Churchill, Stalin and the Iron Curtain speech

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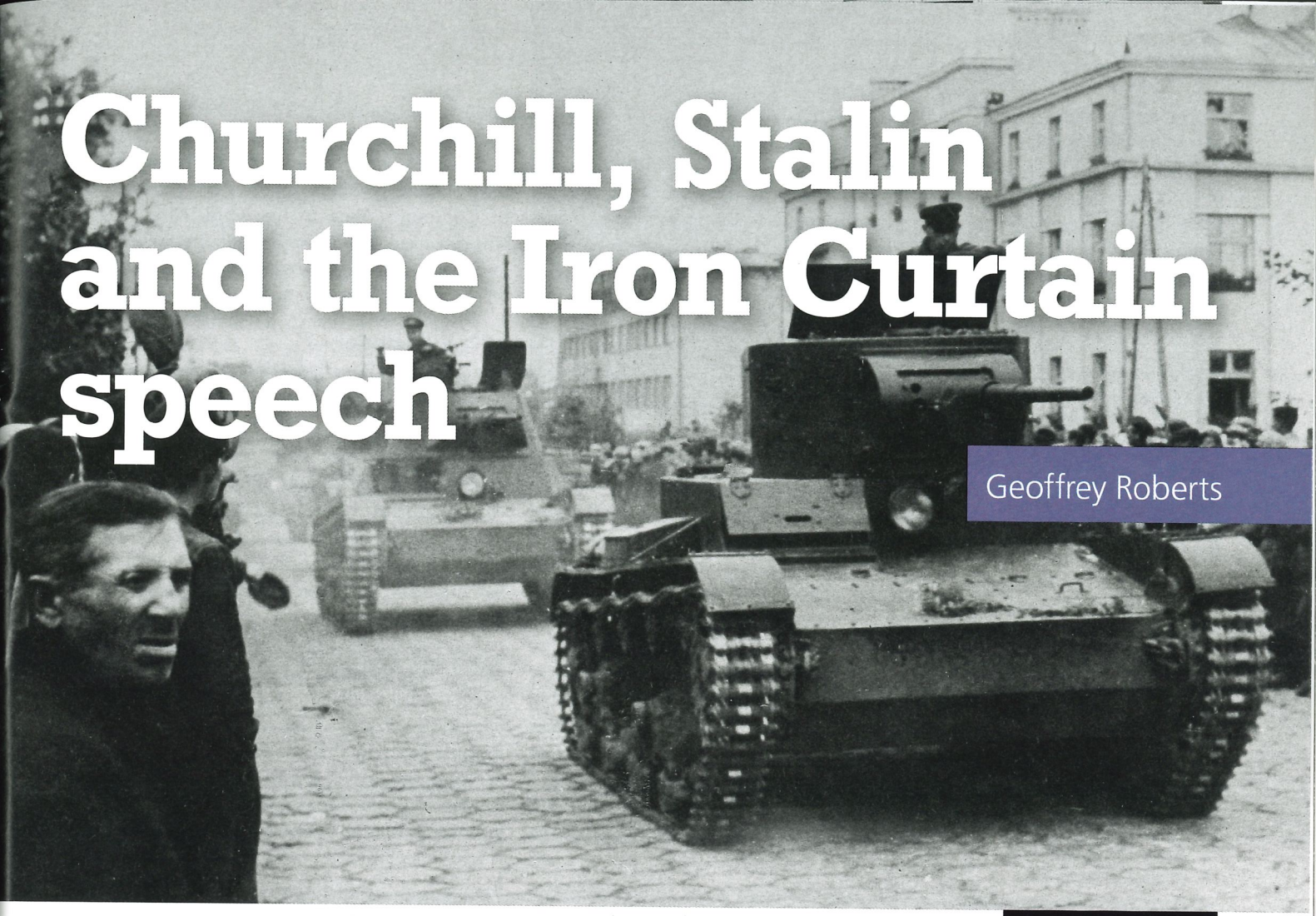

Soviet troops invade Poland

This article examines Winston Churchill's changing attitudes to Russia during the Second World War, and the impact of his 'Iron Curtain' speech

EXAM LINKS

AQA 1H Tsarist and Communist Russia, 1855–1964

AQA 2N Revolution and dictatorship: Russia, 1917–1953

AQA 2R The Cold War, 1945-1991

Edexcel Paper 1, Option 1E Russia, 1917–91: from Lenin to Yeltsin

Edexcel Paper 3, Option 38.1 The making of modern Russia, 1855–1991

OCR Y143/Y113 Britain, 1930–1997

OCR Y253/Y223 The Cold War in Europe, 1941–1995

OCR Y318 Russia and its Rulers, 1855–1964

WJEC Unit 1(AS) 8 Europe in an age of conflict and cooperation, 1890–91

WJEC Unit 3(A2) 10 Changing leadership and society in Russia, 1881–1989

Winston Churchill's attitude to the USSR went from fierce hostility, to Grand Alliance to Iron Curtain. This article traces these developments, focusing on his famous Iron Curtain speech. In the 1930s, Churchill had opposed British and French **appeasement** of Hitler. It was only after the outbreak of war in September 1939 that he returned to office as first lord of the admiralty. In a 1 October radio broadcast, Churchill famously told his listeners that he couldn't forecast the action of Russia: 'it is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.' Less often quoted is what he said next: 'but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.'

Russian aggression

Churchill's topic was the recent Russian invasion of Eastern Poland. The Red Army's entry into Poland on 17 September was in accord with the secret protocol of the **Soviet-German Non-aggression Pact** of August 1939, which divided the country into German and Soviet spheres of influence. Churchill's goal was to persuade his audience that Russian occupation of Eastern Poland was better than Germany occupying the whole country, and that Soviet and Nazi interests would clash to Britain's benefit.

appeasement The policy of negotiating with Hitler and acceding to certain demands for territory, for example at Munich in 1938 when the Sudetenland was transferred from Czechoslovakia to Germany.

Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact A last-minute agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union which postponed war between them until 1941. Often known as 'The Nazi-Soviet Pact'.

El Alamein (23 October–11 November 1942) A battle in North Africa of great psychological importance, as it was the first major British and Allied victory and the first defeat for German land forces.

Stalingrad (23 August 1942–2 February 1943) A crucial battle in which the Soviet army crushed a German army which was besieging the city of Stalingrad.

Somewhat surprisingly, within a few weeks of expressing such hard-nosed realpolitik, Churchill advocated British and French military intervention in Finland, which was embroiled in a war with the USSR following its refusal of Soviet territorial demands. The plan was to send an Anglo-French expeditionary force to Finland via northern Norway and Sweden. En route allied forces would seize control of the Norwegian port of Narvik and of Sweden's iron ore fields — a vital resource to the German war economy.

As the British historian A.J.P. Taylor noted, 'the British and French governments had taken leave of their senses.' Such an intervention would have violated Norwegian and Swedish neutrality, provoked German action to protect their iron ore supplies and caused a military clash with the Soviet Union. Fortunately, Churchill was saved from the folly of an Anglo-Soviet war by Finland's decision to sue for peace, and sign a treaty with Stalin in March 1940.

The alliance

As France succumbed to Hitler in May–June 1940, Churchill gave many defiant speeches, memorably urging his fellow citizens to resist the coming Nazi invasion of the British Isles and brace themselves for their 'finest hour'.

On the eve of the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941, Churchill attempted to explain the anomaly of establishing an alliance with their great communist ideological rival the Soviet Union. He remarked that if Hitler invaded hell, he would make a favourable reference to the devil in the House of Commons. True to his word, Churchill was wholehearted in his support for the Soviet Union and by July, an Anglo-Soviet agreement on military action against Germany had been signed.

Military victories

When the tide of war turned in the allies' favour in 1942, Churchill said that while the rout of Rommel's Afrika Korps at **El Alamein** was not the beginning of the end, it was, perhaps, 'the end of the beginning'. As the western allies drove the Germans and Italians out of North Africa, a far more important battle was taking place on the Eastern Front — at **Stalingrad**. By the time the Germans surrendered in January 1943, 150,000 of Hitler's troops lay dead in the city.

Later in 1943 at the **Battle of Kursk**, Hitler's elite divisions and tank armies were destroyed, in a major defensive operation with deadly counterattacks, opening the way for a huge advance of the Soviet army towards Berlin in 1944. As Churchill told the House of Commons, even after **D-Day**, it was 'the Russian armies who have done the main work in tearing the guts out of the German army'.

A German soldier taken prisoner at the Battle of Kursk

The Iron Curtain speech

But perhaps the most famous piece of Churchillian rhetoric was his peacetime warning in 1946 that:

> From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities...lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject...not only to Soviet influence, but to a very high and, in some cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow...The Communist parties...have been raised to pre-eminence and power far beyond their numbers and are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control.

When Churchill delivered the so-called 'Iron Curtain' speech in Fulton, Missouri on 5 March 1946 he was no longer prime minister, having been defeated by Labour in the 1945 general election — a result that surprised **Stalin** who had confidently predicted an 80-seat majority for the Tory leader.

Churchill on his way to Fulton with President Truman

Churchill did not enjoy being out of power, forced to sit on the opposition benches in the House of Commons. He missed the limelight and craved publicity. His opportunity came when Westminster College, based in Fulton, invited him to receive an honorary degree.

President **Harry S. Truman** returned to his home state to be with Churchill at the ceremony. His presence on the platform added political weight and ensured the event received mass coverage by newspapers and in an iconic newsreel film. The speech, typically Churchillian in its scope, was rather pompously titled 'The Sinews of Peace' — a reference to the perceived need for a robust post-war peace settlement. Churchill's message was that the West needed to get tough with Russia, before the Iron Curtain effectively blocked all western influence from Central and Eastern Europe.

The special relationship

Later, Churchill identified the speech as the most important of his political career but that had nothing to do with his iron curtain reference. It was instead because of the section in which he introduced the world to another enduring idea — the Anglo-American 'special relationship'. Churchill's fundamental position was that a strong British-American alliance was essential to a stable post-war order.

This stance originated with his realisation during the war that Britain needed American help to survive Hitler's onslaught, and that only the United States could preserve the power and values of the English-speaking world. However, while the anti-Soviet theme of Churchill's speech was generally welcomed in the USA, his call for an Anglo-American alliance was criticised. It was seen by some as a species of dangerous power politics that potentially marginalised the newly-created United Nations, a body that many hoped would ensure peace and security for all states.

KEY FIGURES

Winston Churchill (1884–1965)
Controversial British politician. Initially a Conservative politician and then a Liberal, his imperialist politics later took him back into the Conservative Party. He opposed appeasement of Hitler and became prime minister (from May 1940 to July 1945) from which position he became the figurehead of British resistance to Nazism. He had a second spell as prime minister from 1951 to 1955.

Adolf Hitler (1889–1945)
Former First World War corporal in the German army. He founded the Nazi Party and became Chancellor of Germany (January 1933–April 1945) from which position he presided over the holocaust and led Germany into a self-destructive war aimed at world domination.

Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery (1887–1976)
General in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment who fought in the First World War and rose to command British forces at El Alamein and from D-Day to end of war. Known affectionately as 'Monty'.

Josef Stalin (1878–1953)
Son of a cobbler from a small town in the Caucasus who rose through the ranks of the Bolshevik Party, becoming leader in the late 1920s. He was responsible for the brutal processes of industrialisation, collectivisation and the Great Purge. He actively led the Soviet Union to victory in World War Two and remained in authority during the early Cold War until his death.

Harry S. Truman (1884–1972)
American Democrat Party politician from Missouri who became president on the death of Franklin Roosevelt in 1945. Often seen as a decisive influence in turning US policy towards the USSR from one of cooperation to one of containment and hostility. He remained president until 1953.

Kursk (5 July–23 August 1943) A major tank battle in central European Russia in which the Soviet Army resisted an attempted breakthrough by German and allied forces hoping to reverse the strategic losses after Stalingrad. A decisive failure by Germany from which its forces never recovered.

D-Day The first major attack by land forces of US, British, Free French and Commonwealth troops who landed in Normandy and took Paris.

Churchill with Stalin and Roosevelt at Yalta

Cold War origins

Although Churchill did not use the term 'Cold War', his speech is often identified as the harbinger of the decades-long rivalry between the Soviet Union and the West that began in the late 1940s. Soviet newspapers reacted negatively to the speech but also published extensive extracts from it, including the section on the iron curtain. Soviet commentators pointed out that the concept of an iron curtain had previously been used by Hitler's propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels, when he criticised the Red Army's liberation of Eastern Europe from Nazi occupation.

American opinions

The first time Churchill utilised the term was in a telegram to Truman in May 1945, when he complained that the Soviets had drawn an iron curtain along their front in Central and Eastern Europe and 'we do not know what is going on behind it'. A few days later, Churchill berated the Soviet ambassador in London about the 'iron screen' that Moscow had dropped across Europe 'from Lubeck to Trieste'.

containment A term used to describe US policy in first phase of Cold War, designed to 'contain' the spread of communism and communist influence.

EXAM-STYLE QUESTIONS

1 Was the collapse of the wartime Grand Alliance inevitable?

2 Who constructed the 'Iron Curtain'?

3 Discuss the concept of 'containment'.

In June 1945, Churchill warned Truman that American military retreat to the demarcation lines that had been agreed with the Soviets during the war would bring 'Soviet power into the heart of Western Europe and the descent of an iron curtain between us and everything to the eastward'. Churchill's requests cut no ice with Truman, who was counting on the Red Army's involvement in the war against Japan. Not until the successful test of the atomic bomb in New Mexico in July 1945 did Truman's stance on Russia harden significantly.

Stalin

On 14 March 1946 Stalin entered the fray with an interview in the Soviet Communist Party newspaper, *Pravda*, that called Churchill a warmonger and compared Churchill's advocacy of the English-speaking world to Nazi theories of racial superiority. Stalin did not mention any iron curtain, but he asserted the USSR's right to friendly regimes in Eastern Europe and argued that the post-war growth of communism was a popular phenomenon. He also referred to Churchill's role in the anti-Bolshevik coalition after the First World War that had attempted to overthrow the new Soviet state.

Stalin interpreted Churchill's Iron Curtain speech as a sign the West intended to deny the Soviet Union the fruits of its hard-won victory over Nazi Germany. This conviction was further reinforced by Truman's '**containment**' speech to the US Congress a year

later, in which he called for a global struggle against **totalitarian** forces in defence of the free world.

Renewed friendship

Stalin's venomous personal attack on him did not stop Churchill from sending birthday greetings to the Soviet dictator in December 1946, to which Stalin replied 'with warm thanks for your good wishes on my birthday'. In January 1947, **Field Marshal Montgomery** — the British hero of El Alamein — visited Moscow. Stalin took the opportunity to give Monty a message for Churchill, saying that he had the happiest memories of working with Britain's great war leader. Churchill responded on 3 February 1947:

> I always look back on our comradeship together, when so much was at stake, and you can always count on me where the safety of Russia and the fame of its armies are concerned...Your life is not only precious to your country, which you saved, but to the friendship between Soviet Russia and the English-speaking world.

By the time he returned to power as prime minister in 1951, Churchill had shed the mantle of a 'Cold Warrior' bestowed upon him by the Fulton speech, and reinvented himself as a peacemaker who preferred 'jaw-jaw to war-war'. In February 1950 he called for a 'parley at the summit' with the USSR, thus introducing another new word to the international political lexicon. Churchill's call for the resumption of top-level meetings with Soviet leaders did bear fruit, but not until after Stalin's death from a stroke in March 1953. In June 1953, Churchill himself suffered a debilitating stroke, which led to his resignation as prime minister in 1955.

Churchill was happy to appease Stalin and the Soviets during the Second World War — when the Red Army was doing most of the fighting and Soviet civilians were dying in their millions. More positively, he entertained hopes that the Anglo-Soviet alliance could continue after the war. But towards the end of the war, Churchill grew increasingly concerned about the growth of Soviet power and the spread of communist influence in Europe. He felt the Soviets were violating their agreements with him and refusing to compromise on matters vital to British interests. However, he did not blame Stalin personally for the deterioration of relations. It was the people around Stalin that were seen as the problem. For Churchill, Stalin was a relatively benign figure, his wartime comrade-in-arms, a man whose word was his bond.

FURTHER READING

Kennedy-Pipe, C. (2010) *The Origins of the Cold War*, Macmillan.

McCauley, M. (2003) *The Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1949* (Seminar Studies In History), Longman.

Geoffrey Roberts is emeritus professor of history at University College Cork, National University of Ireland. His latest book (with Martin Folly and Oleg Rzheshevsky) is *Churchill and Stalin: Comrades-in-Arms during the Second World War.*

totalitarian An academic term developed to describe the dictatorships of the fascists who claimed 'total' state control of their countries. The term was first used by Mussolini and was later also used to describe the Soviet system of government.

Using this article in your exam

EXAM FOCUS A*

How could this article be useful in your exam?

The Cold War is a popular A-level and IB topic area. It appears on specifications either as a stand-alone unit, or part of a more general one on developments in modern international relations. Exam questions on this topic either involve writing essays or analysing primary sources. A typical exam question might be: 'To what extent was the start of the Cold War the result of the aggressive attitude of the allies towards Russia'? The article by Geoffrey Roberts is very helpful in helping answer such questions, as it skilfully shows how narrative and explanation can be supported (not merely illustrated) by first-hand accounts.

Reference is made to a range of primary sources especially speeches made by Churchill (particularly important and relevant given the focus of the writing). However, the author has also made an important methodological point about the consequences of editing primary sources. Note what Roberts says about the famous Churchillian comment about the Soviet Union: '...it is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma...' How does knowing what follows this quote (as indicated by the author) alter your understanding of Churchill's views on Russia?