Introduction

It is often said that Grand Alliance was forced into existence by Hitler and fell apart as soon as Nazi Germany was defeated. But neither the formation of the Grand Alliance nor its collapse was inevitable. Both were the result of personal choices by the leaders of the alliance. Without Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin there would have been no Grand Alliance against Hitler in the sense that we understand that term today.60

Hitler posed a dire existential threat to both Britain and the Soviet Union, and to the United States the prospect of perpetual conflict. Britain had been at war with Germany since September 1939 and it is not surprising that the three states formed a military coalition when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941 and then, in December, declared war on the United States. But the Grand Alliance that developed during the war was much more than a military coalition of convenience; it was a far-reaching political, economic and ideological collaboration. At the heart of this collaboration were the personal roles, outlooks and interactions of the three heads of state. Without the personal alliance of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin – the Big Three as they became known during the war - the Grand Alliance would have been stillborn or would

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60 “Grand Alliance” is the term commonly used in the west to describe the anti-Hitler coalition of Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States. The popularity of the term derives from Winston Churchill usage in his memoirs of the Second World War published in the late 1940s. For Churchill it was the revival of a term that he had used in the late 1930s when he was an advocate of a ‘grand alliance’ against Hitler of Britain, France and the USSR.
have collapsed under the pressure, contradictions and challenges of the war. It was the Big Three who ensured the survival of the Anglo-American-Soviet coalition during the early, difficult years of the war and then steered it towards the vision of a peacetime Grand Alliance dedicated to peace and security for all states.

The collapse of the Grand Alliance after the Second World War was the result of the failure of the postwar troika of leaders – Stalin, Truman and Atlee – to continue the personal collaboration of their wartime predecessors. Admittedly, the postwar context was in some ways more complex and challenging than during the war but the problems were not insurmountable. A major difference was the absence of goodwill at the top level of the alliance and a failure of its leaders to see how conflicting interests and outlooks could be reconciled in peace as they had been during the war.

The beginning of the end of the Grand Alliance was not the defeat of Hitler but the death of President Roosevelt in April 1945. Had Roosevelt lived and completed his fourth term of office the outlook for the Grand Alliance would have been more optimistic. It was Roosevelt who had constrained hardliners in the US administration who wanted to take a tougher line in negotiations with the Soviets. His successor, Truman, was much more willing than Roosevelt to listen to their siren voices. The result was sharp words and rising suspicions on both sides. An early example of such tough talking was the first meetings of Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov with President Harry Truman in April 1945. The importance of this famous encounter has been much exaggerated, not least by Truman, who claimed in his memoirs that at the end of his discussion with Molotov the Soviet diplomat complained that he had never in his life been talked to like that. “Carry out your agreements and you won’t get talked to like that”, Truman recalled saying. The issue in dispute was the political composition of the Polish government and there was certainly some tough talking, but Molotov – who had stood up to Hitler’s histrionics in Berlin in November 1940 – is most unlikely to have made such a lame remark – which in unrecorded in either the American or the Soviet reports of the meeting. Besides, the dispute over Poland was soon settled by compromise. But the tone of Molotov and Truman’s first discussions was a harbinger of the coming cold war.

Roosevelt and Stalin had a high level of mutual respect for each other. When Roosevelt died Stalin expressed a degree of grief that was rare for him. Stalin’s relations with Churchill were more volatile: the British Premier was a mercurial

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personality with a dubious history of militant anti-Bolshevism. Even so, from a foreign policy perspective Stalin wanted the conservative Churchill to win the 1945 British General election and was shocked when he lost and did not return to the Potsdam conference. Stalin clashed publicly with Churchill after his ‘Iron Curtain’ speech in Fulton, Missouri in March 1946, but the two men never lost the wartime affection they had for each other. In January 1947 Stalin told Field Marshal Montgomery that “he would always have the happiest memories of his work with...the great war leader of Britain”, to which Churchill responded: “[your] life is not only precious to your country, which you saved, but to the friendship between Soviet Russia and the English-speaking world.”

The social background, personalities, politics, leadership styles and working methods of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin were very different. But they had one important trait in common: they were men of long political experience who placed a high premium on personal relations with their peers. As Frank Costigliola has argued:

“Roosevelt, Churchill and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Stalin operated on the belief that the attitudes, feelings, demeanour, and body language displayed by statesmen in face-to-face meetings could reveal inner thoughts and ultimate intentions...Even acrimonious interactions could clarify differences....Despite the differences in their personal backgrounds, each of the three leaders had developed confidence in his interpersonal skills. Roosevelt’s talent for charm and guileful manoeuvre had fuelled his rise to the presidency. Churchill could usually sway a room with his rhetoric and marshalling of history...Stalin was a master of charm, feint, and argument.”

The response of the Big Three to the crisis and challenge of the war was broadly similar: each actively assumed the mantle of commander in chief, thereby concentrating, centralising and personalising military as well as political decision-making and leadership. This was crucial to their ability to shape the character and control the direction of the Grand Alliance.

As Supreme Commander Stalin was the most active of the three in devising military strategy and directing battles and operation. Stalin was head of Stavka (the headquarters of the Supreme Command), People’s Commissar for Defence and Chairman of the State Defence Committee. He signed every important military directive and command decision. The Commander in Chief of the

63 Churchill and Stalin: Documents from British Archives, FCO: London 2002 docs 77-78.
65 See R. Overy, Why the Allies Won, Jonathan Cape: London 1995 chap. 8
British armed forces was King George VI but Churchill was Minister of Defence as well as Prime Minister, centrally involved in deciding military strategy and took a keen interest in many of the details of the war effort. Roosevelt was the American commander in chief and he exercised his influence through a committee of the Joint Chiefs of Staff chaired by his personal representative, Admiral Leahy. Also important to Roosevelt’s ability to control military affairs was his close working relationship with Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall. Churchill has a similar, if more fraught, relationship with Field Marshal Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Stalin’s the closest military advisors were his Deputy Supreme Commander Georgy Zhukov and the Red Army’s Chiefs of Staff during the war: Boris Shaposhnikov, Alexander Vasilevsky, and Aleksey Antonov.66

In the political sphere the Big Three had trusted confidants who represented them in the most important and intimate negotiations and acted as the sub-architects of the Grand Alliance. Molotov drafted Stalin’s correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt, carried out important diplomatic missions at home and abroad, and acted as his deputy in face to face negotiations with the British and Americans. Not often did Stalin meet foreigners without Molotov being present.67 Harry Hopkins was Roosevelt’s chief diplomatic advisor and his personal envoy to crucial meetings with Churchill and Stalin. Another important figure was Averell Harriman, Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease coordinator in London and, from October 1943, US ambassador to Moscow. Churchill tended to keep his own counsel and preferred personal diplomacy to that conducted via intermediaries. During the war he travelled more than 100,000 miles, meeting Roosevelt eleven times and Stalin twice, as well as attending the Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam summits. Churchill’s Foreign Secretary was Anthony Eden, with whom he had a long association, including as allies in the struggle against Anglo-French appeasement policies in the 1930s. It was Eden who met Stalin in December 1941 and had the first discussion with the Soviet leader about the outlook for the postwar world. Throughout the war Eden conducted detailed negotiations with his Soviet and American counterparts, most notably at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in October 1943.68


68 In allied diplomatic circles the term Big Three gained currency as a way of distinguishing the three heads of state from the three foreign ministers.
relationship with his boss was prickly but he was as indispensable to Churchill as Hopkins was to Roosevelt and Molotov to Stalin.

There was something else that Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin had in common: they all believed in the great man view of history and saw themselves as men of destiny called to save their countries from disaster. Hitler, too, believed in such providence but the Big Three were not ego- or megalomaniacs like the Nazi dictator. They were willing to share the historical limelight with each other. Such forbearance was indispensable to the harmonious relations that developed among them as the war progressed and the initial difficulties within the Grand Alliance were overcome.

Formation of the Grand Alliance

The first challenge to the future Grand Alliance came when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. In a radio broadcast that same day Churchill pledged unequivocal support for the USSR in the struggle against Hitler. “The Russian danger is our danger”, he told his listeners. By the end of June a British military mission had arrived in Moscow. On 8 July Churchill sent Stalin a personal message stating that Britain would give as much help to the Soviet Union as it could. This was first of a 500-message correspondence with Stalin during the war. By 12 July Britain and the Soviet Union had signed an agreement on joint action in the war against Germany and promised that neither side would conduct separate negotiations with Hitler about an armistice or peace treaty.

While it was predictable that Britain would do all to could to encourage Soviet resistance to Hitler, Churchill’s public enthusiasm for an alliance with Stalin was more than a little surprising. There was a long history of antagonism in British-Soviet relations that dated back to Britain’s intervention in the Russian civil war. During the 1920s Britain and the Soviet Union waged what some historians call an early cold war. In the 1930s Soviet efforts to promote collective security against Nazi Germany were stymied by British appeasement of Hitler. When the Soviet triple alliance negotiations with Britain and France proved too problematic in 1939 Stalin turned to a deal with Hitler. Under the auspices of the Nazi-Soviet pact of the 1939-1941 there was extensive German-Soviet cooperation that indirectly contributed to Hitler’s war in the west.

Churchill opposed British appeasement of Hitler – a big factor in his favour in Soviet eyes – and had welcomed Soviet occupation of Poland’s eastern territories (Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine), arguing that was far better than a

German occupation. However, during the Soviet-Finnish war of 1939-1940 Churchill was an enthusiastic advocate of an allied expedition to aid the embattled Finns. Such an action would in all probability have led to a Soviet-Western war in Scandinavia. Fortunately, a Soviet-Finnish peace treaty was signed before the expedition could be launched. After he became Prime Minister in May 1940 Churchill tried to woo Stalin away from Hitler’s embrace but to no avail. Until the peace with Germany failed Stalin was resolved to keep his distance from Britain.71

Churchill was keen to encourage and support the fight against Hitler but he was sceptical the Soviet Union could survive the German onslaught. Like most of his advisors he was reluctant to pour too much aid into Russia for fear that it would be wasted or captured by the Germans. But Churchill’s reserve melted way in the face of staunch Soviet resistance and he became an active proponent of allied aid to the Soviet Union.72

Roosevelt, too, was surrounded by advisors who thought the Germans would win in Russia in summer 1941. Nevertheless, as early as 24/25 June he announced his administration was willing to provide aid to the Soviet Union and decreed that the Neutrality Act did not debar the Soviets from purchasing war materials in the United States. Crucially, at the end of July Roosevelt sent his trusted advisor Harry Hopkins to Moscow. In meetings with Stalin Hopkins pledged American aid and asked for the Soviet Union’s specific requirements. Throughout the war Roosevelt pursued a consistent policy of no-strings-attached aid to the Soviet Union. Since the Soviet Union was doing all the fighting it deserved all the aid it could get and Roosevelt resisted pressures to tie that aid to political or other concessions from the Soviets. In Roosevelt’s view that was no way to build a relationship with Stalin or to secure a long-term Soviet-American alliance.73

After Hopkins’ return from Russia, Churchill and Roosevelt sent Stalin a joint message proposing a conference in Moscow to discuss allied supplies to the Soviet Union.74 This took place at the end of September, with Harriman representing Roosevelt, and Lord Beaverbrook, Minister for Aircraft Production and a strong advocate of aid to Russia, representing Churchill. The result of the


73 See M.E. Glantz, FDR and the Soviet Union: The President’s Battles over Foreign Policy, University Press of Kansas: Lawrence, Kansas 2005.

74 Stalin’s Correspondence pp. 17-18
conference was the signature a wide-ranging and detailed supplies agreement, hailed with much fanfare in the Soviet press.

At the conference with Beaverbrook and Harriman Stalin raised the question of postwar cooperation and pursued the matter in subsequent correspondence with Churchill. Towards the end of December Eden flew to Moscow. He expected no more than an exchange of views as well as progress on the conclusion of a wartime Anglo-Soviet treaty of alliance but was presented with a more radical proposition. Stalin wanted two agreements with the British: a wartime agreement and an agreement on the settlement of postwar problems. To the second agreement would be appended a secret protocol on the reorganisation of European borders after the war. The core proposal of the secret protocol was a postwar military alliance in Europe to safeguard the peace, with provision for Soviet military bases in Romania and Finland and British military bases in Western Europe. This was quite a mild spheres of influence agreement compared to the deals that Stalin had done or contemplated doing with Hitler but it showed the ambition he had for the Grand Alliance even at this early stage of the war. But Eden and, more particularly, Churchill were not prepared to enter into such negotiations.75

One reason for Stalin’s hurry for a deal with the British was that the United States had formally entered the war following the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. That the United States was now fully engaged in the war was of huge, transformative importance militarily, but it also complicated political negotiations since the Americans were opposed to spheres of influence agreements and to any territorial changes in advance of a peace conference.

The US entry into the war raised the question of whether the Soviet Union would reciprocate American aid by becoming involved in the war with Japan in the Far East. Stalin was willing in principle to participate but a Soviet war with Japan was not a practical possibility until after the Germans were defeated. The domestic political complications notwithstanding, Roosevelt accepted Stalin’s decision, not least because he saw Germany as being a much greater enemy than Japan.

Apart from the question of supplies to the Soviet Union the main issue preoccupying the Grand Alliance during this early period was the question the Second Front.

Stalin began agitating for a Second Front in northern France in his very first message to Churchill on 18 July 1941. But the British were not in a position to undertake a large-scale invasion on their own and were unwilling to risk a smaller-scale incursion to draw German troops away from the Russian front.

When the German advance into the Soviet Union faltered in front of Moscow in autumn 1941 Stalin interest’s in a Second Front waned as the prospect loomed of a Red Army counter-offensive that would drive the Wehrmacht out of Russia. But the issue of the Second Front came back on to Stalin’s agenda with the failure of the Red Army’s winter offensive in early 1942. In May-June 1942 Stalin sent Molotov to London and Washington to press for a firm commitment to an Anglo-American Second Front in France in 1942. In London Molotov was able to sign an Anglo-Soviet Treaty of Alliance but he received only a lukewarm commitment to a Second Front from Churchill, who tied it to the availability of sufficient resources. In Washington Molotov’s arguments in favour of an immediate Second Front were given a more sympathetic reception. The US military agreed with the Soviets that a Second Front in France was the best way to relieve the pressure on the Red Army. But the British were in driving seat of the Anglo-American alliance and that position would not change until 1944 when the United States supplied the preponderance of allied troops in Western Europe as well as the bulk of the materiel. Molotov was able to secure a joint American-British-Soviet communique which talked about “the urgent task of creating a Second Front in Europe in 1942” but it was clear nothing was going to happen anytime soon.

Important for the longer term future of the Grand Alliance were Molotov’s conversations with Roosevelt in Washington about postwar peace and security. Roosevelt put forward the idea of an international police force of three or four states that would maintain peace after the war. Stalin responded enthusiastically: “Roosevelt’s considerations about peace protection after the war are absolutely sound…Roosevelt is absolutely right…his position will be fully supported by the Soviet Government.” This was not the last time there would be such a meeting of minds between Stalin and Roosevelt.76

In summer 1942 the Germans resumed offensive action in Russia and launched a southern campaign to seize Stalingrad and the Soviet oil fields at Baku. The opening of a Second Front in the west became even more urgent. On 23 July Stalin wrote to Churchill that “in view of the situation on the Soviet-German front, I state most emphatically that the Soviet government cannot tolerate the Second Front in Europe being postponed to 1943.”77

**Operation Bracelet**78

As the Germans approached Stalingrad in mid-August 1942 Churchill arrived

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77 Stalin’s Correspondence with Churchill, Attlee, Roosevelt and Truman vol.1 p. 56

78 The codename for Churchill’s first visit to Moscow.
in Moscow with some bad news: there would be no Second Front in France in 1942. Stalin was not pleased and accused the British and Americans of not being willing to fight and to shed the blood of their troops. Nor was Stalin mollified by the news that there would be Anglo-American landings in Northern Africa in the autumn with the aim of driving the Germans and Italians out and seizing control of the Vichy French colonies of Morocco and Algeria. Churchill justified this operation as an attack on the soft-underbelly of the Axis in the Mediterranean and drew a sketch of a crocodile (the British PM was an amateur artist) to illustrate his point. As far as Stalin was concerned, however, the Red Army was already doing battle with the croc’s hard snout. One witness to the discussion was Archibald Clark Kerr, the British ambassador to Moscow, who penned this memorable portrait of the first meeting between Stalin and Churchill:

“It was interesting to watch the impact of the two men. Clash and recoil and clash again, and then a slow but unmistakeable coming together as each got the measure of the other, and in the end, much apparent understanding and goodwill… Now the two men know each other and each one will be able to put the right value on the messages – and they are very frequent – that pass between them.”

The next meeting did not go so well and Churchill’s first encounter with Stalin came close to being a complete disaster. It was saved by a long, private dinner in which the two men got to know each other personally. The conversation ranged far and wide and the talk was helped along by a new and outstanding British interpreter, Major A.H. Birse. What they seemed to find in each other as result of the conversation was the kindred spirit of a fellow warrior as fully engaged in the war as they were. Such intimacy and comradeship Stalin and Churchill never experienced with Roosevelt. Churchill left the meeting convinced that he had established a personal relationship with Stalin while Molotov wrote to the Soviet ambassador London, Ivan Maisky, that “the negotiations with Churchill were not entirely smooth” but were “followed by an extensive conversation in Comrade Stalin’s private residence, making for a close personal rapport with the guest.”

Stalin’s meeting with Churchill convinced him of the importance of direct personal dealings with his British and American counterparts and made him keen to meet Roosevelt, too. But he brooded on the question of the second

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front and as the battle for Stalingrad came to a climax he lashed out at his western allies. On 3 October he gave a sensational statement to an American correspondent in Moscow publicly criticising Britain and United States for a lack of aid and the absence of the Second Front.

Tensions within the Grand Alliance about the Second Front coincided with an inter-allied controversy about the trial and punishment of war prisoners. In October the British proposed a plan that involved the postwar punishment war criminals. The Soviets responded by calling for war crimes trials during the war, including the prosecution of Rudolph Hess, Hitler’s former deputy, imprisoned by the British since his dramatic flight to Britain in May 1941 to broker an Anglo-German peace. This was the background to an extraordinary telegram from Stalin to Maisky on 19 October 1942:

“All of us in Moscow have formed the impression that Churchill is intent of the defeat of the USSR in order to come to terms with…Hitler…at our expense. Without such a supposition it is difficult to explain Churchill’s conduct on the question of the Second Front in Europe, on the question of arms supplies to the USSR…on the question of Hess, whom Churchill seems to be holding in reserve, on the question of the systematic bombardment of Berlin…which Churchill proclaimed he would do in Moscow and which he did not fulfil one iota”.

Maisky tried to calm down his boss by suggesting that Churchill was seeking an ‘easy war’ rather than the defeat of the USSR but Stalin was adamant that “as a proponent of an easy war Churchill is easily influenced by those pursuing the defeat of the Soviet Union, since the defeat of our country and a compromise with Germany at the expense of the Soviet Union is the easiest form of war between England and Germany…Churchill told us in Moscow that by spring 1943 about a million Anglo-American troops would have opened a second front in Europe. But Churchill belongs, it seems, among those leaders who easily make promises in order to forget them or break them.”

Striking about Stalin’s exchange with Maisky was how personal his relationship with Churchill had become. The sense of betrayal was palpable. But Stalin’s invective against Churchill was politically driven as well. At this stage of the war there remained doubt that one of the partners of the Grand Alliance would not make a separate peace with Hitler. On the western side the fear was that Stalin would cut his losses and end the war with Germany. Stalin calculated that a Second Front was needed to draw Britain and the United States into a bloody battle in that would harden their commitment to prosecute the war against Germany through to the very end.

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During the middle years of the Second World War there were many rumours of secret peace negotiations between Germany and one or more members of the Grand Alliance. There was no truth to these stories but not until early 1943 did the concerns of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin dissipate. There were two important turning points. First, the policy of unconditional surrender, announced by Roosevelt at the Casablanca conference in January 1943. Second, the surrender a week later of the encircled German forces in Stalingrad. The Soviet victory at Stalingrad signalled that Germany was going to lose the war and that the USSR would emerge as the dominant power in continental Europe. This shifted the balance of power within the Grand Alliance. Churchill and Roosevelt were more anxious than ever to talk to Stalin about the shape of the postwar world.83

**The Convergence Hypothesis**

There was another set of reasons why Churchill and Roosevelt wanted to get closer to Stalin personally: their views of him and of the Soviet system in general had changed and become more favourable as a result of the war.

In private Churchill and Roosevelt referred to Stalin as ‘Uncle Joe’. Stalin - who had good intelligence on what was being said behind the closed doors of his western allies - would have known this long before it was revealed to him by Churchill and Roosevelt at the Tehran conference. It was not patronising but a term of endearment. Churchill and Roosevelt believed that not only could you do business with Stalin, you could trust him. He was a wise and intelligent realist and any problems in the Soviet-Western alliance were the result of the malign influence of his courtiers such as Molotov, or so they believed. (In truth, Stalin was more hard-line than Molotov on most issues). Stalin was seen by Churchill and Roosevelt as a patriot rather than a communist; in other words, he was just like them. This version of the cult of Stalin’s personality – which was quite widespread in western allied circles – underpinned Churchill and Roosevelt’s confidence in the Grand Alliance and its future.

Similarly, there was a perception among western leaders that the Soviet system was becoming more ‘normal’ during the war: state socialism was being moderated; the society was becoming more tolerant, especially of religious beliefs – important to the Christian Roosevelt and Churchill; Russia was less revolutionary and more nationalist and hence more traditional and predictable in its state aims.

Roosevelt embraced this benign view of Russia more radically than Churchill

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because, unlike the British Premier, he thought the historic antagonisms in Soviet-Western relations were caused as much by the west as the Soviets. If the Soviet Union could be fully integrated into the community of nations it would become a normal state and accelerate the process of its convergence with bourgeois capitalist liberal democracy. Roosevelt saw his personal relationship with Stalin as key to the strategy of integration and believed he had the guile and charm to bring him on board the western boat and to keep him there.84

Stalin had his own version of the convergence thesis: during the war the advanced capitalist countries had become more state socialist; the labour movement and the left wing had strengthened; progressive capitalist politicians favouring collaboration with the Soviet Union were now in the ascendency. Churchill and Roosevelt personified those trends and Stalin felt he could work with them in the context of common interests, not just during the war but in peacetime, too. That did not mean that Stalin had abandoned his politics or his ideology. He still sought the spread of socialism and thought history was on the side of the Soviet system. But he did modify his view of how the world revolutionary process would develop. It would be more incremental and variegated and would involve a long period of peaceful coexistence between different social systems. The struggle for communism would continue but it was not necessarily inimical to the Grand Alliance, at least in the short term. This was a point that Stalin made many times during the war, publicly and privately: the common interests and aspirations of the Grand Alliance were a fundamental not a transitory phenomenon. Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States were united in their determination to defeat and then contain Germany and Japan. The three states had a common interest in postwar peace and prosperity. The experience of the Grand Alliance had shown that it was possible for socialism and capitalism to work together for the common good.85

Stalin signalled his good intentions when he engineered the abolition of the Comintern in May 1943. No longer would the activities of communist parties be directed from Moscow. Henceforth, each party would find its own national path to socialism. Soviet influence would be exercised informally, especially by Stalin, who would use his influence to harmonise the communist political challenge with the postwar maintenance of the Grand Alliance. Such a strategy would not be unproblematic – the danger of a divergence of Soviet and communist goals was self-evident – but the Soviets had been handling such tensions and contradictions since the 1920s when Moscow’s diplomats and


85 On Stalin’s views of Churchill, Roosevelt and the Grand Alliance: Roberts, Stalin’s Wars, chaps 6 & 8
Comintern officials had vied to influence Stalin and the Politburo.

**Moscow and Tehran**

As the Comintern was being abolished Joseph Davies, the former American ambassador to the Soviet Union, arrived in Moscow on a special mission from Roosevelt. His goal was to persuade Stalin to agree to a meet with the US President. Roosevelt was convinced that if he could meet Stalin personally then problems within the Grand Alliance could be amicably resolved. Stalin agreed in principle to a meeting with Roosevelt but delayed committing to a date because of pressing military matters. Agreement was eventually reached that Stalin and Roosevelt would meet, together with Churchill, at a summit in Tehran.

The political path to the Tehran summit was paved by an Anglo-Soviet-American foreign ministers conference in Moscow in October 1943. The Moscow conference marked the transition of the Grand Alliance from being a coalition focussed on the war to one that was focussed on peace and the postwar world. The agreements reached at Moscow included a commitment to establish a new international security organisation to succeed the League of Nations after the war. A year later there were detailed negotiations at Dumbarton Oaks about this new organisation, which was destined to hold its founding conference in San Francisco in 1945 and to call itself the United Nations.86

Because of the detailed work done at the Moscow conference there was no need for a fixed agenda at Tehran. Instead there was an informal, open-ended conversation in which the three leaders got to know each other and established the pattern and dynamic of their triangular relationship.

Stalin’s first meeting at Tehran was with Roosevelt. They discussed a number of issues – the military situation, postwar trade, France, China – and found much common ground. The rapport between the two leaders continued in the conference plenary session, where they ganged up on Churchill and pressed the Prime Minister for a definite commitment and date for the invasion of France. Churchill resisted at first but later conceded that the Second Front would be opened in May 1944. In return Stalin agreed to attack Japan when Germany was defeated.

With an agreement on the Second Front in the bag the conversations

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between Churchill and Stalin became much friendlier. Churchill agreed with Stalin that the Soviet Union should have warm water ports and free access to the Mediterranean and the Pacific. With Roosevelt Stalin had a highly positive conversation about the President’s idea for an international organisation to police the postwar world. There was consensus among all three leaders that Germany should be dismembered after the war. When the conference was over the Big Three issued a statement that they had met “with hope and determination” and had left each other as “friends in fact, in spirit and in purpose.”

The most important decision taken at Tehran was concerned the date for D-Day. After the conference there was a significant increase in Soviet-Western cooperation in the military sphere. Stalin’s attitude towards his western allies’ contribution to the common war effort warmed considerably. In his order of the day on 1 May 1944 he noted the “considerable contribution” of our “great allies…who hold the front in Italy against the Germans and divert a considerable part of German troops from us, supply us with very valuable raw materials and armaments, and subject to systematic bombardment military objectives in Germany, thus undermining the latter’s military might”. When D-Day came on 6 June 1944 Stalin cabled Churchill and Roosevelt his congratulations on the Normandy landings and a few days later hailed publicly the “brilliant success” of his western allies, stating that “the history of warfare knows no other similar undertaking in the breadth of its conception, in its gigantic dimensions, and in the mastery of its performance.”

As agreed at Tehran, the Soviets timed their summer offensive to coincide with D-Day. Operation Bagration – the campaign to liberate Belorussia – was launched on 23 June. It was a stunning success and by the end of July the Red Army had crossed into Poland and was approaching Warsaw. Anticipating that Warsaw would soon fall to the Red Army the nationalist Polish Home Army staged an insurrection in the city. Unfortunately, the Red Army’s offensive was halted by the Germans on the eastern banks of the Vistula. The insurrection continued for another two months but was brutally crushed the Germans. During the battle 200,000 citizens of Warsaw died. The city was then razed to the ground by the Germans and the remaining inhabitants expelled.

The Warsaw Uprising led to some sharp exchanges between Stalin, on the one side and Churchill and Roosevelt, on the other. The two western leaders wanted to aid the uprising through airdrops. From Stalin’s point of view the insurrection was a madcap adventure and the supplies would end up in German hands. He

was also politically hostile to the uprising, which he saw as anti-communist as well as anti-Nazi. In the end, Stalin relented and the Soviets facilitated British and American flights to Warsaw as well as themselves dropping supplies to the insurgents. But it was too little too late and Polish accusations that Stalin had deliberately halted the Red Army on the Vistula enjoyed considerable currency in the west.

The Warsaw Uprising is often seen as an important negative turning point in the history of the Grand Alliance, as the first battle of the cold war – at stake being the postwar political future of Poland. However, at the top-level of the alliance its effects were transitory. After the uprising it was back to business among the Big Three.

**The Percentages Agreement**

In October 1944 Churchill travelled to Moscow for a second time. Arriving on the 9th he went straight to the Kremlin for dinner with Stalin. Before they got down to business Churchill presented Stalin with a signed portrait of himself.

Churchill’s celebrated account of this meeting was published in the final volume of his history of the Second World War in 1954:

“The moment was apt for business, so I said [to Stalin], ‘Let us settle about our affairs in the Balkans. Your armies are in Romania and Bulgaria. We have interests, missions, and agents there. Don’t let us get at cross-purposes in small ways. So far as Britain and Russia are concerned, how would it do for you to have ninety percent predominance in Romania, for us to have ninety per cent of the say in Greece, and go fifty-fifty about Yugoslavia?’ While this was being translated I wrote out on a half-sheet of paper:

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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rumania</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>Greece</td>
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<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>90% (in accord with U.S.A.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>Yugoslavia</td>
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<td>Bulgaria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>75%</td>
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<td>The others</td>
<td>25%</td>
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I pushed this across to Stalin, who had by then heard the translation. There was a slight pause. Then he took his blue pencil and made a large tick upon it, and passed it back to us. It was all settled in no more time than it takes to set down . . . After this there was a long silence. The pencilled paper lay in the centre of the table. At length I said, ‘Might it not be thought rather cynical if it seemed we had disposed of these issues so fateful to millions of people, in such an offhand manner? Let us burn the paper. ‘No, you keep it’, said Stalin.‘

While Churchill emphasised the drama of the moment, the British ambassador’s report verged on the comic. Churchill had

“produced what he called a ‘naughty document’ showing a list of Balkan countries and the proportion of interest in them of the Great Powers. He said that the Americans would be shocked if they saw how crudely he had put it. Marshal Stalin was a realist. He himself was not sentimental while Mr Eden was a bad man. He had not consulted his cabinet or Parliament.’

More solemn was the Soviet record which said that Churchill announced “he had prepared a table. The thought which was expressed in this table might be better stated in diplomatic language because, for example, the Americans, including the President, would be shocked by the division of Europe into spheres of influence.” Later in the conversation Churchill returned to this issue, saying that he “had prepared a rather dirty and rough document, which showed the division of influence of the Soviet Union and Great Britain in Romania, Greece, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria”. In response, Stalin said “that the 25 per cent envisaged for England in Bulgaria did not harmonise with the other figures in the table. He . . . considered that it would be necessary to enter an amendment envisaging 90 per cent for the Soviet Union in Bulgaria and 10 per cent for England.” The conversation then wandered off – as was often the case when talking to Churchill - but Stalin later reiterated that the figures for Bulgaria should be amended. When Molotov and Eden discussed the matter the percentage of influence in Bulgaria and Hungary was adjusted to 80/20 in favour of the Soviets.

While there has been much debate among historians about the meaning of the so-called percentages deal, in practical terms it amounted to little more than an agreement that the Soviet Union would not interfere with British influence in Greece. Since the Soviets had long recognised that Greece was in the British

90 For the Soviet record of the percentages conversation: Rzheshevsky, Stalin i Cherchill’ doc. 161.
sphere of influence this was no great concession on Stalin’s part. Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania would be occupied by the Red Army and power would lie with the Soviets irrespective of Churchill’s piece of paper. The precedent that the allied army that occupied a country would control its occupation regime had been set by the British and Americans themselves when they invaded Italy in 1943. As to Yugoslavia, Tito and his partisans would control its destiny.

But the intimacy of Churchill and Stalin’s conversation about such momentous matters spoke volumes about their deepening personal relationship. The ease between the two men was evident in their subsequent meetings. Churchill was in Moscow not carve up Eastern Europe with Stalin but to broker a deal a deal between the Soviets and the Polish government in exile in London. Relations between Stalin and the London Poles had broken down following the Germans’ discovery at Katyn in 1943 of the mass graves of thousands of Polish officers, executed by the NKVD in 1940. Stalin denied any culpability and also insisted that Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine would remain part of the Soviet Union. In return the Poles were offered compensatory German territory in the west. Churchill supported this solution and when he and Stalin met Mikolajczyk, the exile Polish Premier, on 13 October the two of them worked together to persuade the Pole to accept the deal. Mikolajczyk was willing to do a deal but only if he could enter reservations about the frontier question, thus leaving the matter open to renegotiation at the peace conference. Churchill tried to persuade Stalin of the merits of such a deal, arguing the Americans might take up the Poles’ cause and continuation of the Soviet-Polish dispute would have a corrosive effect on the Grand Alliance. In the same conversation Churchill pointed out that until the Comintern had been abolished in 1943 the small countries of Europe had feared sovietisation. He himself recalled that in 1919-1920 the whole world had trembled in fear of world revolution. Stalin replied that “the world no longer had to tremble in fear. The Soviet Union had no intention of organising a Bolshevik Revolution in Europe.”

In their meetings Churchill and Stalin also discussed the future of Germany, the revision of the Montreux Convention on Turkey’s control of the Black Sea Straits, and Soviet participation in the war against Japan. There were no concrete outcomes of Stalin and Churchill’s discussions but the atmosphere was friendly throughout and there were no hiccups as there had been during their previous bilateral meeting in 1942 and at Tehran in 1943. Stalin was in a good mood. He dined at the British embassy and, in his first such outing since the war began, accompanied Churchill to the Bolshoi Ballet. When Churchill departed on 19 October Stalin presented him with a decorative vase decorated with a picture entitled ‘With Bow against Bear’.

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91 Ibid doc. 166
Roosevelt felt left out and he asked Stalin that Harriman be allowed to observe proceedings but the ambassador did not attend all the meetings and was notably absent from the critical percentages discussion. Roosevelt pointed out to Stalin that “in this global war there is literally no question, military or political, in which the United States is not interested. I am firmly convinced that the three of us, and only the three of us, can find the solution to the questions unresolved. In this sense, while appreciating Mr Churchill’s desire for the meeting, I prefer to regard your forthcoming talks with the Prime Minister as preliminary to a meeting of the three of us.” Stalin knew where power lay in the western half of the Grand Alliance and he wrote back that he had assumed Churchill was visiting Moscow with Roosevelt’s agreement. But Stalin seemed a little peeved at Roosevelt’s interference in his relationship with Churchill and told the British Prime Minister that President was demanding too many rights for himself and allowing too few to Britain and the Soviet Union which were, after all, bound together by a formal treaty of alliance whereas the USSR and the United States were not. Churchill defused the situation by joking that they would discuss the Dumbarton Oaks negotiations but not tell Roosevelt!

Yalta

It was Roosevelt who pushed for a second summit of the Big Three. In the end its timing was determined by Roosevelt’s election and inauguration as President for the fourth time in January 1945. Its venue – Yalta – was Stalin’s choice. Stalin did not like flying and had not enjoyed the trip to Tehran, which was partly by plane. A meeting in the Crimea meant he could travel to the conference by train.

Like Tehran, Yalta was a very friendly gathering and the Big Three got on famously. Stalin was the dominant figure at the conference. The reasons for this were partly to do with power. Britain and the United States were invading Germany from the west but the bulk of the fighting was still being done by the Red Army, which was approaching Berlin. By this time the Red Army has conquered or liberated most of central and eastern Europe. Stalin was not strong enough to dictate the terms of the peace but he was well able to define and defend Soviet interests. Stalin dominated proceedings for personal reasons as well. Roosevelt was ill – he died two months later - and the junior role that Britain now played in the Grand Alliance had undermined Churchill’s confidence and exuberance. A flavour of Stalin’s impact at Yalta is provided by a letter from Sir Alexander Cadogan – Britain’s top diplomat – to his wife:

“I have never known the Russians so easy and accommodating. In particular Joe has been extremely good. He is a great man, and showed up very impressively against the background of the other two ageing statesmen…On the first day, he sat for the first hour and a half without saying a word – there was no

92 Stalin’s Correspondence vol 2, pp.162-163,
call for him to do so! The President flapped about and the PM boomed, but Joe just sat taking it all in and being rather bemused. When he did chip in, he never used a superfluous word, and spoke very much to the point. He’s obviously got a very good sense of humour – and rather a quick temper.”

Stalin’s priority at Yalta was an agreement about the future of Germany, including on reparations and dismemberment. Despite Anglo-American qualms about reparations it was agreed that the USSR would receive restitution from Germany for war damage and a figure of $10 billion was agreed as the benchmark. In relation to dismemberment, however, Stalin left Yalta disappointed. Previous discussions with Churchill and Roosevelt had indicated that they favoured breaking up Germany after the war. At Yalta Stalin pushed very hard for a definite commitment on dismemberment but Churchill and Roosevelt would only agree to establish a commission to discuss the issue. From this discussion Stalin concluded that dismemberment was unlikely to materialize. After Yalta he abandoned the policy of dismemberment and became a vocal supporter of German unity.

Roosevelt was keen to finalise discussions on the establishment of a successor to the League of Nations. Most questions about the role and structure of the proposed United Nations organisation had been dealt with at the Dumbarton Oaks conference. There remained, however, the question of a right of veto for the permanent members of the Security Council – a voting procedure that Stalin insisted was necessary to maintain great power unity within the new organisation. The aim, Stalin told Churchill and Roosevelt, should be to establish an organisational framework for peace that would last 50 years. The British and Americans remained unhappy that a great power could block discussion or the independent resolution of disputes that they themselves were involved in, but they accepted the Soviet position on the veto and this principle was written into the invitation issued to attend the founding conference of the UN in San Francisco in April-June 1945.

Churchill’s main concern was resolution the long-running dispute about the post-liberation governance of Poland. By February 1945 all Poland was occupied by the Red Army and just before the Yalta conference the Soviets installed a provisional government formed by the pro-communist Polish Committee of National Liberation (PCNL). At Yalta Churchill and Roosevelt sought to persuade Stalin to establish a more representative government in Poland, one that would include pro-western politicians from the Polish government in exile in London. At Yalta the compromise reached was that the PCNL government would be reorganized and broadened by “the inclusion of democratic leaders from Poland itself and from Poles abroad”. In return for this concession the British and Americans agreed to recognise the ‘Curzon Line’ as the Polish-USSR border – which meant that Moscow’s territorial gains under the auspices of the

93 Cited by Reynolds, From World War to Cold War pp.240-241. Stalin’s Correspondence pp. 17-18
Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939-1941 – Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine - were now formally accepted by the western powers. It was also agreed to compensate Poland for its territorial losses in the east by changing its border with Germany, although the details of the new demarcation line were left open at this stage.

Of the other decisions taken at Yalta by far the most important was a confidential agreement setting out the terms for Soviet participation in the war against Japan. Stalin agreed to abrogate the 1941 Soviet-Japanese neutrality pact and to enter the Far Eastern war two or three months after the defeat of Germany. In return Churchill and Roosevelt agreed to the restoration of Russian territorial concessions in China that had been lost as a result of the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese war.

In terms of the Big Three’s general outlook on the postwar world, the most important Yalta document was the Declaration on Liberated Europe. This American initiative committed the three states to the creation of a postwar Europe based on representative institutions and free elections, a project linked to a more general commitment to the creation of an international order that would guarantee peace, security and freedom for all.

Each of the three leaders had their own concepts of freedom and democracy. Roosevelt’s concepts were linked to free markets, while Churchill was opposed to freedom that would break up the British Empire. Stalin was opposed to democracy that would result in pro-fascist or anti-Soviet governments. Beyond doubt was the Big Three’s commitment to a peacetime Grand Alliance. Churchill later tried to distance himself from Yalta by presenting himself as an early cold war warrior but the contemporary evidence shows him to be a strong supporter of the conference and what it signified. After his death Roosevelt was attacked for his naïve trust in Stalin. A myth developed that Roosevelt had appeased Stalin at Yalta and betrayed Eastern Europe to communist domination after war. However, Stalin was as much an appeaser as Churchill and Roosevelt. The compromises and accommodation of vital interests cut both ways. Roosevelt did not concede Eastern Europe to Stalin, he already controlled it. The issue was how he would control that buffer zone on the Soviet Union’s western borders. Yalta pointed toward a situation in which Soviet control was geopolitically secure but open to ideological and political contestation, as long as this did not threaten Soviet security. Yalta failed to deliver this solution not because of the conference and the collaboration of the Big Three were defective but because of the outbreak of the cold war two years later.94

Much has been made of the difficulties that the Yalta decisions ran into after the conference. Sceptics point, in particular, to the acrimonious inter-allied dispute about the interpretation of the decision on the reconstruction of the Polish provisional government. From Moscow’s point of view what had been

agreed at Yalta was that the PCNL government would be enlarged. The British and American interpretation was that a completely new government would be formed in Poland. It was this difference of view that led to the tough talking between Molotov and Truman in April 1945. But the logjam was broken when Truman did what Roosevelt would have done: he sent Harry Hopkins to Moscow to talk to Stalin. Hopkins’ conversations with Stalin at the end of May led to an agreement under which the PCNL government was reconstructed by the inclusion of pro-western politicians like Mikolajczyk who became a Deputy Premier.

When Roosevelt died Stalin was very upset. As Harriman reported: “When I entered Marshal Stalin’s office I noticed that he was obviously deeply distressed at the news of the death of President Roosevelt. He greeted me in silence and stood holding my hand for about 30 seconds before asking me to sit down.” “President Roosevelt has died but his cause must live on”, Stalin said to Harriman. “We shall support President Truman with all our forces and all our will.” In response Harriman suggested that Stalin should send Molotov to the United States to meet Truman and to attend the founding conference of the United Nations – which had, of course been, Roosevelt’s pet project. Stalin readily agreed and he must have been reassured by reports from the Soviet embassy in Washington that Truman was a Rooseveltian New Dealer and a supporter of cooperation with the USSR. There is no evidence that Truman’s tough talks with Molotov had a negative impact on Stalin’s outlook on the Grand Alliance; the west’s position on the Polish question was, after all, well known. Hopkins’ appearance in Moscow must have been particularly reassuring for Stalin and he approached the Potsdam meeting in a positive frame of mind.

When Stalin met Churchill and Truman at the Potsdam conference in July 1945 the spirit of Yalta was still very much alive and revived. Relations between Soviet and western leaders were not as intimate as those of the original Big Three but they got on well enough. In political terms the conference was as successful as Tehran and Yalta. At the close of the conference Stalin, Truman and Atlee proclaimed they had “strengthened the ties…and extended the scope of their collaboration and understanding”; and had renewed their confidence in their ability to deliver “a just and enduring peace”. At the end of the Second World War the outlook for the Grand Alliance was as rosy as it had ever been. The failure to fulfil its promise was a function of the cold war. But that is another story.

**Conclusion**

The experience of the Grand Alliance shows that leadership does matter and that good personal relations are essential to successful and sustained collaboration. When they allied together in 1941 Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin

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did not know how long their alliance would last or in what directions it would take them. Personal contact between the three leaders – at meetings, through correspondence and via intermediaries – convinced them that they could work together and trust each other. At times that trust and friendship was strained but difficulties were overcome and differences resolved through compromises that respected honour and protected vital interests. The Grand Alliance as it developed during the war is unimaginable without the personal bond between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt that developed. It was the absence of deep personal connections that distinguished the leaders of the Grand Alliance after the war. This absence does not explain the origins of the cold war but it certainly casts it in a new light.