

## The Cold War

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THIS WAS THE WAY the war was supposed to end: with cheers, handshakes, dancing, drinking, and hope. The date was April 25, 1945, the place the eastern German city of Torgau on the Elbe, the event the first meeting of the armies, converging from opposite ends of the earth, that had cut Nazi Germany in two. Five days later Adolf Hitler blew his brains out beneath the rubble that was all that was left of Berlin. Just over a week after that, the Germans surrendered unconditionally. The leaders of the victorious Grand Alliance, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Josef Stalin, had already exchanged their own handshakes, toasts, and hopes for a better world at two wartime summits—Teheran in November, 1943, and Yalta in February, 1945. These gestures would have meant little, though, had the troops they commanded not been able to stage their own more boisterous celebration where it really counted: on the front lines of a battlefield from which the enemy was now disappearing.

Why, then, did the armies at Torgau approach one another warily, as if they'd been expecting interplanetary visitors? Why did the resemblances they saw seem so surprising—and so reassuring? Why, despite these, did their commanders insist on separate surrender ceremonies, one for the western front at Reims, in France, on May 7th, another for the eastern front in Berlin on May 8th? Why did the Soviet authorities try to break up spontaneous pro-American demonstrations that erupted in Moscow following the official announcement of the German capitulation? Why did the American authorities, during the week that followed, abruptly suspend critical shipments of Lend-Lease aid to the U.S.S.R., and then resume them? Why for that matter, years later, would Churchill title his memoir of these events *Triumph and Tragedy*?

The answer to all of these questions is much the same: that the war had been won by a coalition whose principal members were already at war—ideologically and geopolitically if not militarily—with one another. Whatever the Grand Alliance's triumphs in the spring of 1945, its success had always depended upon the pursuit of compatible objectives by incompatible systems. The tragedy was this: that victory would require the victors either to cease to be who they were, or to give up much of what they had hoped, by fighting the war, to attain.

HAD THERE really been an alien visitor on the banks of the Elbe in April, 1945, he, she, or it might indeed have detected superficial resemblances in the Russian and American armies that met there, as well as in the societies from which they had come. Both the United States and the Soviet Union had been born in revolution. Both embraced ideologies with global aspirations: what worked at home, their leaders assumed, would also do so for the rest of the world. Both, as continental states, had advanced across vast frontiers: they were at the time the first and third largest countries in the world. And both had entered the war as the result of surprise attack: the German invasion of the Soviet Union, which began on June 22, 1941, and the Japanese strike against Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which Hitler used as an excuse to declare war on the United States four days later. That would have been the extent of the similarities, though. The differences, as any terrestrial observer could have quickly pointed out, were much greater.

The American Revolution, which had happened over a century and a half earlier, reflected a deep distrust of concentrated authority. Liberty and justice, the Founding Fathers had insisted, could come only through constraining power. Thanks to an ingenious constitution, their geographical isolation from potential rivals, and a magnificent endowment of natural resources, the Americans managed to build an extraordinarily powerful state, a fact that became obvious during World War II. They accomplished this, however, by severely restricting their government's capacity to control everyday life, whether through the dissemination of ideas,

the organization of the economy, or the conduct of politics. Despite the legacy of slavery, the near extermination of native Americans, and persistent racial, sexual, and social discrimination, the citizens of the United States could plausibly claim, in 1945, to live in the freest society on the face of the earth.

The Bolshevik Revolution, which had happened only a quarter century earlier, had in contrast involved the embrace of concentrated authority as a means of overthrowing class enemies and consolidating a base from which a proletarian revolution would spread throughout the world. Karl Marx claimed, in the Communist Manifesto of 1848, that the industrialization capitalists had set in motion was simultaneously expanding and exploiting the working class, which would sooner or later liberate itself. Not content to wait for this to happen, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin sought to accelerate history in 1917 by seizing control of Russia and imposing Marxism on it, even though that state failed to fit Marx's prediction that the revolution could only occur in an advanced industrial society. Stalin in turn fixed that problem by redesigning Russia to fit Marxist-Leninist ideology: he forced a largely agrarian nation with few traditions of liberty to become a heavily industrialized nation with no liberty at all. As a consequence, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was, at the end of World War II, the most authoritarian society anywhere on the face of the earth.

If the victorious nations could hardly have been more different, the same was true of the wars they had fought from 1941 to 1945. The United States waged separate wars simultaneously—against the Japanese in the Pacific and the Germans in Europe—but suffered remarkably few casualties: just under 300,000 Americans died in all combat theaters. Geographically distant from where the fighting was taking place, their country experienced no significant attacks apart from the initial one at Pearl Harbor. With its ally Great Britain (which suffered about 357,000 war deaths), the United States was able to choose where, when, and in what circumstances it would fight, a fact that greatly minimized the costs and risks of fighting. But unlike the British, the Americans emerged from the war with their economy thriving: wartime spending had caused their gross domestic product almost to double in less than four years. If there could ever be such a thing as a “good” war, then this one, for the United States, came close.

The Soviet Union enjoyed no such advantages. It waged only one war, but it was arguably the most terrible one in all of history. With its cities, towns, and countryside ravaged, its industries ruined or hurriedly relocated beyond the Urals, the only option apart from surrender was desperate resistance, on terrain and in circumstances chosen by its enemy. Estimates of casualties, civilian and military, are notoriously inexact, but it is likely that some 27 million Soviet citizens died as a direct result of the war—roughly 90 times the number of Americans who died. Victory could hardly have been purchased at greater cost: the U.S.S.R. in 1945 was a shattered state, fortunate to have survived. The war, a contemporary observer recalled, was “both the most fearful and the proudest memory.”