

Series: What Is NATO?

How the British Empire wrecked Russian-American cooperation and launched the Cold War

Previous articles in our “What Is NATO” series appeared in the *Australian Almanac*, Vol. 13, No. 14-17, with Australian Alert Service issues dated 18 and 25 May, and 1 and 15 June 2022.

By Rachel Douglas

Sir Winston Churchill’s burning desire to preserve the British Empire after World War II put him into conflict with President Franklin Roosevelt (FDR)’s design for a post-colonial world of economic development for all people, as the first three Almanacs in this series recounted. Our [25 May](#) and [1 June](#) articles showed London’s vigorous opposition to Roosevelt’s specific plans for aiding the economic development of Iran and China—opposition up to and including engineering the replacement of Vice President Henry Wallace by Sen. Harry Truman as FDR’s running mate in the 1944 presidential election.

After Roosevelt’s death in April 1945 and Victory in Europe (V-E Day) on 8 May, Churchill moved quickly to disrupt any prospect for cooperation with the Soviet Union under the aegis of the new United Nations, which FDR had envisioned as an umbrella organisation for nations’ security, decolonisation and economic development. For the British, it was a top priority to treat Russia as an enemy, rather than an ally and partner within the UN. In the [15 June](#) Almanac, we reported on Churchill’s Operation Unthinkable, a scheme for war against the Soviet Union to begin almost immediately, in July 1945; the continuation of Churchill’s policy by Labour Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin after the Churchill government fell; Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech in Fulton, Missouri in March 1946; and the manoeuvring by Bevin and Britain’s allies within the Truman Administration, to bar cooperative efforts with the Soviet Union for economic reconstruction.

The next two Almanacs deal in more depth with British imperial strategists’ relentless drive to guide the United States into a confrontation with Russia, which became the Cold War, the long-lasting East-West conflict that kept mankind on the brink of destruction in a hot war for four decades—a danger that has now revived. This meant tightening the UK’s takeover of American foreign policy, beyond the ouster of Wallace; pushing the USA to gear up for war with the Soviet Union; and a string of provocations that instigated the March 1947 proclamation of the Truman Doctrine of intervening to block “communist tyranny”, which set the stage for the formation of NATO in 1949.

There was nothing inevitable about the Cold War! The United States and Russia had been friends or even allies since the American Revolution, especially during the US Civil War (1861-65), when the Russian Tsar sent his Navy to defend New York and San Francisco against planned attacks by the British, who supported the Confederacy—the slave-owning secessionists. Almost a century later, on 25 April 1945, soldiers of the two foremost members of the anti-fascist coalition, the Soviet Union and the United States, had just



Marshal Georgy Zhukov (left) and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower in Frankfurt, Germany, June 1945. Zhukov came to Eisenhower’s headquarters to award him the Soviet Order of Victory. Photo: Lieutenant Moore

recently embraced as their armies converged and met on the Elbe River near Torgau, Germany.

American and Russian military leaders well expressed the wartime relationship. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, in a statement for the 24th anniversary of the founding of the (Soviet) Red Army, 23 February 1942, wrote: “The world situation at the present time indicates that the hopes of civilisation rest on the worthy banners of the courageous Russian Army. During my lifetime I have participated in a number of wars and have witnessed others, as well as studying in great detail the campaigns of outstanding leaders of the past. In none have I observed such effective resistance to the heaviest blows of a hitherto undefeated enemy, followed by a smashing counter-attack which is driving the enemy back to his own land. The scale and grandeur of this effort marks it as the greatest military achievement in all history.”

FDR’s speechwriter Robert Sherwood later observed, “This message from MacArthur was ... transmitted to the Soviet authorities, who broadcast it to the entire world as coming from the heroic and brilliant American general who commanded the valiant forces in the epic struggle for freedom in the Philippines.”¹

Even in November 1945, with Roosevelt dead and the horror of the US atomic terror-bombing of the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki hanging over the world, Soviet war hero Marshall Georgy Zhukov voiced an optimistic vision of Russian-American cooperation. The American commander and future President Gen. Dwight Eisenhower recounted their conversation in his 1948 memoir, *Crusade in Europe*. This excerpt received mass circulation in *LIFE* magazine:

“I saw Marshal Zhukov for the last time November 7, 1945. It was a Soviet holiday, in honor of which he gave a

1. Robert E. Sherwood, *The White House Papers of Harry L. Hopkins*, Vol. II (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1949).

large reception in Berlin, inviting to it the senior commanders and staff officers of all the Allies. The weather turned bad and flying was impossible. The other two commanders in chief canceled their engagements but, knowing that I was soon to be ordered home, I determined to attend the ceremony, although to do so I had to make a night trip by train, followed by a long automobile trip during the day.

"When I arrived Marshal Zhukov ... greeted me and then promptly deserted the receiving line. He took his wife by the arm, and the three of us, with an interpreter, retired to a comfortable room where were refreshments of all kinds. We talked for two hours.

"The tenor of the marshal's conversation was that he believed that we in Berlin [during the first months after V-E Day] had done something to help in the difficult problem of promoting understanding between two nations so diverse in their cultural and political conceptions as were the United States and the Soviet Union. He felt that we could accomplish still more. He talked at length about the new United Nations and remarked: *'If the United States and Russia will only stand together through thick and thin, success is certain for the United Nations. If we are partners there are no other countries in the world that would dare to go to war when we forbade it.'*" (Emphasis added.)

This was the potential for cooperation, which the British were determined to quash, in order to maintain and even expand their empire.

Britain prepares to turn USA vs Soviet Union

At the end of World War II, the British Empire was bankrupt and spread thin around the globe, while the USA had emerged as an industrial and political powerhouse. The Soviet Union had sustained enormous losses, with at least 27 million of its soldiers and civilians killed and many industrial cities in ruins, but it had vast resources and a strong government to drive a recovery. In London's view, it would be better to conquer Russia immediately at the war's end than to allow time for a recovery, but this required incorporating the United States into an embryonic plan for a world government ("world organisation", in Churchill's words), dominated by the British Empire and continuing its policies. This was the Anglo-American "special relationship" Churchill would call for in his March 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech (excerpted in the [previous Almanac](#)). The United States could be then mobilised for war against the Soviet Union.

But the American commitment to alliance with the Soviet Union and collaboration with the Soviets in organising the new United Nations went far beyond Roosevelt and his close team. Still mindful of their own revolution against the British Empire, Americans were praising Russia, and condemning the British. A Gallup poll after the war found that 60 per cent of Americans were anti-British!

The fundamental clash between the British Empire and the United States over the shape of the post-war world had surfaced in the disputes between Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt already in 1941, when they met at the Argentia base in Newfoundland to establish their wartime alliance. Those events are the subject of the [first Almanac in this series](#) (18 May 2022).

By mid-1943, as it became clear that the Allied effort would defeat the Nazi armies, the British were already laying the groundwork for recruiting the United States as a military and political collaborator in a post-war attack on the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, they began to redeploy their intelligence and propaganda capabilities against the Soviet Union directly. To mobilise in earnest for their future

agenda, the British foreign policy establishment assembled a cabal that included the Foreign Office, the foreign intelligence agency MI6, the military Chiefs of Staff, and the Special Operations Executive (SOE).

Bletchley Park was a British intelligence operations centre under MI6, where the government Code and Cipher School intercepted German intelligence codes. Its cracking of the Nazis' famous Enigma code was an important contribution to the Allied defeat of the Nazis.

Until 1943, Bletchley had not been reading Soviet communications, but early that year MI6 chief Sir Stewart Menzies gave the order to begin intercepting them, including transmissions between Moscow and antifascist partisan (guerrilla warfare) groups and anti-Nazi resistance organisations inside German-occupied Europe. Like Churchill, Menzies was from an aristocratic family, and moved in the highest circles of the British wartime establishment. Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, spelled out the policy in a memo: "Since Stalingrad [the August 1942-February 1943 battle deep within Russia, where the Red Army repulsed Hitler's invaders] our immediate strategic objectives had changed. Until then it had been in our interest to do all we could to take pressure off Russia. Now that the tide had turned, it was in our interest to let Germany and Russia bleed each other white."²

In August 1943 the Chiefs of Staff established a Post-Hostilities Planning (PHP) Sub-Committee, chaired by Gladwyn Jebb, to map out plans for the post-war deployment of the British military. According to Jebb, his PHP members were "would-be drinkers of Russian blood", uncompromising in their view that the only potential enemy after the defeat of the Nazis was the Soviet Union.

These preparations for a British shift against an ally were not kept secret from Russia, as author Stephen Dorril points out: "Moscow was quickly informed of the PHP deliberations because one of the 'Ring of Five' [Anglo-Soviet double agents], Foreign Office official Donald Maclean, was passing on details of the main discussions. Soviet news agencies soon began referring to 'nests of Fascist opposition' in the West. ... [A] deputy under-secretary, Geoffrey Wilson observed that there was more to the Soviet complaints than officials might suppose. ... Wilson noted that 'the suspicion and even hostility of the Service Departments [MI5 and MI6] towards Russia are now becoming a matter of common gossip.'"

Provocatory leaks to Moscow would also come from MI6's Section IX, the unit tracking international communist movement activities, which Menzies re-established in early 1944 (it had been suspended at the outset of the war). Since the head of Section IX was another of the "Five", the famous Anglo-Soviet spy Kim Philby, information on its monitoring was sent on to Moscow, amplifying Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's suspicions that the main target of British operations, even during the war, was not Germany, but Russia.

Just after the June 1944 Allied landing in France, the PHP group recommended future joint action with the Germans against the Soviet Union. Chief of the Imperial General Staff Viscount Alanbrooke, thinking likewise, wrote in his diary on 27 July 1944 after a meeting with Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, "Should Germany be dismembered, or gradually be converted to an ally to meet the Russian threat of twenty years hence? I suggested the latter. ... Germany is no longer the dominating power in Europe—Russia is. She has vast

2. Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Inside the Covert World of Her Majesty's Secret Intelligence Service* (New York: The Free Press, 2000) is the source for quotations in this section of this article.

resources and cannot fail to become the main threat in fifteen years from now. Therefore, foster Germany, gradually build her up, and bring her into a federation of Western Europe.”

In September 1944 British Gen. F.H.N. Davidson, head of the British Military Mission in Washington and former director of military intelligence, sounded out a close advisor to Roosevelt on “whether the United States could be counted on to march with Britain in the ‘next war’ against Russia.” The White House response was “distinctly disapproving”, as Dorril put it.

British ‘stocktaking’

As the previous Almanac in this series reported, even the British military Joint Planning Staff (JPS) advised Churchill that his Operation Unthinkable for immediate war on Russia could not produce a quick victory. What’s more, Churchill did not remain in office as prime minister long enough to plough straight ahead into World War III in July 1945. His party lost the general election that month.

Prime Minister Clement Attlee, head of the new Labour government, opposed many of the British imperial faction’s policies, but Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin was intransigent in his anti-Sovietism, dating from his skirmishes with communists as a trade union leader. As for foreign affairs, Bevin was under the tutelage of the Foreign Office permanent bureaucracy; the policies of Churchill would be continued, with MI6, the Foreign Office, and top military officers in the lead.

In July 1945 two of those agencies outlined their perspective for the war strategy against Russia, in departmental documents. One was a new JPS memorandum, “The Security of the British Empire”. The other was a Foreign Office report, “Stocktaking after VE Day”, written by Permanent Under-Secretary Sir Orme Sargent.

The two memoranda shared these strategic assessments: first, that the Soviet Union was the new enemy, and second, that Great Britain could not confront the Soviets alone, but would need to recruit the United States for its muscle power in a war with the USSR.

Like his collaborator and predecessor as permanent under-secretary Sir Alexander Cadogan, Sargent hailed from the imperial tradition in the Foreign Office, where senior officials, “always had a condescending, paternalistic approach to any co-operation with the Americans”.³

Sargent wrote that the British had to overcome the Americans’ powerful anti-imperial impulse and their desire to negotiate the shape of the new order directly with the Soviet Union through a strong United Nations Organisation. He lamented that, “in the minds of our big partners, especially in that of the United States, there is a feeling that Great Britain is now a secondary Power and can be treated as such, and that in the long run all will be well if they—the United States and the Soviet Union—as the two supreme World Powers of the future, understand one another. It is this misconception which it must be our policy to combat.”

Sargent treated the UN dismissively, as a Roosevelt innovation of minimal significance for the Empire. He underscored the need to recruit the USA into the imperial camp. “With the contempt and cynicism which came from years of diplomatic service to what had been one of the foremost powers in the world”, wrote historian Peter David Poole, Sargent proposed to impose “a British foreign policy on the Americans:

‘We must have a policy of our own and try to persuade the United States to make it their own. This ought not to be too difficult.’”

The key was the age-old British tradition of “divide and conquer”: to convince both the USA and the Soviet Union that each was out to double-cross and subvert the other. The British would sound alarms about alleged Soviet expansionism and fear-monger about the power of communist parties in Europe. (Those parties did have great support, and in some cases power, because of their leading role in the anti-Hitler resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe. The political complexities related to this fact will be discussed in future articles.) Sargent insisted, “[W]e must contrive to demonstrate to the American public that our challenge is based on upholding the *liberal idea* in Europe and not upon selfish appreciations as to our position as a Great Power.” (Emphasis added.)

Thus, the British Foreign Office in 1945 anticipated the arguments of “liberal imperialism”—most famously associated with former British PM and Iraq war architect Tony Blair—50 years later and on into the present, when the Anglo-American party of war marches under the banners of “democracy” and “free trade”.



Sir Orme Sargent, who as permanent under-secretary in the British Foreign Office wrote a July 1945 memo on forcing the USA to adopt British policies. Photo: UK National Portrait Gallery

After the A-bomb

America’s military leaders, starting with Generals Eisenhower and MacArthur, opposed dropping atomic bombs on Japan as militarily unnecessary, given that Japan was a resource-poor island nation that could be blockaded and readily brought to its knees. Moreover, through back-channel diplomacy involving the Vatican, Japan had already agreed to surrender on the same terms as were ultimately adopted in September.⁴ Yet President Truman and his Anglophile cabinet members Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Secretary of State James Byrnes made the decision to go ahead with the detonations over Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 and Nagasaki three days later, which killed more than 200,000 people.

The demonstration of the A-bomb’s massive destruction was intended to terrorise the world, especially the Soviet Union, into submitting to the British imperialists and their American junior partners. For the next few years they would hold a nuclear gun to the head of the Soviets.

Top figures in the British establishment lobbied for using the atomic bomb against the USSR right away. Lord Bertrand Russell’s article in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, at the end of 1946, insisted on a plan for centralised control over all nuclear arsenals, as a stepping-stone to world government. If the Soviets did not agree, Russell wrote that the new weapon should be used against them. Churchill was on the same track. Also in 1946, he told his long-time physician,

3. Peter David Poole, “British Foreign Policy, the United States, and Europe, 1945-50”, dissertation submitted to the University of Birmingham, England, 2011, provides this description and subsequent quotations from Sargent’s report.

4. Max Corvo, *The O.S.S. in Italy, 1942-1945: A Personal Memoir* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1989).

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Lord Moran, “We ought not to wait until Russia is ready. I believe it will be eight years before she has these bombs.”⁵

It was not until the Soviet Union had developed its own atomic weapons in 1949, followed by its thermonuclear bomb (hydrogen bomb) in 1953, that these threats of the immediate destruction of Russia in a hot war gave way to the Cold War, the long era of East-West tension under the threat of “mutual assured destruction”.

Relentless pro-Empire campaign

Throughout 1945, despite the death of FDR in April of that year, the pro-Empire campaigners were obsessed with the US-Soviet entente. In July Lord Halifax, the British ambassador to Washington, sent home a report that Russian-American ties were strengthening, including through direct negotiations being handled by FDR’s ally Harry Hopkins over the future of Poland.

At the same time, the Soviets were requesting military bases in Turkey and unimpeded access to the eastern Mediterranean Sea. This was a legitimate request, aimed at preventing any attacks on the USSR’s southern flank. The Soviets also wanted to engage in trade with the Middle East and Africa. These intentions ran right up against Foreign Office thinking on how to preserve the British Empire. For London the Mediterranean was the gateway to the core of the Empire, from the Middle East, including its oil fields, and Egypt with its Suez Canal, the passageway to India. The area also held the key to Africa, the seen as a source of raw materials for the depressed British economy.

The Foreign Office, as spokesman for the Empire, drew a line across the Balkan Peninsula and the Middle East, moving to confront the Soviet Union at every point. They charged “Soviet expansionism”, while failing to mention their own. In reaction to the Soviet bid for access to the Mediterranean from the Black Sea, the British declared that not only Greece and Turkey, but also Bulgaria belonged to their sphere of influence. They also demanded that the disposition of the African colonies of defeated Italy exclude the Soviet Union.

Prime Minister Attlee resisted this belligerence, refusing to attack the Soviet Union—“there is no enemy now to fight”, were his words—and supporting the UN as the appropriate venue for resolving differences. He opposed a military doctrine of confrontation and thought the Middle East should be made a “neutral zone”, while the UK should disengage from Greece and Turkey in early 1946 to avoid fuelling tensions with the Soviets. The PM even questioned the assumption that the Soviet Union was seeking world domination.

Indeed, contrary to the lies of the British Empire advocates, the war-damaged Soviet Union was not making an expansionist push. Moscow wanted spheres of influence to buffer it against potential new attacks, but had no appetite for adventures abroad. According to Soviet reports at the time, cited by author Stephen Dorril, Russia had suffered “material losses which surpassed ‘the national wealth of England or Germany’ and which constituted ‘one-third of the overall national wealth of the United States’.” According to the Ivan Maisky-Maxim Litvinov Report [written under guidance of two senior Soviet diplomats], the Russians sought “at least a



The British Foreign Office churned out memoranda in 1945 and 1946 on the need to confront the Soviet Union, and to make the USA join that policy. Photo: Wikipedia

few decades of peace”, in which to recover.

A 1996 book by two Russian historians, Vladislav Zubok and Konstantin Pleshakov, summarised Soviet geopolitical objectives: “At no point did Stalin’s demands and ambitions in 1945-46 exceed the maximum zone of responsibility discussed by Litvinov and Maisky. In fact, in some cases, Stalin’s moves in the international arena were more modest in scope.” During 1946, they added, Stalin “kept restraining ‘revolutionaries’ not only in Iran, but also in Greece and other places where he did not want to provoke premature confrontation with the British and Americans.”

That made no difference to London. The British imperial faction waged a relentless campaign to force confrontation. In January 1946 the Joint Intelligence Committee of the Cabinet and Christopher Warner, head of the Northern Department of the Foreign Office, each issued a memorandum to justify belligerence towards Russia. Warner conspired with Frank Roberts, the British chargé d’affaires in Moscow, for Roberts to send inflammatory accounts of the situation in the Soviet Union back to the Foreign Office.

In Moscow, Roberts worked jointly with the American Deputy Chief of Mission George Kennan. Their collaboration led to Kennan’s sending his famous “Long Telegram” to Washington on 22 February 1946. That 8,000-word litany of accusations about Soviet activity and intentions initiated the policy of “containment” of the Soviet Union, the term Kennan introduced a year later in his pseudonymous (by-lined “Mr. X”) article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct”. The Roberts-Kennan lobbying helped to derail the working relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, which became more and more adversarial.

In the UK itself, in April 1946 Warner created the Committee on Policy Towards Russia, or the Russia Committee, which attacked any analysis contradicting their assertion that the Soviet Union was imperialist and expansionist, and dismissed Russian claims of having suffered large losses in the war, having no stomach for new wars, wanting to rebuild their destroyed country, and so forth. Warner called for a “defensive-offensive” policy, ranging from intervention into elections on the continent to propaganda campaigns against Russian militarism through the BBC and other media. His efforts were coordinated with similar initiatives by MI6 and the military.

Continued, next Almanac.

5. Charles McMoran Wilson (Lord Moran), *Churchill, Taken from the Diaries of Lord Moran: The Struggle for Survival, 1940-1965* (Houghton Mifflin, 1966).