

Winston Churchill Memorial Dinner

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Churchill and Russia

You have asked me to speak about Churchill and Russia, but you have also only given me 15 minutes. I think if Winston were here he would have demanded longer.

Churchill's most famous quotation about Russia, is that the country was 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma'.

He said those words on 1st October 1939. They formed a key passage in his first wartime broadcast over the BBC. He was not yet Prime Minister, having just been brought back into the Cabinet by Chamberlain as First Lord of the Admiralty but that – characteristically – did not stop him ranging more widely over the world scene.

And let me remind you that Russia was at this point – in 1939 -allied with Nazi Germany, through the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, signed a few weeks earlier in August, and that Stalin and Hitler had just devoured Poland.

It is worth quoting Churchill's famous passage in full. What he said was: 'I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest'. Churchill was actually arguing that it was not in Russian interest to allow German domination of Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Baltic States and that there remained a community of interests between England, France and Russia that effectively created an Eastern Front. It was a perceptive remark, deployed no doubt to help raise British morale, but also correctly anticipating that any German advance in the East might bring Russia into the allied camp. Though of course it would take a further twenty-one months for this to happen.

Churchill was sixty-four at the beginning of the Second World War. This was a man who was born, shaped and schooled in the Victorian era – the age of European empires - and who was consequently a lifelong believer in 'realpolitik' and in great men deciding the fate of great nations (and indeed great nations deciding the fate of lesser nations). It was in his DNA to think in terms of national interests.

At first glance, his relationship with Russia can be seen as changeable and contradictory. And while Churchill did say that 'To improve is to change; so to be perfect is to have changed often', what I am going to argue is that – though he undoubtedly changed his approach- it was always consistent with his understanding of what the Russian national interest was at that point, and – more importantly – with his view of how that impacted on the British national interest.

For young Churchill, Russia was a rival Empire, - the opponent in the Great Game, threatening Britain's interests in India through Afghanistan. The Crimean War, when Britain and France

had fought to prevent Russian control over that still disputed, was very much within living memory. It was a campaign that Churchill is likely to have studied in detail, both at school and at Sandhurst, the officer training academy he attended before joining a British cavalry regiment at the age of 20.

And as a young cavalry officer he fought on the Indian North West Frontier, in some of the very valleys that both the West and before us the Russians have more recently abandoned. To the British in India, Russia was the unseen foe, arming and inciting the Afghan tribesmen. Churchill would have imbibed these views in the officer's mess but they would not have been new to him. Indeed, they were already instilled in him from his study of his father's political speeches. Lord Randolph Churchill had served as Secretary of State for India and had consistently advocated a forward policy in Afghanistan to counter Russian ambitions.

So, if the Russian national interest was expansion in areas that would lead to conflict with the British Empire, then Churchill was opposed to it. But there were exceptions. In 1897 when Britain stood by as the Turks suppressed the Greek national uprising on Crete, Churchill went through a decidedly anti-Turkish phase, expressing the view that the Russians should be allowed to take Constantinople. It is noteworthy that the Russians tend to be described as Europeans when Churchill is in favour of their actions, and as Slavs when he is not.

As a young politician, Churchill believed in social reform at home and Empire abroad. Both of which stood in opposition to Russian Tsarist autocracy.

A recurring theme in his speeches is the contrast between civilisation and barbarism. He was certainly aware of Russian pogroms against the Jews and others and was an opponent of the 1904 Aliens Bill which sought to restrict Jewish immigration from Russia into Britain. For much of the Edwardian period, however, Churchill is focused on domestic or colonial affairs.

It is the First World War which changes his relationship with Russia. Initially, the conflict brings the two countries closer together as they become allies against Germany, the Austro-Hungarian empire and ultimately Turkey. As First Lord of the Admiralty Churchill is desperate to find a way to bring the Navy into the conflict and stop the troops chewing barbed wire (as he puts it) on the Western Front in France and Belgium. Russia is also under huge pressure and desperate for a second front. The strategy of attacking Constantinople by sailing a fleet through the Dardanelles Straits is conceived as a plan that will meet all of these objectives. It is the sort of grand concept that Churchill loves, and there is no doubt that he is its leading advocate in the British Cabinet, but it is also flawed. The straits prove to be too well defended by forts and mines to be forced, thereby necessitating allied landings on the rugged Gallipoli Peninsula. The Turks and the terrain then combine to halt the Allied forces leading to a costly abandonment of the operation and to Churchill's removal from office. This was the first major setback in his meteoric rise and the cry 'what about the Dardanelles' would haunt him for years to come. His wife, Clementine, thought he would die of grief.

In the event, he refused to give in, took up painting, and commanded a battalion on the Western front before ultimately returning to politics. But he now found himself in a subordinate position, serving as Minister for Munitions in Lloyd George's coalition government from 1917. This had not been the war he had wanted and its aftermath changed his political outlook – and nowhere more so than in his response to the Russian revolution.

Churchill abhorred the 'foul baboonery' of bolshevism, famously comparing the German transportation of Lenin into Russia by sealed train as being like the importation of a plague bacillus. As Secretary of State for War in 1918-19 he tried unsuccessfully to push for British military intervention in support of the White Russians fighting the Red Army.

To Churchill communism was a challenge to so much of what he stood for: a challenge to Empire, monarchy, nation states, free trade and paternalistic control of the working classes.

Events in Russia drove Churchill to the right and thereafter he saw the spectre of Moscow everywhere: behind the growth of socialism and militant trade unionism in the United Kingdom, behind the General Strike of 1926, and behind plots to destabilize the British Empire overseas. This new element in his world view was a key factor in driving him away from the Liberal Party and back into the Conservative fold in 1924, allegedly allowing him to remark that "anyone could rat, but it took a certain ingenuity to re-rat". Though to his pleasure and surprise he was rewarded by Prime Minister Baldwin with the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Minister in charge of the Nation's finances, and traditionally the second most important position in the Government.

Russia's national interest, or rather that of the Soviet Union, was now the antithesis of what he saw as the British national interest. This led Churchill to express support for Mussolini as bulwark against communism and to be ambiguous about Franco in the Spanish Civil War. But all of this was about to change again. The rise of Hitler and the emergence of his new brand of militant nationalism in Germany posed a new and greater threat to the international order; one which - as Churchill articulated in his October 1939 broadcast – threatened Stalin and Russia as much as Britain. Prior to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, he argued unsuccessfully for the recreation of the Anglo-Franco-Russian great power alliance as a means of containing Germany. And when Hitler finally turned on Stalin and launched his invasion of the Soviet Union, codenamed Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, Churchill saw and seized his opportunity to bring the two countries back into alignment.

Initially, he was faced with a dilemma. How much support should he give to Russia? He could simply have allowed events to take their course, knowing that any German operation against Russia, would be likely to delay further action against the United Kingdom and would, at the very least, lead to the short-term destruction of some German troops and aircraft without loss to British and Imperial forces. Instead, he saw an opportunity to reach out to Stalin. The longer the Russians could be kept fighting, the greater the pressure on Germany, and the greater the likelihood she might be worn down by having to fight on so many fronts. Psychologically, Britain and the Empire would no longer be waging war alone.

He put it more memorably, on the eve of the German invasion of Russia, while walking with Jock Colville on the Chequers croquet lawn. His private secretary had teased him that in offering support to the Soviets he might be betraying his principles, to which Churchill replied:

I have only one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and my life is much simplified thereby. If Hitler invaded Hell I would make at least a favourable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.

In the summer of 1941, he did not know how long the Russians would hold; he did not know how long the Americans would wait. He knew he had no choice but to embrace both. However, it was also clear that the American and Soviet attitudes to the post war settlement, and especially to the fate of the Balkan and East European countries that bordered on Russia, were going to be very different. At that moment, in 1941, those problems were hypothetical, and subordinated to the need to obtain military victory, but as the war progressed Churchill would inevitably find himself caught between the contrasting attitudes of his two allies. How would he be able to reconcile the high principles of Roosevelt's Atlantic charter, with the realpolitik of soviet policy in Eastern Europe? The truth of course was that the only thing worse than fighting with allies was fighting without them.

Still, real attempts were made to support the Russians. Churchill insisted on the hazardous Arctic convoys, which took military supplies to Archangel. His wife Clementine became the head of the Red Cross Aid to Russia Fund which raised huge sums from the British public. It is a largely forgotten fact that the reason she was not at Churchill's side on VE Day in May 1945 was because she was on a tour of Russia, as a guest of Stalin, where she was awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Lenin. The only thing Churchill consistently refused to give Stalin was a Second Front in France. Scarred by the memory of the Dardanelles and favouring a peripheral strategy that would better protect the British Empire he held out against that major operation until he was ultimately outvoted by Stalin and Roosevelt at Tehran in November 1943.

Generally, however, Churchill worked tirelessly to build and sustain the Grand Alliance against fascism. Here again we can see his belief in realpolitik. He believed that history was made by great men at great moments and he loved nothing more than face to face diplomacy, even if it took a terrible toll on his health. In August 1942 he described travelling to Moscow to tell Stalin that there would be no Second Front in 1943 as akin to taking a block of ice to the North Pole. In 1944 he concluded the infamous percentages agreement with the Russian dictator, in which the two men literally carved up the Balkans into spheres of influence.

Churchill believed in his own ability to negotiate and he clearly believed he had established a personal rapport with Stalin (one that was literally established in their cups). The problem was that the Russian leader kept sending him conflicting signals. One moment Stalin was friendly and offering fulsome Russian hospitality; the next he was castigating the British army for their refusal to fight. Friendly telegrams would be juxtaposed with terse demands and calls for action. Churchill chose to interpret this as being indicative of Stalin's weakness. He

concluded that there must be other shadowy forces at work in the Kremlin interfering with his personal relationship. He could not see that this was a deliberate Russian tactic to keep the British and Americans guessing and confused. In this he was not alone. The same tactics were applied to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman and continued into the Cold War.

In a letter to Churchill of 14 October 1947, President Truman reflects: *“Our Russian ‘friends’ seem most ungrateful for the contribution which your great country and mine made to save them. I sometimes think perhaps we made a mistake – and then I remember Hitler. He had no heart at all. I believe that Joe Stalin has one but the Politbureau won’t let him use it”*¹.

With hindsight this seems like an incredible thing for the American President to write but it was actually very difficult for the British Prime Minister or the American President to know what was going on in Moscow.

Churchill may have misjudged or misunderstood the nature of Stalin, but his understanding of Russian national interest led him to become increasingly fearful about Soviet intentions at the end of the war. Britain had gone to war with Nazi Germany over Poland but by 1945 the Red Army was dominating the country and Stalin was in no mood to compromise over political control. We can see Churchill’s language changing in his private telegrams and correspondence. Even before the German surrender he starts to use terms like ‘iron curtain’ and ‘third world war’. In May 1945 he asks the British Chiefs of Staff to draw up war plans against the Soviet Union. The project is codenamed ‘Operation Unthinkable’. And it is clearly unthinkable. It lacks US support and both British and American public opinion still regards the Soviet Union as an ally. Moreover, there is clearly no way of containing the Russians in Europe without it escalating into all-out war, and nobody wants that in the summer of 1945 – with the war against Japan still raging in the East.

Thereafter, any attempt by Churchill to develop a stronger line against Russia was temporarily thwarted by his election defeat in July 1945. But that did not stop him for long and he famously used the platform given to him by President Truman at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri to make a dramatic call for continued and greater Anglo-American alliance in the face of Russian aggression. On 5 March 1946, he warned that ‘From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent’. The speech helped relaunch Churchill and is now seen as a defining moment in the transition to Cold War. To Churchill, Russian national interest was once again in conflict with that of Britain; a conflict that was made far more dangerous by the advent of nuclear weaponry. He did not shy away from the potential of this new technology arguing that the Americans had a window of technological supremacy during which they could use the bomb to force concessions from Russia. All that of course ended with the Soviet Union’s first successful nuclear test in 1949.

In the new atomic age, the threat of Russia influenced all aspects of Churchill’s foreign policy. Both his calls for greater Anglo-American union and closer European union have to be seen in

¹ Truman to Churchill, 14 Oct 1947. CHUR 2/158/46.

the context of Stalin's domination of Eastern Europe. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather two sides of the same coin. Two ways of building alliances and bulwarks against Russia.

Churchill continued to wrestle with these problems, returning for a second term as British Prime Minister in 1951. And there is evidence that he believed that there was some hope, if only a way could be found of resurrecting the wartime dialogue with Stalin. In Edinburgh in 1950 he called for another talk with the Soviet Union at the highest level, referring to such a conference as a "*parley at the summit*" (thereby coining the term for such modern high-level gatherings).

The mutual respect shared by Churchill and Eisenhower is not in question, but their relationship between 1952 and 1955 was strained by differences of opinion. At the Bermuda Summit in 1953, after the death of Stalin, Churchill pushed for a summit meeting with the Russians. Jock Colville's diary, held in our archives, reveals just how dismissive Ike was of the proposal. Using language that was deliberately undiplomatic and unambiguous Eisenhower rejected a summit meeting on the grounds that Russia was like a woman of the streets, it did not matter whether her clothes were old or new, it was still the same whore underneath.

With London in the Russian firing line, Churchill was increasingly horrified by the huge destructive potential of the hydrogen bomb. But it was now too late. Aged 80, with his health failing, he finally succumbed to the inevitable and retired. His final advice to his Cabinet was not to abandon the Americans, which Eden immediately ignored resulting in the Suez debacle. But he remained optimistic that communism would ultimately fail in Russia and – of course – one of his last actions was to found Churchill College in Cambridge to train the next generation of Cold War scientists and engineers.

His approach to Russia was consistent and based on British national interest. He had no truck with communism, but he believed he could work with Stalin. Ultimately, he felt jaw jaw to be better than war war, but it was better to jaw jaw from a position of strength – not appeasement. For him that did not mean the United Nations, it meant a strong and united West and specifically the Anglo-American alliance and NATO.