Hristiana Petkova, University of California, Los Angeles

Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin: Realists Whose Miscommunications Made the Cold War Inevitable

I. Introduction

The Cold War was a defining period for Russia, Britain, and the United States and still affects foreign relations among these countries today. When Russian policy makers interact with the United States or the United Kingdom in a way that is perceived to be less than positive, sensationalist headlines in the West immediately proclaim “Cold War Renewed Again!” or “Russia says US Trying to Start New Cold War.”\(^1\) Political scholars, such as Mark Kramer, Patrick Callahan, and Daniel Treisman, have studied many different aspects of the Cold War. Yet, even twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the supposed end of previous tensions, new evidence is constantly being uncovered and compiled, which keeps the topic relevant and dynamic. When it comes to the Cold War, scholars agree that it had lasting influence worldwide and shaped the trajectory of international relations in the modern era.

Contemporary discourse on Cold War politics, both in Russia and the West, often frames the conflict as a “war of ideologies.”\(^2\) Public sentiment maintains that because the Soviet Union and countries such as the United States and Great Britain were so fundamentally different, it was virtually impossible for them to cooperate without the threat of Nazis invasion. Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech is often cited to illustrate that peaceful coexistence was fundamentally not feasible. As demonstrated by Soviet political maneuvers immediately following the end of World War II, Stalin and his allies intended to spread communism to other areas of the world. To maintain the balance of power, the United States and its allies could not allow this to happen. In the ensuing struggle, it was only the doctrine known as “mutually

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\(^1\) Swaine.

\(^2\) Rid.
assured destruction”—the concept that if one side aggresses (or uses the nuclear bomb), the other would surely retaliate—that prevented total destruction. In lieu of actual military action, the Cold War is therefore often understood as an ideological struggle between two very different and fundamentally incompatible world views.

Modern scholarship approaches the Cold War in a few different ways. While there are those scholars who argue that the conflict was a clash of ideologies, others maintain that the Cold War was a perfect example of “realism” in action. Realism, a popular “logic” of American political scientific theory, is one of the most common methods of analyzing foreign policy decisions. “Realism” mandates that “states pursue national interest. Their primary interest is security: States seek first to insure that they will survive, keep their territory and independence, and be safe from attack.”³ It could therefore be argued that politics are shaped by states pursuing power and, ultimately, hegemony. When applied in the context of the Cold War, as Patrick Callahan explains, such analysis assumes that leaders in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union were, in a sense, playing a “zero-sum game”—any gain for one state would mean a direct loss for the other.⁴ What this meant in practice was that any gain by one side, regardless of strategic value, would serve one side to the detriment of the other. Thus, all the adversaries would struggle over assets that were not necessarily worth the effort expended by either side. Proponents of the realist approach claim this is why the United Kingdom strongly objected to Soviet presence in Eastern Europe, and why the United States and the Soviet Union spent so much money and invested so many resources on proxy wars that ultimately were not

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³ Callahan, 31.
⁴ Ibid., 35.
advantageous for either side. This argument implies that the inevitability of the Cold War stemmed from insurmountable conflicts of strategic interest between the opposing sides.

While the realists present a compelling argument, there are still other ways to analyze the origins of the Cold War without assuming it to have been an inevitable phenomenon. There is certainly evidence to suggest that the Allied leaders may not have had as intense an aversion to Stalin and communism as is commonly assumed. Churchill negotiated the fate of Eastern Europe with Stalin, and when Roosevelt was creating his “new world order,” he certainly did not exclude the Soviets. The actions of these leaders do not indicate that they anticipated conflict. Taking such factors into account, Deborah Welch Larson proposes an alternative theory to explain the motivations behind Roosevelt’s foreign policy decisions. It states that Stalin and Roosevelt were working to create a world order in which the United States, the Soviet Union, and, to an extent, the United Kingdom, would be leading powers. This world order, however, did not come to fruition due to certain misunderstandings between the leaders of the respective states, especially after Roosevelt’s death. Larson thus maintains that social psychology, not realism, provides a better framework for studying the foreign policy decisions made by American leaders during peace talks.

While Larson’s analysis of the misunderstandings that occurred between the three Allied powers after World War II is convincing, her rejection of realism as an explanation of their foreign policy decisions requires reassessment. Realism need not imply aggressive conflict—the leaders of the “Big Three” (Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin) were allies despite ideological

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5 Callahan, 45. Proxy wars between the USSR and the US and their allies include the Korean War (1950), the Laotian Civil War (1953), the Vietnam War (1957), the Guatemalan Civil War (1960), the Libyan-Egyptian War (1977), the Ogaden War (1977), and the Afghan Soviet War (1979).
6 Newsinger.
7 Larson, 71.
8 Ibid., 71.
9 Ibid., 8.
differences. Rather than rejecting realism as a basis for their foreign policy making decisions, they were diplomatic realists, who aimed to establish dominant power in their respective spheres of influence. However, their vision of the “new world order” remained unrealized because of a lack of clear communication among the leaders (as Larson suggests), an inability to fulfill their promises, and Churchill and Roosevelt’s failure to properly present their visions to their respective legislatures.

II. Explaining Political Realism

The theory of realism has a long history in the field of political science, dating as far back as Niccolo Machiavelli. According to Callahan, modern realist theories claim (1) that global politics are largely shaped by nations pursuing more power, and (2) that in their pursuit of power states are ultimately concerned most with their own security.\(^\text{10}\) Realism asserts that the only way that international stability can be maintained is through a balance of power in the world at large. However, this does not mean that realists advocate unnecessary intervention. Realism explicitly states that a country’s main concern should be to protect its own security, no matter the cost.\(^\text{11}\) This assumption is rooted in the belief that the international system is ultimately anarchic because there is no overarching world government that can control or limit all states.\(^\text{12}\) Hence, it follows that states must protect themselves and, in order to do so, they require power, which derives from military might. Although realists do not advocate war, they argue that states require a powerful military for the explicit purpose of protection. Accordingly, a healthy economy is necessary to finance the military and guarantee protection.\(^\text{13}\) It follows, therefore, that states must be in conflict with each other at all times, since a gain in security for one country means a

\(^{10}\) Callahan, 30.
\(^{11}\) Donnelly, 150
\(^{12}\) Ibid.
\(^{13}\) Callahan, 34.
security loss for another. For example, if a country loses territory to another state, then the latter state gains the resources that come with that territory, including power and security. Thus, in order to gain power, states should continually pursue territorial expansion. However, because no state has enough power to be in conflict with every other simultaneously, a state should only pursue conflict when its security is directly threatened.

The question of what should actually be considered a threat to security divides proponents of realism into two distinct camps: militant and diplomatic. The militants assume a “zero-sum” international setting where there is only one leader state and one challenger state. Any gain for one is thus a direct threat for the other. Scholars who support this approach assert that any state whose dominance or power grows will inevitably present a threat to all other states because it will continually seek new avenues of power. In contrast, diplomatic realists assume that the world is multipolar, and that relationships between states fluctuate constantly—that is, an enemy state today can be an ally tomorrow. Relationships, therefore, are not “zero-sum” and, as a result, a state’s goal is never simply the destruction of its adversary. Additionally, diplomatic realists discern between “revisionist” states and “status quo” states. The former category identifies states that pose a particular danger because they have demonstrated aggression in the past or have unsatisfied grievances. On the other hand, states that are satisfied with their power and position in the world, the so-called “status quo” states, do not present an immediate threat. Thus, the goal of the international community is to transform “revisionist” states into “status quo” states in order to provide stability worldwide. If states are satisfied with or unable to challenge their position, then large-scale conflict would occur far less frequently.

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14 Callahan, 32.
15 Ibid., 33.
Despite slight interpretive differences, realists agree that security, survival, and power are vital interests of every state, especially in the sphere of foreign policy. When applying these theories to the past, it is therefore reasonable to ask the following question: Were Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin realists? As demonstrated below, a strong case can in fact be made for this explanation, especially when one considers the different interpretations of realism.

III. Realism in Action

Evidence for Churchill’s, Roosevelt’s, and Stalin’s realist perspectives on international politics can be identified when one investigates the negotiation process following World War II and the concessions that each leader was willing to make in order to preserve stability and security for his own nation.

Churchill’s Realism

On October 9, 1944, Churchill and Stalin met at the Fourth Moscow Conference (nicknamed the Tolstoy Conference). Churchill deemed this meeting necessary because it was time to renegotiate the terms of British and Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. He stated:

The arrangements I had made [with the President] in the summer to divide our [Anglo-Soviet] responsibilities for looking after particular countries [Greece and Romania, respectively] affected by the movements of the armies had tided us over the three months for which our arrangement had run the time had come to rethink the agreement anew.\(^{16}\)

Churchill, therefore, made a proposition to Stalin, which is now referred to as the “percentages” agreement.\(^{17}\) In essence, what Churchill proposed was a division of Eastern Europe with the understanding that the following would be acknowledged: ninety percent of influence in Romania would be Soviet, while ten percent would be British; ninety percent of influence in Greece would be British, while ten percent would be Soviet; both Hungary and Yugoslavia

\(^{16}\) Churchill, 208.

\(^{17}\) Bell, 74.
would be divided fifty-fifty, and Bulgaria would be seventy-five percent Soviet, and twenty-five percent British.\textsuperscript{18} When Churchill suggested burning the paper this agreement was written on (acknowledging its crudeness by calling it a “naughty document“\textsuperscript{19}), Stalin instead told him to keep it.\textsuperscript{20}

Churchill’s actions represent a clear example of diplomatic realism. He was willing to surrender influence to the Soviet Union in certain territories that were not as essential to British interests (these interests being strategic military positioning in the Eastern Mediterranean\textsuperscript{21}) in Eastern Europe in return for Stalin’s non-intervention in those that were. Churchill chose security over political ideology.

\textit{Roosevelt’s Realism}

Roosevelt understood the limitations of the United States’ international power at the end of World War II. Despite the nation’s vast natural and economic resources and high production rates, the United States was not invincible. Roosevelt, therefore, followed a \textit{Realpolitik} approach by carefully prioritizing his interests and picking his battles accordingly. His preference for this approach is evident in several distinct cases. For example, Roosevelt supported the “percentages” agreement. In fact, he appears to have been pleased, rather than outraged, when Churchill, his closest ally, and Stalin, his supposed ideological opponent, arrived at a compromise regarding the division of Europe. His attitude suggests that Roosevelt was not so much interested in ideological conflicts, but instead prioritized regional stability and, like Churchill, the balance of Soviet and Western power. The United States did not have any direct territorial claims in Eastern

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} Siracusa, 381.
\textsuperscript{19} Churchill, 226.
\textsuperscript{20} Siracusa, 382.
\textsuperscript{21} Papastratis, 202.
\end{flushleft}
Europe. Roosevelt was hence content to let his allies decide the fate of those lands. Even contentious areas in Eastern Europe, such as Poland, seemed to hold little interest for the president. Although Roosevelt intended to lobby heavily for “postwar settlement in the Pacific,” he appears to have preferred not to entangle himself too deeply in European affairs. He even joked at the Tehran Conference, “I don’t give two hoots about Poland—wake me when we talk about Germany” (a joke, of course, but one recognizing the lack of American influence and interest in Poland). It is reasonable to assume that had his policies been driven by ideology and a fear of communism, Roosevelt would not have been so blasé about the issue of Poland and a Soviet-influenced Eastern Europe. Instead, as diplomatic realist theory dictates, Roosevelt did not oppose potential Soviet influence in Eastern Europe because he recognized that this was in fact a Soviet defensive strategy and would therefore pose little direct threat to the United States.

However, despite the appearance of passivity during Churchill and Stalin’s negotiations, Roosevelt was also a realist as evidenced by his own vision of a new world order. The Second World War had a profound influence on the balance of power not only in Europe, but also in the world at large. As one of the first nations to oppose Germany and one of the few remaining European powers still resisting Germany at the end of the war, Britain had been severely weakened. The waning influence of one of the world’s premiere superpowers threatened to create a power vacuum, thus prompting questions regarding a “new world order.” In response, Roosevelt developed a plan known as the Grand Design which he hoped would effectively preserve international stability. The plan called for a new international system in which an organization, similar to a preliminary United Nations, would uphold peace by emphasizing stability over liberty and democracy. Essentially, the organization would include “four

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22 Ibid.
23 Larson, 112.
policemen”—the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Great Britain—charged with keeping the peace after the war.25 Each “policeman” would be responsible for a specific sphere of influence: the United States would police North America, South America, and parts of the Pacific; Great Britain’s sphere would include Western Europe; the Soviet Union’s sphere would include Eastern Europe and parts of Asia; and China would be responsible for peace in the Asiatic sphere. Nations that were not charged with monitoring the world stage would be forced to disarm completely. Only the “four policemen” would remain fully armed, enabling them to monitor more aggressive nations.26 According to the theory of diplomatic realism, the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China would thus become “status quo” states. In other words, they would be content with their positions of power in the world and the spheres of influence they controlled. Security and protection would thus be afforded to all states because the “status quo” states would not have reason to attack one another. After establishing their security, power, and authority the “four policemen” would “quash aggressor nations through economic blockade and aerial bombardment of selected cities.”27 Such actions would easily eliminate all threats posed by smaller states. Finally, every state would be satisfied with its position in the world, and at least in theory, not perceive any other state as a threat.

From this perspective, it is evident that Roosevelt’s foreign policies were not driven by a concern for ideological differences. His primary goals did not include interfering in Stalin’s sphere of influence. Although Roosevelt’s vision for a new world organization was never fully realized, his intended method of structuring the “four policemen” demonstrates that he in fact adhered to a realist perspective.

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25 Larson, 72.
26 Ibid., 72.
27 Ibid., 72.
Stalin’s Realism

The “percentages” agreement represents an interesting example of positive negotiations between Churchill and Stalin. From Stalin’s point of view, the agreement merely formalized a situation that was already in place—the Red Army had “liberated” Eastern Europe, occupying most of Romania, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. Consequently, Stalin was pleased when the British prime minister formally recognized the Soviet right to these spheres of influence. Stalin wanted Eastern Europe to be within the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence for one reason above all—security. By surrounding the Soviet Union with friendly states, he hoped to increase the difficulty of invasion.

As already discussed, realists are primarily concerned with national security. Furthermore, realism dictates that a nation aspiring to increase its security requires a rebalancing of power. One of the methods of gaining such security is the acquisition of territory. Stalin acted exactly as a realist would have: he extended Soviet lands and influence. Since they were like-minded in their realist approach to negotiations, Stalin and Churchill were successful in forming an agreement. Considering their similar views on power, it is surprising, therefore, that such a great divide later emerged between Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin. As history demonstrates, the three leaders did not remain allies for too much longer. Miscommunication eventually began to overshadow their partnership, leading inevitably to the Cold War.

III. Churchill and the European Front

After many years of appeasement and ultimately unsuccessful attempts at avoiding a second catastrophic war, Churchill was appointed prime minister of Great Britain on May 10, 1940. Along with France, Britain had been one of the first major powers to declare war on

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28 Siracusa, 395.
29 Kramer, 101.
30 Callahan, 30.
Germany after its attack on Poland in 1939. This meant that by the time the Soviet Union and the United States finally entered the war, Britain had been under attack for two years. Therefore, when the Soviet Union was invaded by Hitler, despite his general distrust of Stalin, Churchill had no choice but to accept an alliance with him.

Communication between the Allies and personal agreements between each of the leaders, whether at summits or in private, had major effects both on the course of the war and on arrangements made regarding the post-war world. The first allied summit took place in Tehran on November 28, 1943; it was there that Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt met for the first time.\[31\] In exchange for cooperation regarding war-time policies, Stalin insisted that the Allies officially support his regime in the Soviet Union, as well as cooperate in establishing a new border for Poland. Despite protest from London (which housed the old Polish government), Churchill and Roosevelt agreed to Stalin’s conditions.\[32\] This was the first major attempt by the West to cooperate with Stalin in order to secure his aid and support in the war. The Tehran Conference mostly detailed war plans and temporary conditions. Though no one realized it at the time, the “percentages” agreement had far greater post-war implications. In order to better understand the consequences of the “percentages” agreement, it is first helpful to consider the events that prompted its proposal by Churchill.

Churchill maintained that Greece should remain within Britain’s sphere of influence. In Greece, however, the communist movement was strong, and in September 1941, the Communists managed to create an alliance with other leftist parties, thereby establishing the National Liberation Front. In 1944, with support from one third of the Greek population, the National Liberation Army “liberated” a significant part of the Greek countryside from British influence.

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31 Overy, 245.
32 McNeill, 418.
and gained overwhelming support in Athens.\textsuperscript{33} The British were disturbed by this strong display of force and resolved to stop the movement in order to keep Greece within their sphere of influence.\textsuperscript{34} Considered within this context, it becomes ever more apparent why Churchill was so insistent on Stalin’s cooperation in Greece and was willing to sacrifice influence in other Balkan states to get it. Since the communist movement was so strong in Greece, the British would surely have lost their foothold there had the Soviet Union intervened in any way. Thus, when the British began sending troops to Greece on October 17, 1944, Churchill was pleased to find that the Greek Communists did not receive any aid from Stalin. The National Liberation Army quickly lost its home field advantage (at a pace that baffled even the British), and the British managed to regain their position in Greece.\textsuperscript{35} The significance of the Greek episode is this: in Churchill’s eyes, Stalin had proved he could be trusted to keep uphold agreements and could, therefore, be a credible negotiator.\textsuperscript{36} In 1944, Churchill wrote, “I am increasingly impressed with the loyalty with which, under much temptation and very likely pressure, Stalin has kept off Greece in accordance with our agreement.”\textsuperscript{37} This was an important admission on Churchill’s part, and one that lent Stalin a modicum of credibility with Western governments.\textsuperscript{38}

\section*{IV. Roosevelt and the “Declaration on Liberated Europe”}

Roosevelt’s “grand design” for a new world order eventually led to the creation of the United Nations. The final structure and mission of the United Nation did not exactly correspond to Roosevelt’s original vision as it emphasized international consensus. Moreover, the “four policemen,” whom Roosevelt intended to be at the very heart of the organization, were

\begin{footnotes}
\item[33] Newsinger, 48–54.
\item[34] Ibid., 48–54.
\item[35] Ibid.
\item[36] Reynolds, 114.
\item[37] Churchill, 713.
\item[38] Reynolds, 114.
\end{footnotes}
transformed into the Security Council.\textsuperscript{39} Despite these alterations, Roosevelt lobbied hard for its creation. In particular, he needed to convince the rest of the Big Three to be the overseers of the new international organization.\textsuperscript{40} The opportunity to do so arose in February 1945 at the Yalta Summit.\textsuperscript{41} The agenda included discussions on the war in the Pacific, United Nations membership, the question of the division and type of government that should be installed in Poland, free elections in Eastern Europe, and what exactly should be done with a post-war Germany.\textsuperscript{42}

The proceedings at the Yalta Summit provide a vital framework for understanding why, despite their recognition of the potential security benefits that cooperation in a post-war world order could bring, these three “realists” were unable to reach a mutual understanding and prevent the Cold War. By analyzing Roosevelt’s actions during the summit, it is possible to discern where the initial misunderstands may have occurred. At the time of the summit, one of Roosevelt’s primary goals was to get Stalin to agree to declare war on Japan.\textsuperscript{43} At the same time, he was hoping to clarify the need for the United Nations to Stalin and entice him to agree to its establishment. However, Roosevelt’s pursuit of these objectives came at a price.

In order to get a clearer picture of the situation at Yalta, another part of the equation must first be examined. The United States was and still is a democratic state with several agencies that work together to determine and implement foreign policy decisions. Despite the fact that Roosevelt was the sole representative of American interests at Yalta, government bodies, such as the U.S. Department of State, also had an interest in the proceedings but prioritized different foreign policy objectives. Perhaps this is best demonstrated by examining the case of Poland. On

\textsuperscript{39} Larson, 75.
\textsuperscript{40} China was downgraded to a Security Council member, as opposed to a member of the “four policemen.”
\textsuperscript{41} Reynolds, 103.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
December 31, 1944, Stalin officially recognized the Soviet-sponsored provisional Lublin government. This placed Britain in an awkward situation. The Polish government had taken exile in Britain with the expectation of one day returning to Poland and resuming its operations. The British, therefore, objected to the Soviet-installed government, while the Soviets reasoned that the Lublin government was already established and functioning. In an effort to mediate, the U.S. Department of State drafted the Declaration on Liberated Europe (1945) which pledged to aid all people liberated from Nazi occupation, including the Polish government. This declaration, therefore, also had the potential power to nullify Churchill and Stalin’s earlier “percentages” agreement. It was expected that if the Soviet government committed to the declaration, then their newly formed sphere of influence would be dissolved and there would be free elections as soon as all of the people who had been displaced by the war could return to their homelands. The intended effect of the Declaration was not achieved. Moreover, the exact stipulations were never clearly stated. The Declaration vaguely called for “solving by democratic means [Eastern Europe’s] pressing economic and political problems,” without detailing how to do so. As a result, it was difficult for the Soviets to understand what exactly they would be expected to give up and which boundaries they were supposed to observe.

Not only was the Declaration vague and imprecise, but it was also not strongly championed by Roosevelt. It appears that he did not wish to entangle the United States too deeply in European affairs, especially because the United States did not have much influence in Eastern Europe at the time. Roosevelt’s top priorities were clearly the war in Japan and the United Nations. Consequently, he did not wish to waste too much time wrangling over the details

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44 Larson, 113.
45 Ibid.,
46 Ibid., 114.
47 U.S. Department of State, 24–25.
48 Larson, 115.
of Poland. Much like Churchill’s conduct in Tehran, Roosevelt’s approach at Yalta demonstrates that he was indeed a realist when it came to post-war negotiations. The president prioritized certain issues and did not properly communicate the State Department’s intentions to Churchill or Stalin. This set the stage for many misunderstandings in the immediate future. The proceedings at Yalta thus demonstrate that while having similar aims and strategies can facilitate cooperation between nations, effective adherence to realist principles requires clear communication—something not quite achieved at Yalta or in its aftermath.

V. Stalin Receives Mixed Messages

Stalin, regarded by Roosevelt and Churchill as a man of few words, gave a toast at the beginning of the Yalta Summit that highlighted his belief that the Soviet Union and the Western Allies could co-exist. His conduct in Yalta brings to light a very important question: Why did Stalin have such high hopes for Soviet collaboration with Western leaders when he was known for his political paranoia, and probably harbored reservations about pursuing foreign diplomacy, especially considering the recent memory of Hitler’s betrayal? In a toast addressed to the participants of the Yalta Summit, Stalin stated:

In a union, allies should not deceive one another. Perhaps this is naïve? Experienced diplomats may say: “Why wouldn’t I deceive my ally?” But I, as a naïve person, feel that it’s better not to deceive an ally, even if he is a fool. It is possible that our union is so strong precisely because we do not deceive one another, or perhaps because it is not so easy to deceive one another? I would like to raise a toast to the strength of the union of our three powers. Let it be strong and resilient, and let us be as honest as possible!

49 Robins and Jerrald, 274.
50 Reynolds, 115.
51 В союзе союзники не должны обманывать друг друга. Быть может, это наивно? Опытные дипломаты могут сказать: «А почему бы мне не обмануть моего союзника?» Но я, как наивный человек, считаю, что лучше не обманывать своего союзника, даже если он дурак. Возможно, наш союз столь крепок, именно потому, что мы не обманываем друг друга; или, быть может, потому что это не так уж легко обмануть друг друга? Я хотел бы поднять тост за прочность союза наших трех держав. Да будет он сильным и устойчивым; да будем мы как можно более откровенны. Nevezhin, 431.
Stalin was pleased when Churchill formally recognized Soviet claims to what he already considered part of his rightful sphere of influence, something few other leaders deigned to do.\(^5\) In fact, from Stalin’s point of view, he had successfully navigated the negotiation process in Yalta and achieved his desired ends. As long as Soviet demands were met, he did not even object to the establishment of the United Nations. Like Roosevelt, he was convinced that only a strong military presence of “status quo” states could guarantee security and stability. In essence, his vision of the post-World War II order was similar to Roosevelt’s original idea because both leaders, like true “realists,” envisioned a strong Soviet Union that would help preserve the balance of power in the “new world order.”\(^5\)

Stalin proved to be a more compliant negotiator than one may have expected. As already mentioned, apart from convincing Stalin to consent to the establishment of the United Nations, Roosevelt also hoped to persuade him to declare war on Japan. Stalin was already determined to join the war in the Pacific even before Yalta.\(^5\) From Stalin’s perspective, therefore, he had honored the agreements made with Churchill at the Fourth Moscow Conference (Tolstoy Conference) and was now cooperating with Roosevelt. In the aftermath of the Yalta Conference, when alliances began to deteriorate, from Stalin’s point of view, no agreements had actually been broken, and he regarded his own policies as consistent with the plans laid out by all three leaders together. Clearly, there had been a miscommunication.

Early signs of miscommunication are especially evident in regards to the Declaration on Liberated Europe. When Roosevelt proposed the ambiguous Declaration, which seemed to hold no practical solutions to the Polish question, Stalin dismissed it. William Hardy McNeill, describes Stalin’s opinion of the Declaration as a “harmless piece of rhetoric, soothing to the

\(^5\) Larson, 109.
\(^5\) Reynolds, 126.
\(^5\) Ibid.
“Americans, but without any practical implications.”

Cementing this perception, on February 6, 1945 while discussing Poland, Roosevelt wrote the following encouraging statements to Stalin:

I was very much impressed with some of the things you said today, particularly your determination that your rear must be safeguarded as your army moves into Berlin. You cannot, and we must not, tolerate any temporary government which will give your armed forces any trouble of this sort. I want you to know that I am fully mindful of this.

He also added the following reassurances that the United States would support Stalin on the Polish question:

I hope that I do not have to assure you that the United States will never lend its support in any way to any provisional government in Poland that would be inimical to your interest.

Roosevelt clearly implied that the United States would not support any government that Stalin does not approve of or as he explains, “would be inimical to your [Soviet] interest.” This statement underscores the weakness of the Declaration on Liberated Europe. As previously discussed, the Declaration called for free elections, which, at least in theory, could allow for the establishment of anti-Soviet government institutions in Eastern Europe, that is, governments not in Stalin’s “interest.” Roosevelt’s promise of support, however, demonstrates a disregard for the stipulations of the Declaration. It is not surprising, therefore, that Stalin did not understand or was perhaps not even aware of the State Department’s intent to override his previous “percentages” agreement with Churchill. Hence, according to his interpretation of the proceedings at Yalta, Stalin had upheld the promises that he had made to Churchill and Roosevelt by not aiding the Greek communists or objecting to the creation of the United Nations. In other words, Stalin had honored the agreements that he believed had been made.

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55 McNeill, 559.
56 Stalin’s Correspondence with Roosevelt, 188.
57 Ibid.
58 Larson, 115.
After Yalta, every agreement made by the Big Three began to unravel. On February 27, 1945, the Soviet Union interfered in Romanian domestic politics, prompting Andrei Vyshinskii, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, to demand a new government that was more pro-Soviet. 59 The U.S. Department of State was outraged, and William Harriman, Ambassador to Moscow, quickly referred to the Declaration on Liberated Europe to demonstrate that the Soviets were not complying with the agreements made at Yalta. 60

This accusation genuinely puzzled Stalin. In a note to Roosevelt, written on April 7, 1945, Stalin expressed his confusion, stating the following reason:

The reason is that the ambassadors of the United States and England in Moscow – members of the Moscow Committee, have deviated from the arrangements of the Crimean [Yalta] Conference and have introduced new elements which were not provided for by the Crimean Conference. 61

The State Department’s objections to Soviet interference in Romania made little sense to the Soviets. Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill had all acted as “realists”: they discussed security concerns, delegated spheres of influence to guarantee a balance of power of the ‘status quo’ states, and pledged not to intervene in each other’s territories. Suddenly, American diplomats had objections to what Stalin had explicitly outlined with Churchill, and what Roosevelt had presented as a seeming formality. In other words, Roosevelt had presented the Declaration on Liberated Europe, but had lobbied a lot harder for other matters, such as the creation of the United Nation and war with Japan, leading Stalin to think that the Declaration was not as important. Stalin had grown accustomed to Roosevelt’s indifferent attitude toward the situation in Poland (and, more generally, toward Eastern Europe) as well as his perceived lack of concern

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Причина состоит в том, что послы США и Англии в Москве – члены Московской комиссии, отошли от установок Крымской конференции и внесли в дело новые элементы, предусмотренные Крымской конференцией. Nevezhin, 567. The “Yalta Conference” is sometimes referred to as the “Crimean Conference.”
for security arrangements made by Churchill and Stalin within their own spheres of influence.

Suddenly, however, Stalin was confronted with the State Department’s insistence on free elections in Eastern Europe based upon purely ideological and liberal objectives. The discrepancy between this ideological rhetoric and the realist perspective of other negotiations was startling. As a realist, it seemed out of character for Roosevelt to be suddenly so concerned with ideological considerations and liberal policies like free elections. Although the Big Three held similar perspectives regarding the structure and functionality of the post-war world order, and were all driven by realist interpretations of foreign policy (in which security was the most important concern for each individual state), the United States still condemned Soviet actions in Romania, and British diplomats were not far behind in protesting communist expansion. For Stalin, the West’s protests were a breach of trust. He thus determined that he could no longer rely on Allied leaders to uphold their original promises or plans. As a result, Stalin began veering off the previously established path, stating, “Never mind. We’ll do it our own way later.” Stalin had perceived that, rather than the Soviet Union violating the Yalta agreements, it was, in fact, the Western allies who had dishonored their agreements.

Further examination reveals that the Soviet point of view was not completely unfounded. The Declaration on Liberated Europe included provisions that would only come into play if all of the governments involved, including the Soviet Union, agreed on a need for joint action. The document also implied, more generally, that the Soviet provisional governments would remain unaffected. These conditions were not upheld when Western diplomats and leaders invoked the Declaration to block the Soviet Union’s increasing involvement in Eastern Europe. Therefore,

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62 Ibid.
63 Larson, 115.
64 Feliks Chuev claims that Molotov told him that Stalin had stated this, Molotov Remembers, 51.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 118.
instead of working with the Western leaders to establish a “new world order” of “status quo” states, Stalin worked to increase the Soviet Union’s security by himself, setting up new Soviet satellites and encouraging communist regimes despite Western protest. These actions eventually led to the Cold War.

VI. Conclusion

The miscommunication between Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt led to a fundamental mistrust between the Big Three and eventually dissolved the alliance that had managed to defeat what could be called the greatest threat to Europe in the twentieth century. All three leaders emphasized personal integrity and trusted the agreements that had been made, believing that each of the leaders represents the interests of his nation as a whole. At the very least, it was understood that whether or not the leader’s position complied completely with that of his nation’s government, it would be pursued regardless. Ironically, within this context, it seems that Stalin was the most “honest” of the three. This, perhaps, reflects the fact that he was an authoritarian ruler who, for the most part, did not have to answer either to his constituents or to other members of his government. He thus did not have any difficulties in upholding his promises because he did not have any government agencies that could effectively question his decisions.

Churchill and Roosevelt, on the other hand, were leaders of democratic states and thereby had to face the objections of their governments at home. It is therefore not entirely surprising that they could not wholly commit to their word. Evidently, they were beholden to public opinion and could be influenced or even flat-out shut down by their cabinets or by other branches of their governments. This happened repeatedly to Roosevelt. For instance, as already discussed, the U.S. Department of State completely reimagined the role of the United Nations in the international
world, not as an organization with four “status quo” states, but as a truly international organization, and created a United Nations Charter that was more appealing to the liberal public of the Western world. Nevertheless Roosevelt consistently insisted that he be the one to negotiate with Stalin personally. As a result, the ideological reasoning of the State Department clashed with the “realist” world-views of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin. While he would have preferred to focus on other issues, Roosevelt was undermined by the U.S. Department of State. Although he initially seemed uninterested in the fate of Eastern Europe, Roosevelt eventually became deeply embroiled in conflict with Stalin due to a lack of clear communication about the immediate purpose of the Declaration on Liberated Europe. Perhaps if its goal had been clear from the beginning, Stalin would have recognized the conflict of interest between the Declaration and the previous “percentages” agreement. Maybe then the leaders would have also had a more detailed discussion on the matter, rather than leaving it as an ambiguous problem to be resolved at a later date.

Like Roosevelt, Churchill was also a democratic leader and thus at the mercy of the public and his fellow cabinet members. After Yalta, Churchill returned to London and reassured his war cabinet that Stalin “meant well for the world and Poland,” as Neville Chamberlain had done after returning from negotiations with Hitler. Churchill assured his government of the credibility of Stalin’s promises regarding the partition of power in Eastern Europe. This is why Stalin’s decision to interfere in Romania was received unkindly and why his unwillingness to allow Poland to hold free elections was deemed unforgivable. No one even considered that perhaps a misunderstanding might have occurred. The British government assumed that the

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67 Reynolds, 105.
68 House of Commons, Debates, 5th Series, 408:1267-95, Feb. 27, 1945, as cited in Reynolds, 145.
69 Reynolds, 114.
70 Ibid., 146
Soviet Union was behaving like an aggressive imperialist power, while ignoring the fact that, to a large extent, Britain had also approved the idea of spheres of influence, which was why the two leaders had been able to reach an agreement in the first place.

Considering that the Big Three were all diplomatic realists who had miscommunicated their objectives to one another at the close of World War II, the inevitability of the Cold War should be questioned. Undoubtedly, clear communication is vital when negotiating with foreign nations—leaders should, therefore, aim to demonstrate their intentions in the clearest way possible.

Works Cited


