10. A Wartime Alliance: Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin

The Eastern Front in 1941, as the Nazis launched their surprise invasion of Russia, and in 1943 and 1944, as the Red Army pushed the Germans back, finally standing ready to breach the German border in early 1945. The Soviets lost some 8.7 million soldiers on the battlefield; millions of civilians also perished on the brutal Eastern Front. The Russian advance, met in the German heartland by Western Allies moving east, was critical to the Allied victory over Germany in 1945. It also meant that by the end of the war, the Soviets occupied much of Eastern Europe.

Never one to accord ideology much weight, Franklin D. Roosevelt tended to regard the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), a federation of communist republics dominated by Russia and formed in 1922 after a three-year Russian civil war, the same way he viewed Russia itself—as a continental power largely devoid of colonial ambitions that was driven by the same fears and ambitions as Europe’s other leading states. Though concerned about the zealous rhetoric found in Soviet communism, FDR regarded the adherents of Nazism and Japanese militarism as far more dangerous. These ideologues were bent on world conquest by any means, whereas FDR remained convinced that the American people would never wholeheartedly embrace communism, a philosophy advocating class war and collective ownership of property that he considered alien to American culture and experience.

This is not to say that FDR had any illusions about Joseph Stalin or the nature of the Soviet regime. FDR understood that Stalin was an oppressive and even violent ruler, asserting in 1940 that the USSR was run by “a dictatorship as absolute as any other dictatorship in the world.” But Stalinist Russia, focused inward and more concerned about protecting itself from external threats than with spreading communist ideology, could also serve as a counterweight to both German and Japanese expansionism.

It is for this reason that FDR made the decision to recognize the Soviet Union in 1933, and, in the aftermath of Russia’s entry into World War II, to offer Stalin substantial American military and economic aid. Moreover, once it became clear that the Soviet Union would not only survive the German onslaught, but would emerge from the war—like the United States—as a superpower, FDR remained determined to try to extend U.S.–Soviet wartime cooperation as the basis for the peace that would follow.

Above all else, this would require developing a working relationship with Stalin—a working relationship that would allow FDR to overcome Soviet suspicions of the outside world and draw it into the postwar system of peace and security FDR hoped to establish in the United Nations. The president believed the future of the world depended to a large extent on the cooperation of what he called “the Four Policemen”—the United States, the United Kingdom, China, and the USSR. Given his faith in personal diplomacy—“I think I can personally handle Stalin better than your Foreign Office or my State Department,” he wrote British prime minister Winston Churchill in 1942—FDR was most anxious to meet directly with Stalin. He would do so twice during the war, at the Tehran Conference in November–December 1943 and again at the Yalta Conference in February 1945.
Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Recognition of the USSR, 1933

Franklin D. Roosevelt entered the presidency determined to reverse America’s policy of refusing to officially recognize the Soviet Union, established by President Woodrow Wilson in 1917. Wilson had severed diplomatic relations with Russia in the aftermath of the revolution that saw the communists rise to power and establish a government that seized American property, refused to honor debts owed to the United States under the former czarist regime, and concluded a separate peace with Germany in the final months of World War I.

By the time FDR was elected, the United States was the only major Western power that refused to recognize the Soviet Union. For the pragmatic FDR, the normalization of ties seemed a logical move, first, because in the midst of the Great Depression, the U.S. State Department and business community were anxious to open Soviet markets to American goods, and, second, because closer ties between Washington, DC, and Moscow might help deter further Japanese aggression in Asia and might even give pause to Adolf Hitler in Europe.

In an early indication of his hands-on approach to U.S. foreign policy, FDR personally undertook a good share of the negotiations to reestablish diplomatic relations with the Soviets. Indeed, the resulting accord, signed by FDR and Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet foreign minister, at the White House in November 1933, became known as the Roosevelt–Litvinov Agreement. Under its terms, the Soviet Union pledged to participate in future talks aimed at settling its outstanding debts to the United States, to refrain from interfering in U.S. domestic affairs, and to grant religious freedom to American citizens living in the Soviet Union.

But the cooperative spirit that surrounded the negotiation of the agreement was short-lived. There would be no settlement of the debt question and little progress on trade. Joseph Stalin’s initiation in the mid-1930s of great murderous purges of dissenters, which shocked the American public, led to a further deterioration in relations. Finally, Stalin’s collaboration with Hitler—his signing of the Nazi–Soviet Nonaggression Pact in August 1939, followed by the Soviet absorption of the eastern half of Poland in mid-September, just weeks after Hitler had launched his own assault on the hapless Poles—would lead most Americans to conclude that there was little distinction between the two tyrants.

FDR shared this view. But he also understood it was of utmost importance to avoid doing anything that might drive the Soviet Union and Germany further into each other’s embrace. Hence, while he condemned Moscow’s move into Poland, criticized the Soviet attack on Finland in 1939–40, and refused to recognize the Soviet takeover of the Baltic states in the summer of 1940, he was careful not to close the door completely on possible future collaboration.
Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Decision to Aid Russia, 1941

On June 22, 1941, Adolf Hitler launched the German invasion of Russia. Code-named Operation Barbarossa, the surprise attack, which involved more than 3.5 million men, 3,600 tanks, and 2,700 aircraft, was the largest military assault in European history. In Washington, DC, many of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s advisors predicted that the Soviet Union would not last more than a few months.

But FDR did not agree. Within two days of the German attack, he authorized emergency assistance to the Soviets. He then sent his trusted confidant Harry Hopkins to Moscow to assess the situation and meet with Joseph Stalin. Behind the scenes the president began to marshal congressional support to extend Lend-Lease, a generous program of military aid benefiting Britain, to beleaguered Russia.

By the end of October 1941, FDR had secured the congressional support he needed and, taking note of the “valiant and determined resistance of the army and people of the Soviet Union,” announced that Russia was now eligible for Lend-Lease aid. Over the next three and a half years, the United States would provide the Soviets with more than $11 billion in war supplies. Though Lend-Lease aid to Russia constituted only about 7 percent of what the USSR produced during the war, it was vitally important. This was especially true in the first year of the conflict, when German forces drove deep into Russia, coming within fifteen miles of Moscow by December 1941. The support of the Roosevelt administration in these dark and difficult days provided Russian forces with an important psychological lift at one of the bleakest moments of the war.

Moreover, FDR’s willingness to support the Soviet Union showed real leadership and took considerable political courage. There were strong arguments against it. If Russia’s collapse was imminent, then the armaments might end up in the hands of the Nazis. Meanwhile, Britain was still in dire need of help in the summer and fall of 1941, and there were worrying signs in the Far East that American resources might be required there as well. The president also had to consider the need to strengthen America’s defenses at home, not to mention American anticommmunist sentiment and the inevitable isolationist charge that FDR’s support for Russia was but one more example of his determination to take America to war.

But overriding all these considerations was the simple fact that the longer the Soviet Union could engage the Nazis in the East, the more likely Britain and America might be able to turn the tide in the Allies’ favor. Indeed, within a few days of the launch of Operation Barbarossa, FDR predicted to one aide that if the German attack on Russia proved more than a temporary diversion, it would mean “the liberation of Europe from Nazi domination.”
Binding Joseph Stalin to the Alliance, 1941–44

As the United States plunged into World War II and began losing brothers, fathers, and sons on faraway battlefields, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s dealings with Joseph Stalin were driven by a straightforward imperative: make this autocratic ruler of millions more a friend than an enemy.

FDR’s decision to offer generous military aid to Russia, especially after America’s entry into the war in December 1941, was an exercise in diplomacy as well as military strategy. America’s openhanded provisioning of the Russian military, he thought, would help establish trust between the American and Soviet governments, would bring the American and Soviet peoples closer together, and would serve to demonstrate to the Soviets the benefits of the democratic free-market system.

The fear that Stalin might be pressed to seek a separate peace with Adolf Hitler—a very real threat—also played a hand in FDR’s generous aid policy. This concern likewise contributed to FDR’s decision to invade North Africa in 1942, keeping his promise to Stalin that he would open a diverting “second front” against Germany to relieve the embattled Russians. FDR further bound the Soviets to the Allied coalition by announcing in January 1943 at the Casablanca Conference that the Allies would accept no peace without “unconditional surrender” by the Axis; the Soviets would not be left to fight on alone.

Recognizing Russia’s importance to the war effort—the USSR would ultimately sacrifice more than eight million soldiers on the brutal Eastern Front—and increasingly of the mind that Soviet-American relations would also be key to postwar stability, FDR assiduously cultivated a relationship with Stalin. Thus, in the summer of 1941, FDR sent his close advisor Harry Hopkins to Moscow to meet with Stalin, not in any official capacity but as his personal representative. In October the president suggested the two leaders arrange a face-to-face meeting as soon as possible, an encounter that would take place only in the context of two trilateral conferences—Tehran and Yalta—including British prime minister Winston Churchill.

FDR’s desire to meet Stalin on his own terms unnerved Churchill, who feared that the rise of Soviet and American power would diminish Britain’s role in the war and in the peace that followed. To a certain extent these fears were justified, for during the first two years of the Anglo-American alliance, the British, with more troops in the field against Germany, had been the senior partner, but by November 1943, when the Big Three—FDR, Churchill, and Stalin—finally met at Tehran, the Anglo-American roles had reversed. The United States was now poised to play the dominant role in the European theater.

Moreover, by the time of the Tehran Conference, it had become eminently clear to FDR that Soviet power would endure, making Soviet cooperation vitally important in any effort to avoid another cataclysmic war and establish a stable peace. Determined to show Stalin that Britain and America were not maneuvering to establish a united front against Moscow, FDR resolved to use the Tehran Conference to establish a bilateral relationship with Stalin independent of his sturdy ties to Churchill.

At Tehran FDR sought out numerous private meetings with Stalin, while tending to avoid private discussions with Churchill. He did not hesitate to disagree with Churchill in Stalin’s presence. For example, FDR refused to back Churchill’s desire to beef up Anglo-American operations then underway in Italy and the eastern Mediterranean. Instead, he took Stalin’s part, agreeing that the British and Americans must now focus on achieving, no later than May 1944, the long-awaited landings in northwest France that might provide some respite to Soviets fighting in the East.
Above: British prime minister Winston Churchill, a tired-looking Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin at the Yalta Conference of February 1945, the three leaders’ last meeting. Critics have argued that FDR and Churchill failed to press Stalin hard enough about the political future of Eastern Europe. Soviet occupation of this territory in 1945—the result of bloody fighting by the Red Army—set the stage for Stalin to establish a “buffer zone” of communist-dominated states along Russia’s western flank. LOC

Left: Joseph Stalin calls on Franklin D. Roosevelt upon arriving at the Livadia Palace in Yalta, site of the wartime conference of Allied leaders, February 2, 1945. FDR’s objective was to secure a commitment from Stalin that the Soviets would join the war against Japan and participate in the postwar United Nations. FDR.

Little more than a year after the Tehran Conference, in the seaside Ukrainian city of Yalta, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin met for the second and last time. This conference of the Big Three—FDR, Winston Churchill, and Stalin—took place in February 1945. Victory in Europe seemed assured, but Japan stubbornly hung on; it looked like a costly invasion of the Japanese mainland might be required. FDR was weak, ill, and, unbeknownst to anyone, very near the end of his life.

At the conference, FDR achieved his two most important aims. He succeeded in bringing the Soviet Union into the United Nations largely on his own terms, a feat he considered the crowning accomplishment of the conference. He also won Stalin’s promise to join the other Allies in the war against Japan within three months of Germany’s defeat.

But critics, especially Republican critics, would later condemn FDR’s actions at Yalta as a betrayal of Eastern Europe that permitted the Iron Curtain to enclose and darken that part of the world for decades to come. In fact, at Yalta all three leaders signed the Declaration of Liberated Europe and the Declaration on Poland, both of which proclaimed the right of all people in lands formerly taken by the Nazis to choose their own form of government and, in the case of the Poles, called for “the holding of free and unfettered elections as soon as possible on the basis of universal suffrage and secret ballot.”

The leaders did accede to Stalin’s demand to shift the borders of Poland to the west (Poland would take territory from Germany, and the Soviet Union would annex part of Poland). And they failed to insist on a reinstatement of independent governments in the Baltic states, which Stalin had invaded and “Sovietized” in 1940 while his nonaggression pact with Adolf Hitler still held.

But in 1945 the reigning fact was this: the Red Army occupied much of Eastern Europe, having secured that status by a hideously long and lethal march toward Berlin. Short of an Anglo-American military campaign against the Soviets, Stalin’s will would prevail in this territory. In practice, the states falling under Stalin’s control would enjoy no free elections and would have only one choice of government: Soviet-style communism.

At Yalta and in the final weeks of his life, FDR was concerned both with ending the war and with transforming a temporary wartime coalition into a permanent agency for peace. He had hoped that after the war, Stalin’s behavior might be modified through the United Nations and later U.S. policies. He had no illusions about the nature of the Soviet regime, but thought that securing Soviet cooperation during the urgency of war might yield dividends after the fighting stopped.

FDR would not live long enough to see the end of the war or directly influence the postwar world. But his willingness to reach out to Stalin and the Soviet regime undoubtedly helped keep this powerful ally at America’s side during the bloodiest war in human history—and made a deep impression on the Russian people, who still regard FDR as one of their nation’s true heroes and greatest friends.