

The USSR and the creation of the buffer zone

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On 17 September 1939, Joseph Stalin annexed the eastern part of Poland and, in the following year, the Baltic States. This Soviet expansion was very similar to the Russian colonisation of previous centuries.

On 22 June 1941, Germany attacked the USSR. Stalin decided to throw everything at the enemy until it was beaten. In order to motivate his people to fight, he called on their patriotic feelings. At the end of the war, the military successes of the Red Army firmly re-established the reputation of the Soviet forces. During the war, alliances with the United States and Great Britain enabled it to make substantial territorial gains.

Territorially enlarged, the USSR came out of the war with an aura of prestige from having fought Hitler's Germany. The country was given new life by its heroic resistance to the enemy, exemplified by the victory at Stalingrad. The USSR also offered an ideological, economic and social model extending as never before to the rest of Europe. Furthermore, the Red Army, unlike the British and US armies, was not demobilised at the end of the war. The Soviet Union thus had a real numerical superiority in terms of men and heavy weapons.

Although in 1945 the Communist world was limited to the Soviet Union, it rapidly spread to Central and Eastern Europe. On 22 September 1947, delegates from the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union, Poland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Italy and France gathered near Warsaw and created the Cominform, an information bureau located in Belgrade. It quickly became the Communist movement's agent for spreading its ideology through its newspaper *For a lasting peace, for a people's democracy*.

Communist propaganda was greatly helped by the presence of the Soviet army in the countries that it had liberated in Central and Eastern Europe. Gradually, the Communists took over the key positions in their governments.

Progressively, the leaders of non-Communist parties were removed: they were either discredited, intimidated or subjected to show trials leading to their imprisonment or even execution. Three years was enough for the USSR to establish people's democracies ruled by Communist Parties. Poland as well as Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia were more or less brutally forced into the Soviet embrace. Nevertheless, the refusal in 1948 of the Yugoslav Communists to follow the line decreed by the Cominform showed that the USSR had some difficulty keeping control of all its satellite countries.

In practice, the USSR seemed to be the only contender to rival the power of the United States, whilst the nations of Continental Europe had been ruined by the war. In August 1949, the USSR exploded its first atomic bomb, then in 1953, its first hydrogen bomb. Its claim to be a world power could no longer be disputed. In the Soviet Union, Stalin continued to govern alone. Liberalising tendencies which had appeared during the war disappeared once again, and Stalin's personality cult reached its height. A further wave of repression was, however, interrupted by the death of Stalin on 5 March 1953.