



A view of London in December 1940 after a German bombing raid. Great Britain endured a relentless bombing campaign waged by the German air force during the second half of 1940.

half of 1940. The Soviet Union initially signed a nonaggression pact with Germany in August of 1939 and then quickly defeated Finland in the Winter War of 1939–40. On June 22, 1941, however, Hitler launched a full-scale invasion of the Soviet Union, leaving the **Nazi-Soviet Pact** in tatters.

For each of the “Big Three” Allies, unexpected events led to a wartime alliance that remained fragile and pragmatic. This was less true for the Anglo-American partnership, strengthened by the bonds of common culture, shared economic interests, and democratic institutions, than the Soviet-American alliance that depended almost entirely on a shared hatred of a common enemy. For more than a decade after the founding of the Soviet Union in 1922, the United States refused to recognize the new Communist state. Even after formal diplomatic ties were established in 1933, U.S.-Soviet relations remained tense. The United States suspected the Soviet Union of fomenting revolution within America, while the Soviets viewed the United States as an implacably hostile capitalist nation. As ideological opposites with a history of tense relations, the United States and the Soviet Union shared little beyond a common desire to defeat Nazi Germany.

The Soviet-American alliance, in the words of one leading historian, was “forged in the end from the bare metal of national self-interest.”⁶ When those national interests diverged, as they did with increasing speed in the final months of the Second World War, the

Soviet-American alliance strained and then broke. With the aid of hindsight, the coldly strategic logic of the wartime alliance makes the Cold War appear inevitable. To fully understand how two victorious allies turned into bitter rivals at the conclusion of World War II, however, we must turn to the vastly different experiences of each nation in the war itself and to the stark contrast between the interests of the United States and the Soviet Union as each looked to shape the postwar world order.

The American Wartime Experience

World War II was not a fight the United States welcomed or pursued. The nation’s experience in World War I, though relatively brief, had left many Americans disillusioned with Woodrow Wilson’s moralistic brand of internationalism and wary of involving the nation in foreign conflicts. A strain of isolationism, amplified by the acute suffering brought on by the Great Depression, gained traction throughout the 1930s. An opinion poll conducted in 1936 revealed the depth of antiwar sentiment among the American people. When asked if America should take part in another world war if one broke out in Europe, 95 percent of the respondents answered, “No.”⁷ Isolationist groups like the America First Committee attracted hundreds of thousands of members, including the celebrated aviator Charles Lindbergh.⁸ Congress responded to the popular will by passing four separate neutrality acts between 1935 and 1939, aimed at keeping the United States out of war.

The unprovoked Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, however, instantaneously and fundamentally altered the national attitude toward intervention. Congress voted nearly unanimously to authorize American entry into the epic global conflict the following day. Almost overnight, isolationism was rendered politically toxic as the nation prepared for war. By the end of World War II in August 1945, more than 16 million American men and women had served the war effort in some official capacity. During the war, 18.1 percent of American families had at least one member who served in the armed forces.⁹

When the United States entered World War II, the conflict had been raging for two years in Europe and longer still in Asia. By mobilizing vast manufacturing capacity, agricultural production, and technological development to the demands of total war, the United