

# THE IRON

# CURTAIN

# OF EUROPE

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

**AUGUST 23, 1939**

The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a nonaggression treaty that includes an agreement to split Eastern Europe between Germany and the USSR.

**SEPTEMBER 17, 1939**

After Germany invades Poland on Sept. 1, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin sends troops to occupy Eastern Poland.

**MARCH 13, 1940**

Following more than three months of fighting, Finland signs a peace treaty with the Soviets that gives the USSR possession of Eastern Finland. The League of Nations calls what comes to be known as the Winter War illegal and expels the USSR from the league.



Molotov Stalin

**JUNE 14, 1940**

While the attention of the world is on the fall of Paris, Soviet foreign affairs minister Vyacheslav Molotov accuses the Baltic countries of conspiring against the Soviet Union and demands they put into place governments sympathetic to the USSR. Soviet troops attack Lithuania the next day and Latvia and Estonia the day after that. By the end of the month, the Soviet Union has occupied the Baltic nations and is working to install friendly governments.

**JUNE 1941**

Germany invades the Soviet Union. Stalin, who had ignored repeated warnings that Germany would attack, is taken by surprise. The invasion terminates the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

**NOV. 28-DEC. 1, 1943**

At a conference of Allied leaders in Tehran, Persia, Stalin wins a major concession from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he insists parts of eastern Poland be incorporated into the Soviet Union. At a conference in Moscow the next year, Stalin extracts from Churchill an agreement that Soviet influence in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia be increased.



The Yalta Conference

**FEB. 4-11, 1945**

At a conference of Allied leaders in Yalta, USSR, Roosevelt and Churchill push Stalin to agree to allow Poland to conduct free elections after the war and that the Soviet Union would participate in the United Nations. Stalin requests separate memberships for all 16 Soviet Socialist republics, but that request is denied.

**JULY 17-AUG. 2, 1945**

At a conference of Allied leaders in Potsdam, Germany, Churchill and President Harry Truman back off from pressuring Stalin to loosen his grip on Eastern Europe.

**MARCH 5, 1946**

Speaking at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill warns “an iron curtain has descended across the continent” and that the great capitals of Eastern Europe and their populations are now subject to an “increasing measure of control from Moscow.”

The address is not well-received: Most in the U.S. and the U.K. still regard the Soviet Union as allies from World War II.

On March 5, 1946 — 80 years ago — former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill referred to the closing of Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union after World War II as an “iron curtain” that had descended across Europe.

This speech is often cited as the unofficial start of the Cold War that would affect the world for the next half-century. But, of course, the seeds of the Cold War had been planted much earlier than that ...



NATIONAL CHURCHILL MUSEUM  
Churchill at Westminster College on March 5, 1946.

“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 and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere and are all subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in some cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow.”

— Winston Churchill  
MARCH 5, 1946

## Europe's Iron Curtain



Soviet leader Joseph Stalin accuses Churchill of “warmongering” and claims the alliances made in Eastern Europe are to prevent further Nazi-style invasions.

**JUNE 5, 1947**

U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall announces an ambitious plan to help rebuild postwar Europe with \$12 billion in economic help.



Marshall

The idea of what comes to be called “the Marshall Plan” is that economic stability would provide a foundation for political stability in Europe — but part of that stability would mean preventing the spread of communism. Naturally, Stalin and other Soviet-aligned nations oppose the plan. The next month, Stalin would summon the foreign minister of Czechoslovakia for a reprimand for considering joining the Marshall Plan.

**JANUARY 1948**

The U.S. State Department releases information regarding Russia's 1939 agreements with Nazi Germany including the agreement to split Europe. Again caught off-guard, Stalin denies the secret agreement.

**FEB. 21-25, 1948**

Communist politicians backed by the Soviet Union seize control of the Czechoslovakian government.



U.S. AIR FORCE

The Berlin Airlift

**JUNE 24, 1948**

As the other WWII allied powers began combining the sectors of Berlin they controlled into one — “West Berlin” — Soviet leaders grow alarmed. They fight this by closing off all highways and railroads through East German territory to West Berlin. The U.S.-led Allies respond with an effort to fly in food, fuel and other necessities — including candy dropped to children along the way — in what comes to be called the Berlin Airlift. The blockade and the airlift will continue through May 12, 1949.

**JUNE 28, 1948**

Following disagreements between Stalin and Yugoslavian leader Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia withdraws from the Soviet sphere of influence and declares itself an independent Communist state. It survives with economic help and loans from the United States



Tito

**AUG. 31, 1961**

In order to stop mass defections from Communist-controlled East Berlin into West Berlin, the East German government begins construction of a barbed-wire and concrete wall along the border of the eastern- and western-controlled sectors of the city.

**AUG. 20-21, 1968**

Troops and tanks from the Soviet Union and four other Soviet bloc nations invade Czechoslovakia and occupy Prague in order to halt reforms and political liberalization in that country.

Sources: “At the Abyss: An Insider's History of the Cold War” by Thomas C. Reed, “The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War” by Benn Steil, “Roosevelt and Churchill: A Friendship that Saved the World” by Al Cimino, “World War II Day by Day” by Antony Shaw, “The Second World War” by Winston S. Churchill, Westminster College, National Churchill Museum, BBC, PBS, CNN, Encyclopedia Britannica, History.com

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