

From John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005)

So WHAT *did* Stalin want? It makes sense to start with him, because only he of the three postwar leaders had had the time, while retaining the authority, to consider and rank his priorities. Sixty-five at the end of the war, the man who ran the Soviet Union was physically exhausted, surrounded by sycophants, personally lonely—but still firmly, even terrifyingly, in control. His scrawny mustache, discolored teeth, pock-marked face, and yellow eyes, an American diplomat recalled, "gave him the aspect of an old battle-scarred tiger. . . . An unforewarned visitor would never have guessed what depths of calculation, ambition, love of power, jealousy, cruelty, and sly vindictiveness lurked behind this unpretentious facade."<sup>4</sup> Through a series of purges during the 1930s, Stalin had long since eliminated all his rivals. The raising of an eyebrow or the flick of a finger, subordinates knew, could mean the difference between life and death. Strikingly short—only five feet four inches—this paunchy little old man was nonetheless a colossus, bestriding a colossal state.

Stalin's postwar goals were security for himself, his regime, his country, and his ideology, in precisely that order. He sought to make sure that no internal challenges could ever again endanger his personal rule, and that no external threats would ever again place his country at risk. The interests of communists elsewhere in the world, admirable though those might be, would never outweigh the priorities of the Soviet state as he had determined them. Narcissism, paranoia, and absolute power came together in Stalin:<sup>5</sup> he was, within the Soviet Union and the international communist movement, enormously feared—but also widely worshipped.

Wartime expenditures in blood and treasure, Stalin believed, should largely determine who got what after the war: the Soviet Union, therefore, would get a lot.<sup>6</sup> Not only would it regain the territories it had lost to the Germans during World War II; it would also retain the territories it had taken as a result of the opportunistic but shortsighted "non-aggression" pact Stalin had concluded with Hitler in August, 1939—portions of Finland, Poland, and Romania, all of the Baltic States. It would require that states beyond these expanded borders remain within Moscow's sphere of influence. It would seek territorial concessions at the expense of Iran and Turkey (including control of the Turkish Straits), as well as naval bases in the Mediterranean. Finally, it would punish a defeated and devastated Germany through military occupation, property expropriations, reparations payments, and ideological transformation.

Herein there lay, however, a painful dilemma for Stalin. Disproportionate losses during the war may well have entitled the Soviet Union to disproportionate postwar gains, but they had also robbed

that country of the power required to secure those benefits unilaterally. The U.S.S.R. needed peace, economic assistance, and the diplomatic acquiescence of its former allies. There was no choice for the moment, then, but to continue to seek the cooperation of the Americans and the British: just as they had depended on Stalin to defeat Hitler, so Stalin now depended on continued Anglo-American goodwill if he was to obtain his postwar objectives at a reasonable cost. He therefore *wanted* neither a hot war nor a cold war.<sup>7</sup> Whether he would be skillful enough to avoid these alternatives, however, was quite a different matter.

For Stalin's understanding of his wartime allies and *their* post objectives was based more on wishful thinking than on an accurate assessment of priorities as seen from Washington and London. It here that Marxist-Leninist ideology influenced Stalin, because his illusions arose from it. The most important one was the belief, which went back to Lenin, that capitalists would never be able to cooperate with one another for very long. Their inherent greediness—the irresistible urge to place profits above politics—would sooner or later prevail, leaving communists with the need only for patience as they awaited the adversaries' self-destruction. "The alliance between ourselves and the democratic faction of the capitalists succeeds because the latter had an interest in preventing Hitler's domination," Stalin commented as war was coming to a close. "In the future we shall be against this faction of the capitalists as well."<sup>8</sup>

This idea of a crisis within capitalism did have some plausibility. World War I, after all, had been a war among capitalists; it thereby provided the opportunity for the world's first communist state to emerge. The Great Depression left the remaining capitalist states scrambling to save themselves rather than cooperating to rescue the global economy or to maintain the postwar settlement: Nazi Germany arose as a result. With the end of World War II, Stalin believed, the economic crisis was bound to return. Capitalists would then need the Soviet Union rather than the other way around. That is why he fully expected United States to *lend* the Soviet Union several billion dollars for reconstruction: because the Americans would otherwise be unable to find markets for their products during the coming global crash.<sup>9</sup>

It followed as well that the other capitalist superpower, Great Britain—whose weakness Stalin consistently underestimated—would sooner or later break with its

American ally over economic rivalries: "[T]he inevitability of wars between capitalist countries remains in force," he insisted, as late as 1952.<sup>10</sup> From Stalin's perspective, then, the long-term forces of history would compensate for the catastrophe World War II had inflicted upon the Soviet Union. It would not be necessary to confront the Americans and British directly in order to achieve his objectives. He could simply wait for the capitalists to begin quarreling with one another, and for the disgusted Europeans to embrace communism as an alternative.

Stalin's goal, therefore, was not to restore a balance of power in Europe, but rather to dominate that continent as thoroughly as Hitler had sought to do. He acknowledged, in a wistful but revealing comment in 1947, that "[h]ad Churchill delayed opening the second front in northern France by a year, the Red Army would have come to France....[W]e toyed with the idea of reaching Paris."<sup>11</sup> Unlike Hitler, however, Stalin followed no fixed timetable. He had welcomed the D-Day landings, despite the fact that they would preclude the Red Army from reaching western Europe anytime soon: Germany's defeat was the first priority. Nor would he write off diplomacy in securing his objective, not least because he expected—for a time at least—American cooperation in achieving it. Had not Roosevelt indicated that the United States would refrain from seeking its own sphere of influence in Europe? Stalin's was, therefore, a grand vision: the peacefully accomplished but historically determined domination of Europe. It was also a flawed vision, for it failed to take into account the evolving postwar objectives of the United States.