Without Russia, World War II Goes On

by John Stanton

Most Americans are ignorant of Russia’s incredible contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany and Japan. Americans can barely remember the details of World War II and worse still they do not want to be bothered with more than a cursory review of the details, subtleties and chance that WWII was. What the US populace knows of Russia’s efforts in WWII is viewed through the lopsided American narrative of that war and the equally discolored American tale of the Cold War that would run from 1947 to 1991. The latter pitted the two former allies in long, ideological and violent struggle: dictatorial communism versus capitalist republicanism.

In the exceptional book Legacy of Ashes (by Tim Weiner) the driving force behind the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency, General Bill Donovan, said that “intelligence must be global and totalitarian” when facing a totalitarian nation with global presence. The Cold War contest was ruthless with proxy wars and coups, large and small, taking place on every continent. The Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis (Cuba had nuke missiles already in place), and the Vietnam War remain the most obvious examples of war by proxy. But the Cold War saw the US and USSR foment revolution, overthrow freely elected governments (Iran 1953) and fund, create and unleash wicked mercenary forces. Whether left or right wing--backed by the US or USSR, or operating in Central/South America, Asia or Africa--the commonality between them was war, torture, execution and blackmail. Propaganda was also global, distorted and dangerous. Americans trumped up Russian military prowess. Russians mocked the American “way of life” as decadent.

In 1941 Senator Harry Truman uttered this gem, “Let us help the Russians when the Germans are winning and the Germans when the Russians are winning, so each may kill off as many as possible of the other.” It is an attitude that he kept as President.

Post-WWII, George Kennan’s Long Telegraph of 1946 described the Russians as “insecure and neurotic” and outlining the ways that the USSR would subvert Capitalism setting a tone of enmity that would prevail between the two powers during the Cold War. The rest is history.

American impressions of Russia are a tragicomic combination of Truman and Kennan’s muddled opinions. It remains this way in 2013. The US media lambasts Russian officials as oppressive: Putin is a dictator and is censoring the Russian press according to the major US media outlets. Really? Well, President Obama has used an arcane 1917 Espionage Act to attack the media and whistleblowers. And according to Tom Shorrock writing in the Nation Magazine, “By using the NSA to spy on American citizens, the United States has created a police state with few parallels in history: It’s better than anything that the KGB, the Stasi, or the Gestapo and SS ever had.”

Scary Scenarios

But for a time, from 1941-1945, Russians and Americans worked together, if delicately, to defeat the Axis Powers. Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill managed to keep it together and cooperate during the war
years. Each leader had their own national self-interest as a priority and it is quite amazing considering the differences in ideology and post-war goals and objectives that they succeeded in crushing Germany and Japan.

Had the Russians been defeated the world might still be at war. The scenarios for a world without Russia’s tenacity and sacrifice are frightening.

The Nazi ideology—more powerful and deadly than Communism or Capitalism—may have spread to the disenfranchised youth of the post WWII world. Even in 2013 the Nazi philosophy lives and has been adopted by some citizens in the United States. For example, the US National Socialist Movement worships Hitler. The group is on the World Wide Web and is always recruiting youth. In this era of austerity and near economic collapse, fear of the “other” rises and the flames of racism and hatred are fanned. The National Socialist Movement, “a white civil rights nonprofit”, is here to help they say. In a world of Nazi governance, entire segments of the world’s population would be eliminated because of race, religion, creed and sexual preference.

If Russia had been conquered by Nazi Germany, its vast resources would have been used to fuel the Nazi war machine on the Western Front. The Nazi’s might have moved into Asia aided by the Japanese. The US and UK would have had to make critical adjustments requiring more personnel and equipment, and a complete relook of US and UK strategy and tactics. The situation would have been dire.

With Nazi Germany in possession of Russian resources and scientists—and German engineering—they may have developed Atomic Weapons to match those being produced by the USA. How would the Allied Forces find atom bomb producing facilities in the Urals? It may have been the case that the USA would have been forced to drop Atomic Weapons in Germany, a defeated Russia, Japan, France, Manchuria, Italy, etc. Absent the Russians and an accelerated pursuit of Atomic Weapons by the Nazi Germans, WWII may have escalated into an atomic war with Nazi Germany strikes on the USA and the UK.

*Roosevelt, Stalin, Churchill: Godfathers like Don Corleone*

General George C. Marshall told it like it was. Marshall had met Stalin many times during WWII. Unlike many of his political and military colleagues, Marshall treated Russian officials with the utmost respect knowing that disaster would ensue without the Russian fighting machine. He would say “we are doing business with the Russians” knowing that mission success in WWII trumped ideology. Marshall had the uncanny ability to see personalities, trees and forests unlike any around him. Even as Secretary of State, Marshall endeavored to find avenues of cooperation with the USSR.

“It seemed to me quite clear that Stalin was in a desperate situation—we all knew that. He was in desperate need of these things which we couldn’t furnish him. He saw only his side of it, which is not unnatural, we have that all the time—and he was a rough character. Anyone reading his early career would certainly agree to that statement. And this was a message, written by the head of a country, who was a dictatorial head, who had had a very rough time rising to that position, who was now in a desperate situation, facing possible defeat or destruction, and in tremendous need of these things he wanted. And he was to be forgiven if he wrote very much in character, and I thought the Prime Minister
[Churchill] had to consider that. If that came from some other man in some other position, it would be quite a different matter. But I think it was Stalin Au Naturel....I found the Generalissimo [Stalin] a very astute negotiator. He had a dry wit. He was agreeable and in regard to me he made sort of semi-affectionate gestures. When we were in opposition he would stand with his hand on my shoulders. He was arguing for an immediate Second Front...He used to take a little delight in embarrassing Churchill. Stalin was very free in his probing Churchill and did not follow this course at all with Mr. Roosevelt.

When it came to the exact discussion of the military phases, Stalin was reasonable precise and as later evidenced, very sincere, because he carried out his agreements to the day. I am referring now to the matter of moving his armies to Manchuria. I have in contrast to this Stalin in the political field where I met him as Secretary of State in Moscow in 1947. His attitude would completely change the minute it was business. So, in effect, Stalin personally is a very clever negotiator, a man who could lighten the serious part of the affair with rather dry retorts—the kind he turned on Churchill—and when it got into the field he didn’t intend to do business with you, the political field, you got absolutely nowhere.”

Marshall went on to state that Stalin was “very nice” in terms of social graces and that the charge of being a dumb peasant was way off the mark. “No [he was not illiterate] and I was surprised to find seemingly none of our people had read his early history.”

In this remarkable note of history, Stalin expresses his admiration of Marshall. “Eisenhower wrote that after dinner in the Kremlin, Stalin took him aside and “specifically and earnestly requested that I repeat to you the following: `About last February we received from General Marshall certain information involving the intentions of the Germans. Based on this information we made battle dispositions, and when later the information proved to be incorrect, we had considerable difficulty in readjusting our forces to meet the threat. When this occurred, I personally, and on the spur of the moment, sent General Marshall a telegram which was rude, and I have always regretted sending it. Please tell General Marshall that I have always considered him one of the great soldiers and great men of this war and that my opinion of him was not in the least affected by this occurrence. I want him especially to know that I regret the rudeness of my telegram to him.'” [Papers of George Catlett Marshall, ed. Larry I. Bland and Sharon Ritenour Stevens (Lexington, Va.: The George C. Marshall Foundation]

The USA and UK: Back Stabbers?

“Russian suspicions fed by the memory of Western Allied interventions against the Soviet government in 1917-21 and strengthened by Stalin’s fear of invasion on every front and the belief--sometimes well founded--that the Western world would overthrow his regime if it could, surfaced.”

Indeed the USA/UK had their schemes for remaking the world. Churchill headed over to Moscow to propose his own design for Europe to Russian officials in a try to salvage the UK’s role as a major post-WWII player.

“Churchill demonstrated Britain’s diminished power by traveling to Moscow in October 1944 to make a sphere-of-influence agreement with Stalin about their degrees of control in postwar eastern and southeastern Europe. At the meeting, Churchill and Stalin made the “percentage’s agreement”
describing how much say each of them would have over Romania (90 percent Soviet, 10 percent British); Bulgaria (75 percent Soviet, 25 percent British); Yugoslavia (50 percent each); and Greece (90 percent Britain and the United States)….Whether Stalin planned from 1944 on to seize the main capitals of Central Europe or whether he merely attempted to shore up his positions against the un-friendly intentions of the Western Allies is not clear. What is evident is that he feared that the Western Allies might come to terms with the Germans on the western front while leaving the Red forces heavily occupied in the East….The Americans stressed quick military success over long-range political considerations. The result was what Washington should have expected. Stalin and his advisers, deeply suspicious by nature, saw nothing but deception in the Swiss discussions [with the Germans]. But Western persistence on continuing talks without Russian participation merely confirmed the darker doubts of Moscow.

The Reality

The USA’s Public Broadcasting System has a fine and fair analysis of WWII. Absent is the hyperbole and propaganda of the Cold War years and the contest between former allies. The atrocities by all the participants in WWII and post-WWII are the subject of many thousands of books, articles and speeches. In time’s view, WWII was yesterday, a mere 68 years ago.

The Cold War ended 22 years ago. It is from that propaganda filled era that Americans draw their impressions of Russia. That is a shame. But in an America that hardly knows the name or accomplishments of its own George C. Marshall, who had the highest respect for Russia’s leaders and the contribution of the Russian people to defeating Germany and Japan—what can be done to educate them? Perhaps another world war where Russia is needed?

“The World War II leadership of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin is the story of three exceptional men whose realistic assessments of the dangers to their respective countries from Hitler’s Nazi Germany assured the survival of their nations and systems of governance. The tensions that erupted after 1945 were the natural result of the fundamental differences that time and circumstance had pushed aside. All in all, it seems fair to say that the Big Three, as journalists dubbed them, acted wisely in a period of grave peril. The Allies various postwar national aims were incompatible. Churchill and Roosevelt opposed Stalin’s plans for Soviet-controlled Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, where they believed the defeat of Nazi Germany should bring self-determination. Churchill and Roosevelt also had their own differences: they were at odds over the resurrection or continuation of Britain’s colonial empire after the war. In addition, Roosevelt, reflecting American public opinion, was far more enthusiastic about establishing a new world peacekeeping organization (the United Nations) than either Churchill or Stalin.”