment burgeoned throughout American society.

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, ideological antipathy yielded to the dictates of *realpolitik*. Roosevelt and his chief strategists quickly recognized the great geostrategic advantages for the United States of a Soviet Union able to resist the German onslaught; they worried, conversely, about the enhanced power that Germany would gain were it to subdue a country so rich in resources. Consequently, beginning in the summer of 1941, the United States commenced shipping military supplies to the Soviet Union in order to bolster the Red Army’s chances. The central dynamic of Roosevelt’s policies from June 1941 onward was, as historian Waldo Heinrichs has so aptly put it, ‘the conviction that

the survival of the Soviet Union was essential for the defeat of Germany and that the defeat of Germany was essential for American security'. Even the inveterately anti-communist Churchill immediately grasped the critical importance of the Soviet Union's survival to the struggle against German aggression. 'If Hitler invaded Hell', he quipped, 'I would make at least a favourable reference to the devil in the House of Commons.' The Americans, the Soviets, and the British thus suddenly found themselves battling a common enemy, a fact formalized with Hitler's declaration of war on the United States two days after Pearl Harbor. More than \$11 billion in military aid flowed from the United States to the Soviet Union during the war, serving as the most concrete manifestation of the newfound sense of mutual interest that bound Washington and Moscow together. Meanwhile, the US Government's wartime propaganda machine strained to soften the image of 'Uncle Joe' Stalin and the unsavoury, long-loathed regime he headed.

Precisely how, where, and when to fight their common German adversary, however, were questions that almost immediately generated friction within the Grand Alliance. Stalin pressed his Anglo-American partners to open a major second front against the Germans as quickly as possible so as to relieve the intense military pressure on his own homeland. Yet, despite Roosevelt's promises to do so, the United States and Great Britain chose not to open a major second front until two and a half years after Pearl Harbor, opting instead for less risky, peripheral operations in North Africa and Italy in 1942 and 1943. When Stalin learned in June 1943 that there would be no second front in northwestern Europe for another year, he angrily wrote to Roosevelt that the Soviet Government's 'confidence in its allies . . . is being subjected to severe stress'. He caustically called attention to 'the enormous sacrifices of the Soviet armies, compared with which the sacrifices of the Anglo-American armies are insignificant'. Not surprisingly, Stalin proved wholly unsympathetic to his allies' supply and preparedness problems. They had the luxury of waiting before engaging the full brunt of German armed might; the Russians quite obviously did not. Stalin

suspected that his putative allies simply did not assign a particularly high priority to relieving the Soviets; and he was certainly right in the sense that the Americans and British much preferred to have Soviets die in the fight against Hitler if that would allow more of their own soldiers to live. Right up until the launching of the long-postponed Allied invasion of the German-occupied Normandy coast in June 1944, Soviet forces were holding down more than 80% of the *Wehrmacht's* divisions.

Political disputes also plagued the wartime alliance. None proved more nettlesome than those surrounding the peace terms to be imposed on Germany and the postwar status of Eastern Europe, respectively. At the wartime conference at Tehran, in November 1943, and throughout the following year, Stalin impressed upon Roosevelt and Churchill his conviction that Germany would regain its industrial-military power soon after war's end and once again pose a mortal danger to the Soviet Union. The Russian ruler, accordingly, pushed vigorously for a harsh peace that would strip Germany of both territory and industrial infrastructure. Such an approach would satisfy the Soviet Union's dual need to keep Germany down while extracting from it a sizable contribution to the Soviet rebuilding effort. Roosevelt proved unwilling to commit himself fully to Stalin's punitive proposals, though he did tell Stalin that he, too, saw merit in the permanent dismemberment of Germany. In fact, US experts had not yet decided, at that point, among competing impulses: whether to crush the nation that had precipitated so much carnage; or to treat it magnanimously, using the anticipated occupation period to help fashion a new Germany that could play a constructive role in postwar Europe, with its resources and industry fully utilized in the mammoth task of rehabilitating war-torn Europe. Despite Roosevelt's preliminary nod toward a punitive approach, the issue remained far from settled, as subsequent developments would make painfully clear.

Eastern European questions, which also touched directly on vital Soviet security interests, similarly eluded easy resolution. In theory

and in practice, the Americans and British were reconciled to a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe – an Eastern Europe, in other words, in which the Soviets exercised a predominant influence. In the crudest version of wartime spheres of influence diplomacy, in November 1944 Churchill and Stalin tentatively approved the notorious ‘percentages agreements’, which purported to divide much of the Balkans into zones of preponderant British or Russian influence. Roosevelt never signed on to that *modus vivendi*, however, since it represented too blatant a violation of the principles of free and democratic self-determination that formed a cornerstone of American plans for postwar political order. Yet this particular square could not be circled. Poland, the country whose joint invasion by Germany and the Soviet Union had triggered the European war, well encapsulated the intractable nature of the problem. Two competing Polish governments vied for international recognition during the war years: one, headquartered in London, was led by strongly anti-Soviet Polish nationalists; the other, set up in the Polish city of Lublin, essentially served as a Soviet puppet regime. In so polarized a polity, there was no middle ground; hence little room existed for splitting differences as Roosevelt was wont to do in domestic political clashes.

At the Yalta Conference of February 1945, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin tried to resolve some of these basic disputes while also planning the war’s end game. The conference represents the high point of wartime cooperation, its compromises well reflecting both the existing balance of power on the ground and the determination of the ‘Big Three’ leaders to sustain the spirit of cooperation and compromise that their unusual alliance’s survival required. On the crucial question of Poland, the Americans and British agreed to recognize the Soviet-backed Lublin government, provided that Stalin broaden its representativeness and permit free elections. Largely as a sop to Roosevelt, who sought a fig leaf to cover this retreat from one of America’s proclaimed war goals – and to assuage the millions of Americans of Eastern European descent (most of whom, not insignificantly, were Democratic voters) – Stalin



1. Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin pose for photographers during the Yalta summit of February 1945.

accepted a Declaration on Liberated Europe. The three leaders pledged, in that public document, to support democratic processes in the establishment of new, representative governments for each of Europe's liberated nations. The Soviet ruler also received the assurance he sought that Germany would be forced to pay reparations, with the tentative figure of \$20 billion put on the table, \$10 billion of which would be earmarked for the Soviet Union. But final agreement on that issue was deferred to the future. The Soviet commitment to enter the war against Japan within three months after the end of the European War, also negotiated at Yalta, marked a major diplomatic achievement for the United States, as did the formal Soviet agreement to join the United Nations.

From cooperation to conflict, 1945-7

Within weeks of the conference's closing sessions, however, the Yalta spirit was jolted by mounting Anglo-American dissatisfaction with Soviet actions in Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union's crude

and brutal repression of non-communist Poles, coupled with its heavy-handed actions in Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary, all areas recently liberated by the Red Army, struck both Churchill and Roosevelt as violations of the Yalta accords. Churchill urged Roosevelt to make Poland 'a test case between us and the Russians'. The American leader, albeit equally disquieted by Stalin's behaviour, demurred; he remained convinced right up until his last days that a reasonable, give-and-take relationship with the Russians could be preserved. When, on 12 April, Roosevelt succumbed to a massive cerebral hemorrhage, that daunting responsibility fell to the untested and inexperienced Harry S. Truman. How much of a substantive difference the shift in American leadership at so momentous a juncture exerted on the course of US-Soviet relations has remained a subject of intense scholarly debate. Certainly Truman proved more willing than his predecessor to accept the recommendation of hard-line advisers that getting tough with the Russians would help Americans achieve what they wanted. In a revealing, oft-quoted comment, Truman on 20 April said he saw no reason why the United States should not get 85% of what it wanted on important issues. Three days later, he brusquely enjoined Soviet Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov to make sure that his country kept its agreements with regard to Poland. Churchill, too, was growing disgruntled with what he characterized as Soviet brutishness and bullying, setting the stage for a showdown meeting of the Big Three in war-shattered Germany.

In July 1945, two months after the German surrender, US, British, and Soviet leaders made one more effort to hammer out their differences – with mixed results – during the last of the great wartime conferences. The meetings, held in the bombed-out Berlin suburb of Potsdam, dealt with a wide range of issues, including territorial adjustments in East Asia and the specific timing of Soviet entry into the Pacific War. But the thorniest problems, and those that dominated the two-week conference, surrounded the postwar settlements in Eastern Europe and Germany. Stalin gained one of his top diplomatic objectives early in the sessions: Anglo-American

recognition of the newly established Warsaw regime. His Grand Alliance partners felt they had no choice but to accept the *fait accompli* of a Soviet-dominated Poland, even with expanded western boundaries rather crudely carved out of former German territory. They balked at comparable recognition of the Soviet-installed governments in Bulgaria and Romania, however. The conferees, instead, established a Council of Foreign Ministers which was to address those and other territorial questions arising from the war in future meetings and to draft peace treaties for the defeated Axis powers.

Germany – the ‘big question’, as Churchill appropriately labelled it – generated fierce wrangling before an American-sponsored compromise solution saved the proceedings from deadlock, though at the cost of a *de facto* economic division of the country. Reparations, again, emerged as the principal stumbling block. Stalin’s insistence on the \$10 billion in German reparations that he thought had been agreed upon at Yalta met with firm resistance from Truman and his advisers. The Americans, convinced now that the economic recovery and future prosperity of Western Europe – and of the United States itself – required an economically vibrant Germany, opposed any scheme that would work against that end. Secretary of State James F. Byrnes put forward a compromise offer that the Soviets, in the end, reluctantly accepted. It stipulated that the four occupying powers – the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union – would extract reparations primarily from their own designated occupation zones; the Soviets were promised, additionally, some capital equipment from the western zones. Yet those western zones, containing the most highly industrialized and resource-rich sections of the country, would in effect be insulated from Russian influence. Since the Grand Alliance partners were unable to agree upon a unified approach to the German question – the single most contentious diplomatic issue of the war and the issue destined to remain at the heart of the Cold War – they essentially opted for division while trying to retain the pretence of unity. The ramifications of that outcome were

far-reaching. It represented an initial step towards the integration of the Western- and Soviet-occupied portions of Germany into separate economic-political systems – and presaged the East-West division of the European continent.

Truman, nonetheless, expressed satisfaction with the portentous decisions reached at Potsdam. 'I like Stalin', he remarked at the



2. Churchill, Truman, and Stalin pose in front of Churchill's residence during the Potsdam Conference of July 1945.

time: 'He is straightforward. Knows what he wants and will compromise when he can't get it.' The American leader's confidence in his ability to get most of what he wanted in future negotiations with his Soviet counterpart rested especially on what the president and his leading advisers saw as Washington's two trump cards: its economic power and its exclusive possession of the atomic bomb. Truman's self-assurance was bolstered significantly when he received word, in the middle of the Potsdam talks, of the successful atomic bomb test that had been carried out in New Mexico. America's 'royal straight flush', as Secretary of War Henry Stimson fondly tagged it, would surely improve the prospects for diplomatic settlements consistent with American interests – or so Truman and his inner circle believed. The atomic bomb blasts over Hiroshima on 6 August and Nagasaki on 9 August, which instantly killed 115,000 and left tens of thousands more dying of radiation sickness, compelled Japan's capitulation. Use of the bomb simultaneously served several American military-diplomatic objectives: it brought the war to a speedy close, saved thousands of American lives by so doing, foreclosed the need for Soviet troops in the Pacific theatre (although not the movement of Soviet troops into Manchuria), and closed the door on any realistic Soviet bid for a role in the postwar occupation of Japan.

Yet, despite the Truman administration's trump cards, Soviet-American relations progressively deteriorated in the months that followed the Japanese surrender. In addition to Eastern Europe and Germany, still the most vexing problems, the former allies clashed over competing visions of how international control of atomic weaponry might be attained, over conflicting interests in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, over the question of US economic aid, and over the Soviet role in Manchuria. Although some compromises were forged in the various meetings of the Council of Foreign Ministers, 1946 marked the demise of the Grand Alliance and the beginning of a fully fledged Cold War.

Throughout that year, the Truman administration and its principal

Western European allies came increasingly to view Stalin's Russia as an opportunistic bully with what seemed a voracious appetite for additional territories, resources, and concessions. George F. Kennan, the senior US diplomat in Moscow, articulated and lent weight to that assessment in his landmark 'long telegram' of 22 February 1946. Soviet hostility to the capitalist world was as immutable as it was inevitable, Kennan emphasized, the result of the unfortunate merger of traditional Russian insecurity with Marxist-Leninist dogma. He argued that the Kremlin's rulers had imposed an oppressive totalitarian regime on the Soviet people, and now used the presumed threat posed by external enemies to justify a continuation of the internal tyranny that kept them in power. Kennan's advice was pointed: eschew accommodation, which would never work in any case; concentrate, instead, upon checking the spread of Soviet power and influence. The Kremlin, he insisted, would yield only to superior force. On 5 March, Winston Churchill, now out of power, publicly added his voice to the swelling anti-Soviet chorus. In Fulton, Missouri, with an evidently approving Harry Truman sharing the podium, the British wartime leader railed: 'From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.' Christian civilization itself, Churchill warned, was now endangered by communist expansionism.

Soviet behaviour alone did not warrant the degree of alarm emanating from Western capitals, and certainly not the doomsday scenarios being sketched in some American quarters. The Stalinist regime did press its advantages at nearly every turn, to be sure. It imposed subservient governments on Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria; carved out an exclusive sphere of influence in its occupation zone in east Germany; initially refused to remove its troops from Iran, precipitating the first major Cold War crisis in March 1946; pressed Turkey aggressively for concessions, even massing troops along the Bulgarian border in an effort at intimidation; pillaged Manchuria; and more. Yet the Soviets also allowed relatively free elections in Hungary and Czechoslovakia,

cooperated in the formation of representative governments in Finland and Austria, continued to engage in spirited negotiations with the Western powers through the institutionalized Council of Foreign Ministers, and even acted to restrain the powerful communist parties in Italy, France, and elsewhere in Western Europe. Soviet behaviour, in short, allowed for more subtle and balanced interpretations than those offered by Kennan and Churchill.

Actually, what US and UK analysts feared most was neither Soviet behaviour per se nor the hostile intentions that might underlie such behaviour. Nor were they unduly concerned about Soviet military capabilities, at least not in the short run. Top American and British military experts judged the Soviet Union too weak to risk war against the United States; they considered a Red Army attack on Western Europe, in particular, as highly improbable. What induced apprehension among American and British policy-makers was, rather, the prospect that the Soviet Union might capitalize on and benefit from the socioeconomic distress and accompanying political upheavals that continued to mark the postwar world. Those conditions had abetted the rise of the left worldwide, a phenomenon most disturbingly reflected in the growing popularity of communist parties in Western Europe, but also manifested in the surge of revolutionary, anti-colonial, and radical nationalist movements across the Third World. The severe social and economic disruptions of the war made communism seem an appealing alternative to many of the world's people. Western foreign and defence ministries feared that local communist parties and indigenous revolutionary movements would ally with and defer to the Soviet Union, a state whose legitimacy and prestige had been burnished substantially by its central role in the anti-fascist crusade. The Kremlin, consequently, could augment its power and extend its reach without even needing to risk direct military action. For US strategists, the frightening shadow of 1940–1 loomed. Another hostile power, armed once again with an alien, threatening ideology, might gain control over Eurasia, thereby tipping the scales

of world power against the United States, denying it access to important markets and resources, and placing political and economic freedom at home in jeopardy.

Drawing lines

To meet those grave, if diffuse, threats, the United States moved with dizzying speed during the first half of 1947 to implement a strategy aimed simultaneously at containing the Soviet Union *and* reducing the appeal of communism. A British initiative, necessitated by London's declining power and deepening financial woes, propelled the first critical step in the US diplomatic offensive. On 21 February, the British Government informed the State Department that it could no longer afford to provide economic and military assistance to Greece and Turkey. American officials quickly determined that the United States must assume Britain's former role so as to block the possible spread of Soviet influence into the eastern Mediterranean – and into the oil-rich Middle East beyond. To gain support from a cost-conscious Congress and a public disinclined to accept new international obligations, Truman, on 12 March, delivered a forceful address to Congress in which he asked for \$400 million in economic and military support for the beleaguered governments of Greece and Turkey.

On one level, the United States was simply acting here to fill a power vacuum created by the contraction of British power. The right-wing Greek Government was fighting a civil war against indigenous communists supplied by communist Yugoslavia. The Turks, for their part, faced persistent Russian pressure for concessions in the Dardanelles. Moscow and its allies thus stood to benefit from the British withdrawal, an unsettling prospect that the American initiative aimed to foreclose. What is particularly significant about the Truman Doctrine, however, is less that basic fact of power politics than the manner in which the American president chose to present his aid proposal. Using hyperbolic language, Manichean imagery, and deliberate simplification to

The Truman Doctrine

‘At the present moment in world history’, Truman told Congress in his appeal for the Greek-Turkish aid package, ‘nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life.’ After cataloguing the perfidies of the Soviet Union, though never directly naming it, Truman famously concluded with the exhortation that ‘it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure’. That breathtakingly open-ended commitment was quickly dubbed the Truman Doctrine.

strengthen his public appeal, Truman was vying to build a public and Congressional consensus not just behind this particular commitment but behind a more activist American foreign policy – a policy that would be at once anti-Soviet and *anti-communist*. The Truman Doctrine thus amounted to a declaration of ideological Cold War along with a declaration of geopolitical Cold War. Yet ambiguities abounded, and they would reverberate throughout the entire Cold War era. What, precisely, was the nature of the threat that justified so full-scale a commitment? Was it the potential growth of Soviet power? Or was it the spread of a set of ideas antithetical to American values? The two, quite distinct, dangers merged imperceptibly in US thinking.

Three months after Truman’s epochal speech, the United States publicly announced the second major phase of its diplomatic offensive. Secretary of State George C. Marshall, during a Harvard University commencement address, promised US aid to all European countries willing to coordinate their recovery efforts. The enemies that the United States sought to combat with what was soon labelled the Marshall Plan were the hunger, poverty, and

demoralization fuelling the rise of the left in postwar Europe, a set of circumstances abetted by stalled recovery efforts and exacerbated by the most severe winter for the past 80 years. British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin and French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault responded immediately and enthusiastically to Marshall's overture. They organized a meeting of interested European states that soon came up with a set of organizing principles to govern the proposed US aid programme. British, French, and other Western European governments sensed a golden opportunity to help alleviate serious economic problems, counter local communist parties, and thwart Soviet expansion. They shared, in short, many of the Truman administration's concerns about the dangers inherent in the postwar environment, even if Europeans tended to be less ideologically fixated than their American counterparts in their understanding of the threat. Western European leaders plainly welcomed – and invited – a more active US policy towards and stronger presence in postwar Europe because this dovetailed with their own economic, political, and security needs. The Marshall Plan eventually provided \$13 billion in assistance to Western Europe, helping to jump-start economic recovery there, encourage European economic integration, and restore an important market for American goods. Stalin, fearful that the European Recovery Program would be used to loosen Russia's grip on its satellites, forbade Eastern European participation. Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov walked out of the Paris organizing conference with a stern warning that the Marshall Plan 'would split Europe into two groups of states'.

A decisive reorientation of its German policy formed another integral part of the Truman administration's diplomatic offensive. American policy-makers deemed the participation of the western occupation zones of Germany in the Marshall Plan to be essential to the plan's prospects, since German industry and resources constituted the indispensable engines of European economic growth. Even before the Marshall Plan's unveiling, the United States had moved to boost coal production within the by-then

merged American and British occupation zones. Washington planners were convinced that global peace and prosperity, as well as the security and economic well-being of the United States, depended upon European economic recovery, and that those overriding policy goals required, in turn, a strong, economically revived Germany. Those goals militated against any diplomatic compromise with the Soviet Union on the all-important German question. Secretary of State Marshall's insistence on German participation in the European Recovery Program essentially killed any lingering prospects for a four-power accord on Germany, and led directly to the acrimonious collapse of the November 1947 meetings of the Council of Foreign Ministers. 'We really do not want nor intend to accept German unification in any terms that the Russians might agree to', a high-ranking American diplomat privately admitted. Preferring to divide the country rather than to run the risk of a reunified Germany that might over time align itself with the Soviet Union or, almost as bad, adopt a neutralist stance, the United States, Great Britain, and France, in early 1948, took the first steps towards the creation of an independent West German state. British Ambassador Lord Inverchapel correctly observed that the Americans believed that the 'division of Germany and the absorption of the two parts into rival Eastern and Western spheres is preferable to the creation of a no-man's land on the border of an expanding Soviet hegemony'.

Given Stalin's oft-stated concerns about the revival of German power, those Western policy initiatives virtually ensured a vigorous Soviet reaction. US officials certainly expected as much – and they were not disappointed. In September 1947, at a conference in Poland, the Soviets established the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) as a means of tightening control over both their satellite states in Eastern Europe and the communist parties of Western Europe. Decrying the Marshall Plan as part of a concerted strategy to forge a Western alliance that would serve as a 'jumping-off place for attacking the Soviet Union', chief Russian delegate Andrei Zhdanov said the world was now divided into 'two camps'.

A Soviet-sponsored coup in Czechoslovakia, in February 1948, followed. It led to the dismissal of all non-communist ministers from the government, and left respected Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk dead in its wake – in highly suspicious circumstances. Along with heavy-handed repression of the non-communist opposition in Hungary, the Czech coup heralded a much tougher Soviet stance within its ‘camp’ and helped crystallize Europe’s East–West split.

Then, on 24 June 1948, Stalin threw the hammer down. In response to the Anglo-American-French rehabilitation and consolidation of West Germany, the Soviets suddenly halted all allied ground access to West Berlin. By isolating the western enclave in that divided city, located 125 miles within Soviet-occupied eastern Germany, Stalin aimed to expose his adversaries’ vulnerability, thereby derailing the establishment of the separate West German state he so feared.

The Cold War Truman responded by initiating a round-the-clock airlift of supplies and fuel to the 2 million embattled residents of West Berlin in one of the most storied, and tension-filled, episodes of the early Cold War. In May 1949, Stalin finally called off what had turned into an ineffectual blockade – and a public relations disaster. The clumsy Soviet riposte succeeded only in deepening the East–West split, inflaming public opinion in the United States and Western Europe, and destroying whatever shred of hope still existed for a German settlement acceptable to all four occupying powers. In September 1949, the Western powers created the Federal Republic of Germany. One month later, the Soviets established the German Democratic Republic in their occupation zone. Europe’s Cold War lines were now clearly demarcated, the division of Germany between west and east mirroring the broader division of Europe into American-led and Soviet-led spheres.

A number of top Western European diplomats, none more determinedly than British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin, believed that the burgeoning European–American connection could only be cemented through a formal trans-Atlantic security agreement.

Towards that end, the burly former labour leader became the prime mover behind the formation of the Brussels Pact of April 1948. That mutual security agreement between Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, Bevin hoped, could serve as the basis for a broader Western alliance. What he sought was a mechanism that would simultaneously draw the Americans more fully into Western European affairs, assuage French anxieties about the revival of Germany, and deter the Soviets – or, as a popular saying crudely but not inaccurately put it: a means ‘to keep the Americans in, the Soviets out, and the Germans down.’ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) met the needs identified by Bevin – and by a Truman administration intent upon adding a security anchor to its developing containment strategy. Signed in Washington on 4 April 1949, NATO brought together the Brussels signatories, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Canada, and the United States in a mutual security pact. Each of the member-states consented to treat an attack on one or more as an attack on all. This commitment represented an historic reversal for the United States of one of the defining traditions of its foreign policy. Not since the alliance with France of the late 18th century had Washington formed an entangling alliance or merged its own security needs so seamlessly with those of other sovereign states.

The sphere of influence, or ‘empire’, that the United States forged in postwar Europe stands as a product of its fears more than its ambitions. It was a product, moreover, of a convergence of interest between US and Western European elites. Indeed, the latter deserve recognition as co-authors of what historian Geir Lundestad has termed America’s ‘empire by invitation’. Important distinctions obtain, in this regard, between a Soviet empire that was essentially imposed on much of Eastern Europe and an American empire that resulted from a partnership born of common security fears and overlapping economic needs.

Although an undeniably crucial development in the onset of the Cold War, the division of Europe into hostile spheres of influence

forms only part of our story. Had the Cold War been restricted to a competition for power and influence in Europe alone, that story would have played out very differently than it ultimately did. The next chapter, consequently, shifts the geographical focus to Asia, the Cold War's second major theatre of the early postwar era.