

Rise of the Superpowers (USA & USSR) from events prior to and during WWII

World War II: the process of superpowerdom

It is often wondered how the superpowers achieved their position of dominance. It seems that the maturing of the two superpowers, Russia and the United States, can be traced to World War II. To be a superpower, a nation needs to have a strong economy, an overpowering military, immense international political power and, related to this, a strong national ideology. It was this war, and its results, that caused each of these superpowers to experience such a preponderance of power. Before the war, both nations were fit to be described as great powers, but it would be erroneous to say that they were superpowers at that point.

To understand how the second World War impacted these nations so greatly, we must examine the causes of the war.

The United States gained its strength in world affairs from its status as an economic power. In the years before the war, America was the world's largest producer. In the USSR at the same time, Stalin was implementing his 'five year plans' to modernise the Soviet economy. From these situations, similar foreign policies resulted from widely divergent origins.

Roosevelt's isolationism emerged from the wide and prevalent domestic desire to remain neutral in any international conflicts. It commonly widely believed that Americans entered the first World War simply in order to save industry's capitalist investments in Europe. Whether this is the case or not, Roosevelt was forced to work with an inherently isolationist Congress, only expanding its horizons after the bombing of Pearl Harbour. He signed the Neutrality Act of 1935, making it illegal for the United States to ship arms to the belligerents of any conflict. The act also stated that belligerents could buy only non-armaments from the US, and even these were only to be bought with cash. In contrast, Stalin was by necessity interested in European affairs, but only to the point of concern to the USSR. Russian foreign policy was fundamentally Leninist in its concern to keep the USSR out of war. Stalin wanted to consolidate Communist power and modernise the country's industry. The Soviet Union was committed to collective action for peace, as long as that commitment did not mean that the Soviet Union would take a brunt of a Nazi attack as a result. Examples of this can be seen in the Soviet Unions' attempts to achieve a mutual assistance treaty with Britain and France. These treaties, however, were designed more to create security for the West, as opposed to keeping all three signatories from harm. At the same time, Stalin was attempting to polarise both the Anglo-French, and the Axis powers against each other. The important result of this was the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, which partitioned Poland, and allowed Hitler to start the war. Another side-effect of his policy of playing both sides was that it caused incredible distrust towards the Soviets from the Western powers after 1940. This was due in part to the fact that Stalin made several demands for both influence in the Dardanelles, and for Bulgaria to be recognised as a Soviet dependant.

The seeds of superpowerdom lie here however, in the late thirties. R.J. Overy has written that "stability in Europe might have been achieved through the existence of powers so strong that they could impose their will on the whole of the international system, as has been the case since 1945..." At the time, there was no power in the world that could achieve such a feat. Britain and France were in imperial decline, and more concerned about colonial economics than the stability of Europe. Both imperial powers assumed that empire-building would necessarily be an inevitable feature of the world system. German aggression could have been stifled early had the imperial powers had acted in concert. The memories of World War One however, were too powerful, and the general public would not condone a military solution at that point. The aggression of Germany, and to a lesser extent that of Italy, can be explained by this decline of imperial power. They were simply attempting to fill the power vacuum in Europe that Britain and France unwittingly left. After the economic crisis of the 1930's, Britain and France lost much of their former international standing--as the world markets plummeted; so did their relative power. The two nations were determined to maintain their status as great powers however, without relying on the US or the USSR for support of any kind. They went to war only because further appeasement would have only served to remove from them their little remaining world standing and prestige. The creation of a non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany can be viewed as an example of imperial decline as well. Stalin explained the fact that he reached a rapprochement with Germany, and not one with Great Britain by stating that "the USSR and Germany had wanted to change the old equilibrium... England and France wanted to preserve it. Germany also wanted to make a change in the equilibrium, and this common desire to get rid of the old equilibrium had created the basis for the rapprochement with Germany." The common desire of many of the great European powers for a change in the world state system meant that either a massive war would have to be fought; or that one of the great powers would need to attempt to make the leap to superpower status without reaping the advantages such a conflict could give to the power making the attempt. Such benefits as wartime economic gains, vastly increased internal markets from conquered territory, and increased access to resources and the means of industrial production would help fuel any nation's drive for superpowerdom.

One of two ways war could have been avoided was for the United States or Russia to have taken powerful and vigorous action against Germany in 1939. Robert A. Divine, holds that "superpowerdom gives a nation the framework by which a nation is able to extend globally the reach of its power and influence." This can be seen especially as the ability to make other nations (especially in the Third World) act in ways that the superpower prefers, even if this is not in the weaker nation's self interest. The question must then be raised, were the United States and Russia superpowers even then, could coercive, unilateral actions taken by them have had such significant ramifications for the international order? It must be

concluded that, while they were not yet superpowers, they certainly were great powers, with the incredible amount of influence that accompanies such status. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union possessed the international framework necessary to be a super power at this time. It is likely that frameworks similar to Nato or the Warsaw Pact could have been developed, but such infrastructures would have necessarily been on a much smaller scale, and without influence as the proposed Anglo-American (English speaking world) pact was. At this time, neither the United States nor Russia had developed the overwhelming advantages that they possessed at the end of the war. There are several factors that allowed them to become superpowers: a preponderance of military force, growing economies, and the creation of ideology-backed blocs of power.

The United States, it seems, did not become a superpower by accident. Indeed, Roosevelt had a definite European policy that was designed from the start to secure a leading role for the United States. The US non-policy which ignored Eastern Europe in the late thirties and forties, while strongly supported domestically, was another means to Roosevelt's plans to achieve US world supremacy. After the war, Roosevelt perceived that the way to dominate world affairs was to reduce Europe's international role (vis-à-vis the United States, as the safest way of preventing future world conflict), the creation of a permanent superpower rivalry with the USSR to ensure world stability. Roosevelt sought to reduce Europe's geopolitical role by ensuring the fragmentation of the continent into small, relatively powerless, and ethnically homogenous states. When viewed in light of these goals Roosevelt appears very similar to Stalin who, in Churchill's words, "Wanted a Europe composed of little states, disjointed, separate, and weak." Roosevelt was certain that World War Two would destroy continental Europe as a military and economic force, removing Germany and France from the stage of world powers. This would leave the United States, Great Britain, and the USSR as the last remaining European world powers.

In order to make it nearly impossible for France to reclaim her former world position, Roosevelt objected to De Gaul taking power immediately after the war. Roosevelt defended the Allies "right [to] hold the political situation in trust for the French people." He presented General Eisenhower control of France and Italy for up to a year, in order to "restore civil order." As British foreign minister Anthony Eden stated, "... Roosevelt wanted to hold the strings of France's future in his hands, so that he could decide that country's fate." It seems inexcusable that Roosevelt desired to hold an ally's nation in trust, comparable to Italy, who was a belligerent. It could be argued, however that they were taking the reigns of power, not from the resistance, but from the hands of the Vichy French.

It might be asked why Roosevelt did not plot the fall of the British Empire as well. A cynical answer to this is that Roosevelt understood that the United States was not powerful enough to check the Soviet Union's power in Europe by

itself. It made sense that because the United States and Britain are cultural cousins, the most commodious solution would be to continue the tradition of friendliness, set out in the Atlantic Charter earlier. As far as economic or military competition, Roosevelt knew that if he could open the British Empire to free trade it would not be able to effectively compete with the United States. This is because an imperial paradigm allows one to sell goods in a projectionist manner, finding markets within the Empire. This allows a nation to have restrictive tariffs on imports, which precludes foreign competition. A nation, that is primarily concerned with finding markets on the other hand, is in a much better position for global economic expansion, as it is in its interest to pursue free trade. The more generous, and likely the correct interpretation is that Roosevelt originally planned to have a system of three superpowers, including only the US, the UK, and the USSR. This was modified from the original position which was formed before the USSR joined the allies, that held for Great Britain to take a primary role in Europe, and the United States to act as a custodial in Asia. Later, after it was seen that either the Germans or the Russians would dominate Eastern Europe, the plan was forced to change. The plan shifted from one where the US and Great Britain would keep order in Europe, to one where Great Britain and the USSR would keep order in Europe as local superpowers, and the US would act as an impartial, world wide mediator. Roosevelt hoped for the creation of an Anglo-American-Russo world police force.

However, Roosevelt, underestimated the power of the Russian ideology. He believed that the Russians would back away from communism for the sake of greater stability and union with the West. Roosevelt saw the Soviet Union as a country like any other, except for her preoccupation with security (the safety corridor in Eastern Europe that Stalin insisted on), but he thought that that this could be explained by the cultural and historical background of Russia. It was not thought unreasonable to request a barrier of satellite states to provide a sense of security, given that Russia and the USSR had been invaded at least four times since 1904. It was felt that granting the Soviet Union some territory in Eastern and Central Europe would satisfy their political desires for territory. It was only after experiencing post World War II Soviet expansion, that the Soviet quest for territory was seen to be inherently unlimited. Roosevelt felt that the position in Eastern Europe, vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, was analogous to that of Latin America, vis-à-vis the United States. He felt that there should be definite spheres of influence, as long as it was clear that the Soviet Union was not to interfere with the governments of the affected nations. The reason that Roosevelt did not object to a large portion of Eastern Europe coming under the totalitarian control of the Soviet Union was that he believed the weakness in the Soviet economy caused by the war would require Stalin to seek Western aid, and open the Russians to Western influence.

Many historians feel that Roosevelt was simply naive to believe that the Soviet Union would act in such a way. Arthur Schlesinger saw the geopolitical and ideological differences

between the United States and the Soviet Union. He stressed however, the ideological differences as being most important. "The two nations were constructed on opposite and profoundly antagonistic principles. They were divided by the most significant and fundamental disagreements over human rights, individual liberties, cultural freedom, the role of civil society, the direction of history, and the destiny of man." Stalin's views regarding the possibility of rapprochement between the USSR and the West were similar. He thought that the Russian Revolution created two antipodal camps: Anglo-America and Soviet Russia. Stalin felt that the best way to ensure the continuation of communist world revolution was to continually annex the countries bordering the Soviet Union, instead of attempting to foster revolution in the more advanced industrial societies. This is the underlying reason behind the Soviet Union's annexation of much of Eastern Europe, and the subjugation of the rest. The creation of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe did not come as a total surprise. Roosevelt thought that America's position after the war, vis-à-vis the rest of the world, would put him in a very good position to impose his view of the post-war world order. The Joint Chiefs of Staff however, predicted that after the German defeat, the Russians would be able to impose whatever territorial settlement they wanted in Central Europe and the Balkans.

World War II caused the USSR to rapidly evolve from a military farce, to a military superpower. In 1940 it was hoped that if the Soviet Union was attacked, that they could hold off the Germans long enough for the West to help fight them off with reinforcements. In 1945 the Soviet Army was marching triumphantly through Berlin. Was this planned by Stalin in the same way that Roosevelt seems to have planned to achieve world supremacy? The answer to this question must be a somewhat ambivalent "no." While Stalin desired to see Russian dominance in Europe and Asia if possible, he did not have a systematic plan to achieve it. Stalin was an opportunist, and a skilful one. He demanded that Britain and America recognise territory gained by the Soviet Union in pacts and treaties that it had signed with Germany, for instance. Stalin's main plan seemed to be to conquer all the territory that his armies could reach, and create socialist states within it. From this it can be seen that one of the primary reasons for the superpower rivalry was Roosevelt's misunderstanding of the Soviet system. Roosevelt and his advisors thought that giving the Soviet Union control of Central and Eastern Europe, would result in the creation of states controlled somewhat similar to the way in which the United States controlled Cuba after the Platt Amendment. The State Department assumed that the USSR would simply control the foreign policy of the satellite nations, leaving the individual countries open to Western trade. This idea was alien to Soviet leaders. To be controlled by the Soviet Union at all was to become a socialist state; freedom to decide the domestic structure, or how to interact with the world markets was denied to such states. Stalin assumed that his form of control over these states would mean the complete Sovietization of their societies, and Roosevelt was blind to the internal logic of the Soviet system which in effect required this. Roosevelt believed that the dissolution of Comintern in 1943, along with the defeat of

Trotsky, meant that Stalin was looking to move the Soviet Union westward in its political alignment. While Stalin might have been primarily concerned with "socialism in one country," communist revolution was a "paramount, if deferred policy goal." Roosevelt's desire for a favourable post-war settlement appears to be naive at first glance. The post war plan that he had created was dependant upon the creation of an open market economy, and the prevailing nature of the dollar. He was convinced that the Soviet Union would move westward and abandon its totalitarian political system along with its policy of closed and internal markets. When seen from such a perspective, Roosevelt's agreement to let the Soviet Union dominate half of Europe does not seem as ludicrous. His fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Soviet state can be forgiven, once it has been allowed that an apparently peaceful nature was apparent at the time, and that it had existed for a relatively short time. While the United States wanted to "eschew isolationism, and set an example of international co-operation in a world ripe for United States leadership," the Soviet Union was organising its ideals around the vision of a continuing struggle between two fundamentally antagonistic ideologies.

"The decisive period of the century, so far as the eventual fate of democracy was concerned, came with the defeat of fascism in 1945 and the American-sponsored conversion of Germany and Japan to democracy and a much greater degree of economic liberalism..." Such was the result of America attempting to spread its ideology to the rest of the world. The United States believed that the world at large, especially the Third World, would be attracted to the political views of the West if it could be shown that democracy and free trade provided the citizens of a nation with a higher standard of living. As United States' Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, "To the extent that we are able to manage our domestic affairs successfully, we shall win converts to our creed in every land." It has been seen that Roosevelt and his administration thought that this appeal for converts would extend into the Soviet sphere of influence, and even to the Kremlin itself. The American ideology of democracy is not complete without the accompanying necessity of open markets.

America has tried to achieve an open world economy for over a century. From the attempts to keep the open door policy in China to Article VII of the Lend-Lease act, free trade has been seen as central to American security. The United States, in 1939, forced Great Britain to begin to move away from its imperial economic system. Cordell Hull, then Secretary of State, was extremely tough with Great Britain on this point. He used Article VII of the Lend-Lease, which demanded that Britain not create any more colonial economic systems after the war. Churchill fought this measure bitterly, realising that it would mean the effective end of the British Empire, as well as meaning

that Great Britain would no longer be able to compete economically with the United States. However, Churchill did eventually agree to it, realising that without the help of the United States, he would lose much more than Great Britain's colonies.

American leadership of the international economy--thanks to the institutions created at Bretton Woods in 1944, its strong backing for European integration with the Marshall Plan in 1947 and support for the Schuman Plan thereafter... (both dependent in good measure on American power) created the economic, cultural, military, and political momentum that enabled liberal democracy to flourish in competition with Soviet communism.

It was the adoption of the Marshall Plan that allowed Western Europe to make its quick economic recovery from the ashes of World War II. The seeds of the massive expansion of the military-industrial complex of the early fifties are also to be found in the post war recovery.

Feeling threatened by the massive amount of aid the United States was giving Western Europe, the Soviet Union responded with its form of economic aid to its satellite countries. This rivalry led to the Western fear of Soviet domination, and was one of the precursors to the arms-race of the Cold War.

The foundation for the eventual rise of the Superpowers is clearly found in the years leading up to and during World War II. The possibility of the existence of superpowers arose from the imperial decline of Great Britain and France, and the power vacuum that this decline created in Europe. Germany and Italy tried to fill this hole while Britain and France were more concerned with their colonial empires. The United States and the Soviet Union ended the war with vast advantages in military strength. At the end of the war, the United States was in the singular position of having the world's largest and strongest economy. This allowed them to fill the power gap left in Europe by the declining imperial powers.

Does this, however, make them Superpowers? With the strong ideologies that they both possessed, and the ways in which they attempted to diffuse this ideology through out the world after the war, it seems that it would. The question of Europe having been settled for the most part, the two superpowers rushed to fill the power vacuum left by Japan in Asia. It is this, the global dimension of their political, military and economic presence that makes the United States and the USSR superpowers. It was the rapid expansion of the national and international structures of the Soviet Union and the United States during the war that allowed them to assume their roles as superpowers.

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