

Stalin used Churchill speech to tighten 'Iron Curtain'

By [Vladislov Zubok](#)

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Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech was never published by the Soviet press -- only in May 1998 did it appear in Russian in a historical archival journal. Stalin himself informed his people about it in Pravda. He compared Churchill to Hitler and described him as "a warmonger" who aimed at "Anglo-Saxon ... racial" world domination. At the same time, he claimed that the Soviet Union, despite recent war losses, was capable of waging and winning another war. Stalin's harsh reaction was calculated, not emotional. After the fall of 1945, the Soviet dictator had begun preparations for a possible confrontation with the West. In addition to atomic and other military projects, he launched a campaign to disabuse his lieutenants of any "illusions" about the West's -- and Churchill's -- good will. The "Iron Curtain" speech gave him a pretext for mobilizing the Soviet people against their former allies.

It was not an easy task. Many Soviets, exhausted and hungry, opted for postwar cooperation with the West -- not for a closed empire from Berlin to Vladivostok. And many could not care less about a mythical "war threat" from the West. On the contrary, most Soviets remembered the U.S. Lend-Lease program, including U.S. canned food sent to their nation during the war, and hoped this assistance might continue. It was even rumored among peasants that Western powers might "force" Stalin to disband the hated collective farms.

Intelligentsia, scientists and professionals expected an end to the self-isolation of the U.S.S.R. from the outside world. And millions of World War II veterans who had marched through the towns and villages of Europe could never figure out why on Earth wealthier Westerners might choose to go to war against the poor Soviet Union.

The more clever and perceptive among the Soviet public immediately realized that Stalin's anti-Churchill jeremiad was yet another sign that he had returned to his old ways and there would be no silver lining in their lives. Most surprising, the same sentiment even was felt by the military elite.

Some marshals and generals, conquerors of Berlin, Budapest, Vienna and Prague, returned to the Soviet Union -- some as freshly nominated communist "candidates" to the Supreme Soviet "parliament" -- only to be appalled by the misery in their motherland. Those military professionals, who dreaded a combination of U.S. atomic power and British air bases around the Soviet Union, took Stalin's response to Churchill as provocative bravado.

In March 1946, Stalin for the first time purged his top brass, among them the conqueror of Berlin, Marshal Georgi Zhukov. But even then some military leaders did not remain silent, at least privately. In December 1946, Stalin's military

counterintelligence overheard a talk between two Soviet generals who blamed Stalin for the absence of Western assistance and feared that his confrontation with the West would result in war -- and Soviet defeat.

It took many more months for Stalin to convince his people of the perceived danger from the West and to build a real "Iron Curtain" around his empire.

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