



How Did the Personalities of the Big Three Allied Leaders Affect their Decisions in the Second World War? By Michael Sofie

Although the alliance of America and Britain with Russia was uneasy, the Allies had to cooperate with one another or fail separately. Russia's Marshal Stalin demanded on many occasions for the opening of a second front in Europe to relieve some of the German pressure on Soviet troops. Stalin's demands for a second front were delayed by the Allies until victory in the Mediterranean and the successful invasion of Europe, to conserve men and materials and because of the mistrust of the Soviet Union. The "second front" had been a political and military issue since 1941 when Russia joined the Allies and the decision rested on the personal and diplomatic personas of the Big Three leaders, Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill, America's President Franklin Roosevelt, and Stalin. As Fenby suggests, "[t]o a far greater extent than in the 1914-18 conflict, the Second World War was a personal struggle between towering figures – Roosevelt, Stalin, Churchill, and Hitler, with a supporting cast" of lesser leaders (6).

By 1943, Hitler's war was in its fourth year and German aggression had claimed territory from the border of neutral Spain in the west to the Soviet Union in the east. North Africa was now in the hands of the Allied force since May 13th and as Greenfield reports, "[b]y February, 1943, Admiral Nimitz's commanders had wrestled Guadalcanal, and General

MacArthur's the eastern tip of New Guinea, from the Japanese...[t]he Americans went over to the offensive and began to gain the initiative in the Pacific "(7). Japan planners had "counted on our [US] acceptance of a limited war in the Pacific," but the Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the American commanders the go ahead for "operations in the central Pacific" in the summer of 1943 (Millett 432).

Home front support by the populations of the Allied countries, the United States, Britain and Russia, was manifested somewhat by national attitudes. The war had all but erased the U.S. Depression years with plentiful jobs, as Kennedy notes, including "4.3 million workers, half of them women, who would not... sought work even in full-employment peacetime "(644). The British people had endured strict rationing, shortages, bombings, and other hardships since 1939, but they resolved to prevail over Germany again, as they had in the First World War. The character of the people of the Soviet Union was illustrated by the siege of Stalingrad, where their harsh winter conditions, perseverance, and determination defeated the German Army in February.

Political support for military action was of a more transient nature, Roosevelt appreciated that the best way to silence war critics was effective military action"(Dallek 336). FDR employed words and symbols, and expounded values and ideas that all Americans could understand and support (Keegan 538). Winston Churchill was, "a patriot, a romantic and an imperialist: victory was his first and last desire," as Keegan concludes, and although Great Britain was left without much of her empire after the war, he rallied the English people to finish the job" (538). In contrast, Marshall Stalin exercised brute force, executions, treachery, and all the powers at his disposal to maintain his leadership and control the outcome of the war for the benefit of the Soviet Union (Keegan 537).

Stalin's objective of survival provoked him to sign the non-aggression pact with Hitler in 1939, but when German Army attacked Russia 1941, he negotiated with the Americans and British to

join the Allies' effort. As the tide was turning against the Axis, Stalin foresaw an opportunity to appropriate the Baltic States and other territory as the spoils of war and as with the German alliance; he treated relations with his new partners with suspicion (Conquest 222). Smith insists, "Russia, the third great ally, had only one possible strategy: maximum defensive pressure against Germany while urging the United States and Great Britain to open the second front in Europe without delay (5)." "Josef Stalin DEMANDED three things of his allies during 1942:" as Smith continues, "formal recognition of Russia's territorial demands, enormous deliveries of military supplies, and a second front in western Europe...[h]e was thrice refused" (39). Collier acknowledges the quandary:

How long the Russians would hold out was hard to foresee...the British ambassador in Moscow, reported a week before the offensive began that the Red Army was not expected...to withstand a German attack for more than three or four weeks ... Stalin...admitted in July that the situation was critical and that Russia would be crippled or defeated without help from the West. (332)

In addition to the suspicions about Stalin's motives and tactics, the German Army revealed the discovery of mass graves in the Katyn forest of some "8000 Polish officers allegedly murdered in 1940" by their Russian captors (Smith 70). The Russian's rejected the international outcry as blaspheme and severed diplomatic connections with the exiled Polish government (Smith 70-71).

Prior to the German attack on the Soviet Union, America and Great Britain considered Russia a "semi-enemy" (Smith 39). American sympathies softened that posture as Russia suffered against the weight of the German military machine for the good of all humanity (Smith 15). "The 9 million casualties suffered by the Red Army gave him a moral advantage over the Western Allies," and as Fenby finds, "Stalin could count on plenty of support from public opinion in the West" (17). Roosevelt's old confidant and colleague from the New Deal days, Harry Hopkins, became the liaison between the foreign missions and the Lend Lease shipments of

military materials and other supplies to the combatant nations. No country needed these goods more desperately than Russia, and Stalin and Hopkins began an amicable association (Sherwood 268-269). The Lend Lease shipments promised in January, at the Casablanca meeting, struggled to pass through the U-boat infested North Atlantic and the shipping losses were staggering. "Four convoys did manage to reach Murmansk in the first weeks of 1943, paltry recompense, in Stalin's eyes, for the military agonies and the punishing supply famine that the Soviets had been enduring for the preceding six months" (Kennedy 590). The Russian plight and Stalin's insatiable appetite for war goods caused concern, according to Smith:

In short, Americans were pessimistic concerning what Russia might do if her wishes were not met, but they were essentially optimistic in their belief that Western attitudes could shape Russian behavior both during and after the war. The ramifications of this Anglo-American-Soviet interplay appear everywhere in the diplomacy of the war. They affected the debate over grand strategy and they touched such questions as shipping and the allocation of supplies. (6)

A year earlier, FDR wrote to Churchill about the public pressure to establish a second front to take the pressure off the Russians on the grounds that they were more effective in chewing up German manpower and equipment than the rest of the coalition (Churchill 314). Supplies, manpower, or the day-to-day maintenance of the war effort was not the problem, and Stalin never wavered in his quest to regain territory previously lost before the war and imperialistic fervor to expand the dominance of the Soviet Union over satellite countries. Smith states the objectives succinctly:

Russia's minimum territorial objectives in Europe were clearly stated. They included restoration of the June 1941 boundary, which meant that Russia would enjoy the full fruits of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact, specifically the annexation of the three Baltic states, nearly half of prewar Poland, and pieces of Finland and Romania ...Russia would not be deflected in the slightest way by the [Atlantic] Charter from the pursuit of her own aims in her own way. (15-16)

Churchill was far more adroit in handling Stalin diplomatically than Roosevelt, who made overtures and implied promises to the Russian leader, which affected the relationships and “fundamental objectives for the future (Smith 9,11). Successes at Stalingrad, Leningrad, Moscow, and in the Caucasus, caused the concern that if the second front was not established soon, the Russians possibly could defeat the Germans on their own and “impose her own terms at the peace conference” (Collier 358). Stalin noted that the Allied military action in the Mediterranean and bombing assault on Germany had failed to deeply wound the Third Reich in contrast to a major offensive on the continent or second front (Millett 430).

The Casablanca conference in January of 1943 became the lightning rod for Allied basic strategic decisions, “[v]ictory was far off, but in sight “(Smith 55). The missing member of the Alliance, Marshal Stalin, was unhappy when Roosevelt and Churchill issued the statement calling for Germany’s unconditional surrender and as Smith asserts, “[h]e immediately understood that they might use it as a poor substitute for the second front he was waiting for” (Smith 15). The British were unmoved by the always present Russian suspicions of complicity and understood insistent calls for the second front, but adamantly “refused until the time was ripe “(Smith 5). Overlord, the invasion at Normandy, targeted for 1944 was still in the planning and logistics stage and would not be finalized until the November Tehran conference where Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill met together for the first time. Operations prior to the invasion build-up, as Greenfield summarizes, “[f]or them [Americans] the Mediterranean was an indecisive theater, and with increasing anxiety and impatience they pressed the British for the commitment to a full-bodied attack across the Channel in the spring of 1944, and finally, with a welcome assist from Stalin at Teheran, they got it (13).

Churchill and Roosevelt met in Cairo before the Teheran conference of November – December of 1943 and when the Big Three finally appeared together, as Smith concludes, “[t]he year ended in a climax of apparent good will and unity” (59). Much to Churchill dismay, Roosevelt took up residence in the Soviet buildings which were more accessible for the

wheelchair-bound President, and “it would be easier for him to meet Stalin informally – that is without Churchill” (Fenby 231). Roosevelt was certain that if he could establish a personal relationship with the Russian leader that the mutual concerns and individual goals of the Allies would be more easily considered. Not finding a connection at first, the President decided to “do something desperate” and:

At the start of the plenary session, he teased Churchill about his Britishness, John Bull, his cigars, his habits. ‘It began to register with Stalin,’ he recalled...Scowling, Churchill grew red. The more he coloured, the more Stalin smiled, letting out a deep, hearty guffaw. ‘For the first time in three days I saw light.’...He continued to goad Churchill...’From that time on our relations were personal and Stalin himself indulged in an occasional witticism,’ he told Perkins. (Fenby 255)

After so many years of success, the hazard for Roosevelt was to have too much “faith in his persuasive powers, intuition, and the reading of others, which bore less and less connection with reality” (Fenby 15). It became apparent to the President and the Prime Minister that from this point forward Marshal Stalin had taken control of the decision making as Roosevelt and Churchill tried to ingratiate themselves to him. As Stalin had told Beria’s son back in October of 1943, “[n]ow the fate of Europe is settled...[w]e shall do what we like, with the Allies’ consent” (Fenby 211). In 1941, “the Soviet Position had been dire,” so given the opportunity, the Soviet leader’s demands in Teheran focused on his resolve to “obtain at the end of the war – deep security zone achieved by the Red Army in eastern and central Europe” (Fenby 237). Roosevelt would privately lecture Churchill, “you have four hundred years of acquisitive instinct in your blood and you just don’t understand how a country might not want to acquire land somewhere if they can get it” (Fenby 219).

In the spirit of bilateralism, the President “assured Stalin that he would never go to war over the Baltic States,” and as Fenby comments, “[t]he stern, moralistic line on the frontiers of

1942 was long forgotten; there was no mention of the Atlantic Charter” (258). Roosevelt’s main objective was to include the Soviet Union in the “global community,” and avert “the inevitable war of the continents” by aggravation of the Russian Bear. The talk inevitably returned to the Invasion of Europe and Roosevelt suggested some possible dates in May of which Churchill was reluctant to support a firm time, whereas “Stalin insisted that the landing should be staged in the suitable weather of May” (Fenby 245). Greenfield admits that “the decision on a powerful cross-Channel attack after long debate was made firm and final” (8). Churchill finally conceded that the North African and Italian campaigns did not provide the results of a second front as the Russians had been promised as far back as 1942, as Kennedy relates, but he assured Stalin that Overlord would now have the highest priority (682). The Russian leader also weighted in on the selection of General Eisenhower to lead the Normandy Invasion. On his return to the safety of the White House, the President sent a memo to the Secretary of State outlining the need to give maximum support to the war effort of the USSR by increasing Lend-Lease to deliver “7,800 planes, 170,000 vehicles and other supplies, including six million pairs of shoes” (Fenby 276).

The Normandy invasion on June 6, 1944, was probably the largest allocation of armed forces anywhere; 2,876,439 men, 4308 landing craft and ships, 284 major combat vessels, and 7,774 aircraft (Hasting 347-348). The race to Berlin was now on by the Allied Expeditionary Force to the west and the Red Army closing in from the east. The Presidential election of 1944 loomed large over the conduct of the war in Europe as Roosevelt campaigned for an unprecedented fourth term and characterized himself as “Doctor Win the War.” Smith suggest that the President “was timid and unsure” of what the American people would bear in foreign affairs and skirted issues that needed to “be confronted,” worried that they would lose him votes (9). As a pure political animal, FDR would have down played Anglo-American relations if Churchill did not follow the American strategy (Fenby 324). After the Invasion, Churchill visited Italy and later stopped in Moscow for a bilateral meeting with Stalin, and where upon leaving, as

Fenby acknowledges, he emphasized his “many long and intimate talks with my friend and war comrade Marshal Stalin,...the warrior statesman [that]...will lead the Russian people...through these years of storm and tempest into the light of a broader and happier age for all” (335).

Earlier in the war, Churchill had modified his long-held distrust of the Bolsheviks on the “simple logic that Hitler’s enemies were Britain’s friends” (Seaton 516).

The second meeting of the Big Three leaders would also be their last in Yalta in February of 1945, Roosevelt would succumb to a cerebral hemorrhage just two months later. Frail, gray, and in failing health, the President was there in spirit, but without his usual good humor and strength of character, Yalta would be Stalin’s show. He came to the conference with a clear agenda, “to maintain the deep security zone” in Eastern Europe, “to assert his country’s position as a great power, and to insure that Germany would not be able to attack Russia again,” and he said at one point, “[w]e are interested in decisions and not discussions” (Fenby 353). He was all business and in control of the proceedings and was looking for clarification on the division of post-war Germany, whether it would be apportioned in the way Roosevelt had suggested in Teheran or Churchill’s idea proposed in Moscow (Fenby 360). As the historian George Kennan noted, “[s]o deep was Roosevelt’s wish to see in the dictator, after the Yalta summit, which cinched Stalin’s achievement of his aims in eastern and central Europe, the president expressed the belief that... ‘something entered into his nature of the way in which a Christian gentlemen should behave’ ” (Fenby 18). Churchill was more realistic in his evaluation of the Bolshevik Dictator and the struggle between Marxism and capitalism. Stalin would offer a toast at a dinner about the good “character or intimacy” of the alliance and conclude with, “[p]ossibly our alliance is so firm just because we do not deceive each other; or is it because it is not easy to deceive each other” (Fenby 370).

America’s Arsenal of Democracy and the Lend Lease program kept the war off the United States continental shores (except for a brief Alaskan skirmish) and overwhelmingly

contributed more resources to the war effort than any other nation. Between March 1941 and June 1945, the total Lend Lease expenditures were 3.1 billion dollars, and without American support the postwar world might have looked entirely different (Feis 648). Stalin's Russia asked numerous times for help from the Allies to take the pressure off Soviet troops, but waited three long years for the arrival of the real second front. Stalin's demands for a second front were delayed by the Allies until victory in the Mediterranean and the successful invasion of Europe, to conserve men and materials and because of the mistrust of the Soviet Union. As Fenby summarizes in Alliance:

For Britain, the alliance was a lifeline. For the Soviet Union, it was the avenue to super-power status. For America, it represented the recognition that, however great its power and whatever unacceptable accommodations were involved, the United States could not walk alone in seeking over-arching objectives reaching beyond its narrow national interests. Those considerations are as valid today as they were between 1941 and 1945. (420)

It would be difficult to conceive what the outcome of the Second World War would have been without the chemistry and wealth of ideas from these great leaders. In retrospect, time was needed to assure a successful end to the war in Europe and the worst fears about Soviet intentions would not be realized until the beginning of the Cold War.

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