Report of the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee of Great Britain: ‘Russia’s Strategic Interests and Intentions’, 1 March 1946[[1]](#footnote-1)

TOP SECRET

[1]. We have been instructed[[2]](#footnote-2) to prepare a fresh review of Russia’s strategic interests and intentions, in order to forecast the policy that Russia is likely to pursue in support of her interests both in Europe and elsewhere.

2. Our last report on this subject was dated the 18th December, 1944[[3]](#footnote-3), and we understand that a fresh review is needed as a result of the developments which have taken place since our last appreciation.

3. Any study of Russia’s strategic interests and intentions must be speculative, as we have little evidence to show what view Russia herself takes of her strategic interests, or what policy she intends to pursue[[4]](#footnote-4). We have practically no direct intelligence, of a detailed factual or statistical nature, on conditions in the different parts of the Soviet Union, and none at all on the intentions, immediate or ultimate, of the Russian leaders. For example, we have no intelligence whatever on two such crucial questions as whether Russia intends to continue her demobilisation during 1946 and whether Russian industry is to any substantial extent being reconverted from wartime requirements for the needs of peace. Our present appreciation is based, therefore, on the limited evidence which we have, on deductions made from such indications of policy as Russia has given, and on reasonable conjecture concerning the Soviet appreciation of their own situation.

4. Our report of the 18th December, 1944, came to the following broad conclusions. We consider that these conclusions for a useful basis for a study of the present situation bearing in mind subsequent developments.

(*a*) Russia’s policy after the war would be directed primarily towards achieving the greatest possible measure of security. She would wish to take every possible precaution against being again invaded, however small the risk might seem, and she would need a prolonged period of peace in which to restore devastated areas, to develop her industry and agriculture, and to raise the standard of living.

(*b*) She would wish to improve her strategic frontiers and to draw the States along her borders, particularly those in Europe, into her strategic system.

(*c*) Provided that the other Great Powers were prepared to accept her predominance in these border States, and provided their policy were designed to prevent any revival of German and Japanese military power, she would have achieved the greatest possible measure of security and could not hope to increase it by further territorial expansion.

(*d*) She would at least experiment with collaboration with Great Britain and America in the interests of world security. But if she came to believe that we were not sincerely collaborating, she would probably push her military frontiers forward into the border States in Europe, try by political intrigue to stir up trouble in Greece, the Middle East and India, and exploit her influence over the Communist parties in the countries concerned to stimulate opposition to anti-Russian policy.

(*e*) While Russia would not follow an aggressive policy of territorial expansion, her suspicion of Great Britain and America would continue to cause difficulty as would also her tactlessness in the handling of international relations. Her relations with us would depend very largely on the ability of each side to convince the other of the sincerity of its desire for collaboration.

*Situation at the End of* 1945

5. We consider that, during the course of 1945, the attitude of the Russian leaders has been successively influenced by four new factors: -

(*a*) The speed of the Western Allies’ advance, after crossing the Rhine in March 1945 must have given rise to Russian fears that their Allies would beat them in the race to Berlin, would then refuse to withdraw into their allotted Zones, and so would rob the Soviet Union of many of the spoils of victory.

(*b*) The use of atomic bomb disclosed a weapon which seemed to constitute a new threat to that security for which they have been striving ever since 1917 and which, in late 1944, they seemed, at last, to be on the point of attaining[[5]](#footnote-5).

(*c*) The attitude both of the Americans and ourselves towards Russia seemed to them to harden after the end of hostilities. Both in South-East Europe and in the Far East, the United States Government seemed to them to be pursuing a policy designed to restrict Russia’s aspirations. His Majesty’s Government appeared to be pursuing a similar policy in South-East Europe, Turkey and Persia.

(*d*) On the other hand they must now appreciate that both the British Commonwealth and the United States are incomparably weaker that they were in the summer of 1945. Great Britain is faced with great man-power and financial problems leading to rapid demobilization, while the United States has let her military forces disintegrate, and since the death of President Roosevelt has an executive which lacks decision.

6. In the annexed report, we speak frequently of the “Russian leaders.” By this we mean the inner circle controlling the Communist party of the Soviet Union who are alone responsible for the framing of policy. They include the members of the Politburo of the party and the principal People’s Commissars. They include above all Generalissimo Stalin, whose position is now, we consider, as strong as it ever was. Stalin is, however, over 65[[6]](#footnote-6) and his death would probably result in some slight difference in emphasis of Russian policy, though it might not alter the policy itself. When Stalin has himself in the past intervened in negotiations between Russia and Great Britain and the United States, the result has usually been to make Russian tactics more flexible and accommodating: we cannot tell whether this will continue now that the war is over, but in the event of Stalin’s death it is reasonable to assume that the absence of this modifying influence would be felt.

7. The Russian régime is firmly established and the Government steadily maintaining its authority. The Soviet system is such that, even during the recent elections, the people were given little occasion to express their views on policy or to share in the framing of it. This fact further increases our difficulties in obtaining intelligence on Russian intentions. Decisions are taken by a small group of men, the strictest security precautions are observed and far less than in the case in the Western Democracies are the opinions of the masses taken into account.

*Conclusions*.

8. Our report is annexed. Our broad conclusions are as follows:-

(*a*) The long-term aim of the Russian leaders is to build up the Soviet Union into a position of strength and greatness fully commensurate with her vast size and resources. They estimate the time needed to attain it to be of the order of 50 years. They are convinced that an ultimate position of predominance in the world will inevitably result from the strength of Russia’s national resources and potential, and from the superiority of the Soviet system.

(*b*) They are determined that the development of Russia’s resources shall not again be disturbed by enemy attack, and are consequently preoccupied with the military security of the Soviet Union. They will therefore maintain a high level of modern armaments and will develop to the full Russian industrial resources for defence purposes. They will consider it important to create and consolidate round the frontiers of Russia a “belt” of satellite States with governments subservient to their policy.

(*c*) Consequently we consider that at any rate the short term aim of Russia is to avoid any course of action which, in the opinion of the Russian leaders, may provoke a war in which the British Commonwealth or the United States participate against her. This will apply particularly in the period during which she is rebuilding her military and industrial strength to make up fully for her war losses and relative backwardness in the latest technical developments[[7]](#footnote-7).

(*d*) Meanwhile, if Russia considers attempts are being made to undermine her position in the countries already comprising her “belt”, she will retaliate by using all weapons, short of major war, to frustrate these attempts. She will make full use of propaganda, of diplomatic pressure and of the Communist parties abroad both to this end and to weaken foreign countries. She will also use for this purpose her position in U.N.O. as well as in certain international organisations such as the World Federation of Trade Unions and the World Youth Organisation.

(*e*) Russia will seek, by all the above means, short of major war, to include within her “belt” further areas which she considers it strategically necessary to dominate. Turkey and the major part of Persia are such areas, since the southern frontier of the U.S.S.R. has at present no such protective “belt”[[8]](#footnote-8). In choosing such territories Russia will, for diplomatic reasons, direct her main efforts towards those areas where she calculates that she will not come up against firm combined resistance from the United States and Great Britain together. Such areas are the Mediterranean, Turkey and Persia where the United States feel that their interests are less directly affected than for example on the European Atlantic seaboard and in the Far East.

(*f*) Elsewhere she will adopt a policy of opportunism to extend her influence wherever possible without provoking a major war, leaving the onus of challenge to the rest of the world. In pursuing this policy she will use, in the way she thinks most effective, Communist Parties in other countries and certain international organisations. She will also use her propaganda to stir up trouble among colonial peoples.

(*g*) In considering what action she can take, short of a major war, to attain her immediate aims, Russia will no doubt give full weight to the fact that Great Britain and the United States are both war weary, faced with immense internal problems and rapidly demobilizing their forces. By comparison, Russia’s own forces and industry are still on a war basis. No further demobilization since the 31st December, 1945, has yet been announced, and Russian divisions are being rapidly re-equipped with the latest material.

(*h*) We have considered whether, in view of the above factors, Russia would nevertheless feel tempted to resort to a major war to obtain her ends. We remain, however, convinced that she will make every effort to avoid war in the period referred to I (*c*) above. We have insufficient evidence to enable us to estimate firmly how long this period is likely to last. It is, however, unlikely that her oil input will have been restored to pre-war level before 1950, or that she will have significant quantities of atomic weapons before about 1955–60, though she may develop biological warfare agents a good deal earlier[[9]](#footnote-9). By about 1955–60 the development of Russian industry will have made her self-sufficient in time of war. By about 1952 she will have made up her losses in man-power. We consider therefore that it should be safe to conclude that Russia will do her best to avoid a major conflict at least until the completion of the first post-war Five-Year Plan (January 1951) when the situation should be reviewed in the lights of the facts then available.

9. Although this report is restricted to Russia’s strategic interests and intentions, we consider that attention should be drawn to the dangers inherent in Russian policy as we see it. We have concluded that the main preoccupation of the Soviet leaders is with their security and reconstruction, and that at any rate their short-term aim is to avoid any course of action which, in their opinion, may provoke a war in which the British Commonwealth or the United States participate against Russia. But we have also concluded that, in seeking a maximum degree of security, Russian policy will be aggressive by all means short of war. In brief, although the intention may be defensive, the tactics will be offensive, and the danger always exists that Russian leaders may misjudge how far they can go without provoking war with America or ourselves. It is not for us to recommend policy, but it is clear that the situation will require constant watching.

[Signature] H.A. CACCIA[[10]](#footnote-10)

E.G. RUSHBROOKE[[11]](#footnote-11).

T.W. ELMHIRST[[12]](#footnote-12).

C.E.R. HIRSH[[13]](#footnote-13) (for D.M.I.[[14]](#footnote-14))

[…]

ANNEX

[…]

PART I.

THE PRINCIPAL AIM OF THE U.S.S.R.

The long-term aim of the Russian leaders is to build up the Soviet Union into a position of strength and greatness fully commensurate with her vast size and resources. They are convinced of the greatness of Russia’s future under the Soviet system. We believe it to be their firm conviction that, within the next fifty years or perhaps a hundred years (unlike Hitler, they are not pressed for time), the Soviet Union will inevitably become the most powerful, the richest and the best ordered country in the world.

2. Stalin has repeatedly stated that one of the Soviet objectives is to catch up with and outstrip the industry, especially the heavy industry, of the United States and to raise the standard of living in Russia. He has spoken of the latter task as needing fifty years to complete. Russia’s immense resources, both in man-power and raw material, compare favourably with those of the United States. The present generation in Russia is convinced that the Soviet system with its stern discipline is superior to that of the Capitalist Powers. They expect that political and social troubles will interfere with the development, and weaken the military strength and preparedness, of the United States and the British Empire.

3. This conviction, as well as the greatest problems of reconstruction and economic development immediately facing the Soviet Union, suggest that she is unlikely to embark, in the near future, upon dangerous foreign policies which she considers could lead to a major conflict.

[...]

*General Outlook of the Russian Leaders*.

(a) *Belief in the hostility of the outside world*.

5. The Russian leaders are predisposed to believe that the non-Communist world is hostile, that every man’s hand is against them. This belief derives in part from the course of Russian history, marked as it is by a series of invasions of Russian soil; in part from the Marxist-Leninist faith, which insists on a pure and uncompromising Communist dogma, and which in the past resulted in the political and economic isolation of Russia; in part from the circumstances of intrigue and internal struggle in which the new Russian State was born and in which many of the present Russian leaders emerged to power.

6. For the last twenty years they have made use of this hostility to them as the main basis of their propaganda to justify war preparations. They found ample material for it in the Intervention at the time of the Denikin[[15]](#footnote-15) movement in 1918–19, and in the various open declarations of unfriendliness to Bolshevism on the part of the “Capitalist” Governments and in the Press of the Western countries. Their own incessant propaganda argued that the Soviet Union must be the military bastion of communism, and that military defence against the expected capitalist attack must be the first duty of its peoples.

(b) *The feat of infection with non-Communist ideas*.

7. The Russian concept of “Security” is a very wide one and it covers both defence against military attack and measures against the “infection” of the peoples of Russia with ideas from the *bourgeois* world outside her frontiers, which might, by the suggestion of equal or greater benefits under a non-Communist system, tempt the peoples away from their allegiance to that system. They feel that they must be ever on the watch to prevent that “infection” and that the price of the success which they confidently expect for the Soviet State is eternal vigilance against it. This leads them to be uncompromising in their dealings with the outside world, and to insist on the untiring struggle which they must wage on “Social Democracy”. It leads them also to tighten up Communist party discipline and to insist on an orthodox interpretation of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine at the present time, since there have been many divergences from it under the conditions of war; and it lends an urgency to the need of raising the standard of living in the Soviet Union, since so many of their soldiers have seen conditions in the *bourgeois* world beyond its frontiers, and may be inclined to draw comparisons with conditions at home[[16]](#footnote-16).

(c) *Prestige*.

8. Allied to this feat of infection is the Russian insistence on “prestige”. The Soviet Union embraces an immense Asiatic element and its leaders (many of them, like Stalin, not of Russian race) have not only an oriental fondness for bargaining but also an oriental regard for the maintenance of their dignity in all their dealings[[17]](#footnote-17). They are fully conscious of the enormous strides which the Communist State has made in the last twenty-six years; they have just gained complete victory in a life-and-death struggle and they believe that Russia deserves and is destined, to become the most powerful nation on earth. The setback which they have received from the advent of the atomic bomb and their difficulties with their allies have only served to increase the importance they attach to “face”. Any obvious loss of prestige might also weaken the Soviet Government’s hold over Communist parties abroad. Moreover, it might be harmful to the self-confidence of the Russian people, and to their faith in their leaders and in the Communist doctrines, though this can to some extent be offset by the complete Government control of Soviet Press and Radio.

9. This consideration makes the Russian leaders uncompromising in all their actions which may affect Russia’s position in the world. They feel that the time has come when Russia must assert her position in all world questions. She has, with her share in victory, come out of a position of isolation into which she had been forced by the hostility of the outside world to the Soviet system: she intends to assert herself in every field with the jealousy of one who has been cold-shouldered, and who will make every issue a “question of confidence”. […]

[TNA, CAB 81/132]

Keywords: post-war USSR, inter-allied relations

1. Among the scholarly literature that mentions this report see: Lewis J. Op. cit. p. l – li; Deighton A. Britain and the Cold War, 1945 – 1955 // *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* Vol. 1 / Ed. by M.P. Leffler, O.A. Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 119; Excerpts of the report published in: DBPO. Ser. 1. Vol. 6. London, 1991. p. 297–301. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The corresponding directives were from a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on 6 February 1946. See: C.O.S. (46) 20th Meeting, 06/02/1946 // TNA, CAB 79/44. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. JIC (44) 467 (O) (Final), Report by JIC, 18/12/1944 // TNA, CAB 81/126. The original version of this report was compiled principally by the Foreign Office official A. Noble on 18 October, but was sent on to be refined. On the whole, the report of 18 December proposed (in contrast to a number of Chiefs of Staff memoranda) proceeding from the fact that the main aim of the USSR was ‘absolute security’, which it would try to achieve in three fundamental ways: political cooperation with Great Britain and the USA, the establishment of spheres of influence, and the not allowing the reemergence of Germany. See: Goodman M.S. The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee. Vol. 1. London, 2014. p. 233–234. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This phrase is contained (word-for-word) in a report of 18 December 1944. It was followed by: ‘Moreover, Russian policy at present depends very largely on the decisions of Marshal Stalin.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An analogous thought was contained in the annual report of the British Embassy in Moscow for 1945 (delivered on the 1 October 1946 and signed by F. Roberts): ‘To appreciate the effect of the atom bomb on the rulers of Russia it must be borne in mind that, after the hunted lives of their youth, the immense and dangerous gamble of the revolution, the perils of intervention and civil war, the internecine struggle after Lenin’s death, the perpetual threat of economic failure, the purges of the ‘thirties, the Fascist threat against which by feverish work and terror they dragooned the slipshod Russian people into building security, and the all but fatal invasion, now at last both security and even their dreams of power seemed to be within their reach. They felt invincible; it seemed almost too good to be true. And then suddenly this assurance vanished in the smoke of the atom bomb’ (British Documents on Foreign Affairs (hereafter – BDFA). Pt. IV. Ser. A. Vol. 2. Frederick, 1999. p. 83). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to the official version of events, Stalin was born in 1879; according to information appearing in the scholarly literature of the 1990s, it was in 1878. Stalin himself, as far back as the war years, played up his age and health, including declining long-distance travel and venues that suited him for meetings of the “sick three”. In September 1944, in response to various suggestions for venues made by Harriman for holding a conference of the “sick three”, Stalin suggested that ‘he would welcome the meeting, but the fact of the matter is that of late he has become ill more and more often … his age is telling’ (САМО. Т. 2. С. 212). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The opinion that ‘in all technical matters, all three Services in Russia are considerably inferior to our own’ had been expressed earlier by the British military mission in Moscow (C.O.S. (45) 597 (O), 03/10/1945 // TNA, CAB 80/97). Roberts also wrote later from Moscow of the ‘immense superiority of Western technique’, which was manifested in the atomic bomb (BDFA. Pt. IV. Ser. A. Vol. 2. p. 83). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. According to the evidence – which augments Molotov’s – of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, Stalin, surveying the new post-war map of the Soviet Union, said in respect of the northern, western and eastern borders ‘everything is all right’; the southern border, however, made him less pleased: ‘But I don’t like our border right here’ Stalin said and pointed south of the Caucasus’ (Chuev F.I. Molotov: polyderzhavnyi vlastelin. М., 2002. S. 18–19; translated into British as: Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics, Conversations with Felix Chuev. Chicago, 1999. p. 8). Although the British historian Geoffrey Roberts does not exclude the possibility that such evidence is ‘apocryphal’, he recognises that it reflects some realities of Soviet foreign policy (Roberts G. Moscow’s Cold War on the Periphery: Soviet Policy in Greece, Iran and Turkey, 1943-8. p. 75). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Alongside atomic weapons, the British authorities were also devoting significant attention to biological weapons and their potential role in a future war. In August 1945, the Inter-Service Sub-Committee on Biological Warfare (formed in June 1944) pointed to the rapid progress of the USA in the area of biological weapons’ production, considering this to be ‘a clear indication that biological warfare is a potential weapon of great seriousness, and that it may in fact prove to have a revolutionary effect on methods of future warfare’ (C.O.S. (45) 518 (O), Report by B.W. Sub-Committee, 07/08/1945 // TNA, CAB 80/96). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Caccia, Harold Anthony (1905 – 1990) – British diplomat and civil servant, Vice-President of the Allied Control Commission in Italy (1944), political adviser in Greece (1945), Chairman of Joint Intelligence Committee (1945 – 1946), Ambassador to Austria (1951 – 1954), Ambassador to USA (1956 – 1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rushbrooke, Edmund Gerard Noel (1892 – 1972) – Vice-Admiral RN, Director of Naval Intelligence (1942 – 1946). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Elmhirst, Thomas Walker (1895 – 1982) – Air Vice-Marshal (later Air Marshal) RAF, Air Officer (Administration) in HQ 2nd Tactical Air Force (1943 – 1945), Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Intelligence) (1945 – 1947), Chief of Inter-Service Administration in India (1947), Air Officer Commanding Royal Indian Air Force (1947 – 1948), Commander-in-Chief, Indian Air Force (1948 – 1950). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hirsch, Charles Ernest Rickards – British Brigadier, Head of G-2 Section of 15th Army Group (1945), then Deputy Director of Military Intelligence. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This stands for Directorate of Military Intelligence – the directorate for military intelligence gathering, a subdivision of the British War Ministry. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Denikin, Anton Ivanovich (1872 – 1947) – Russian Lieutenant-General, in 1918 – 1919 Commander of the Volunteer Army, which benefitted from British support at the time of the Civil War in Russia (1918 – 1922). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Earlier, in July 1945, significant stress was laid on this factor by the head of the British military mission in Moscow, Lieutenant-General Gammell, in his Note on Russia: ‘the return to Russia of vast numbers of displaced persons, prisoners of war, and, above all, demobilised soldiers who have seen a number of countries where the standard of life is far superior to the Russian, will set the Soviet authorities a very difficult problem in carrying out their policy of preventing their people from getting a true picture of conditions outside the U.S.S.R.’ (Note on Russia, by Gammell, July 1945 (in: C.O.S. (45) 597 (O)) // TNA, CAB 80/97). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Such an assessment chimed with the judgement on Stalin formed by a former official at the British Embassy in Moscow J. Balfour, who characterised Stalin as among other things ‘deathly proud and quick to react against the slightest suggestion of Soviet inferiority or bad faith’ (Extract from Letter from Balfour to Warner, 16/01/1945 (in: W.P. (45) 156) // TNA, CAB 66/63. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)