

How Did the Soviets React to the Marshall Plan?

The United States and the Soviet Union were the two superpowers after World War II. The United States used economic support, including the Marshall Plan, to help Western Europe rebuild and prevent the spread of communism. The Soviet Union saw the Marshall Plan as an exercise of American imperialism. They refused to take part in the Marshall Plan and used its own power to retain a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

History is the story of our lives. It is the story of the lives of those who live and have lived. And, history is not just about one side of the story. We often focus on one side, especially when we are part of the story. But, a complete look at history requires we look deeper.

We have discussed the Marshall Plan in another article, but have done so mainly through the eyes of one side, namely, our own (United States). Do you think Russian students are taught this topic in the same light? Let's now look at how the Soviets reacted in more detail.

What is the Marshall Plan?

The promise that World War I would be the "war that ends all wars" turned out to be as well-kept as your average New Year's Resolution. We can see that by the "I" after "WWI."

After World War II, two "superpowers" grew out of the rubble. The United States and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union now controlled Eastern Europe, a result of years of hard-fought battles with Nazi Germany that involved millions of Soviets dead. The Soviet Union promoted communism, which also was destined to win out in China.

President Truman set forth the "Truman Doctrine" proclaiming that it was the policy of the United States to help the promotion of free people everywhere with the help of economic aid. "Freedom" in the eyes of the United States was not communism. Spoiler alert.

Truman's Secretary of State, George Marshall, followed up with a promise of aid to all of Europe, including the Soviet Union, if the countries could reach an agreement on:

[T]he revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist.

The Soviet Union, however, was a big "NO!" on the whole deal.

American Imperialism

The Marshall Plan was a promise of financial aid for countries in ruins. Why did the Soviet Union not want to take part in the effort? Its decision is reasonable in context.

The leaders of the Soviet Union felt that the financial aid package was an exercise of American imperialism. "Imperialism" has a negative connotation and we might not want to apply it to the "good guys." But, imperialism is the extension of a nation's power by means of diplomacy or military force. It has existed in some form since there were nations.

And, the leaders of the Soviet Union were correct in an important way. The United States did believe that financial aid would be a useful way to extend its power and influence. It would also help stop the spread of communism. "Freedom" in the United States meant anti-communism.

The whole thing was a big success in this fashion, with the U.S. ultimately giving or lending Western European nations billions of dollars. The threat of a communist takeover of Western Europe faded and the region underwent a major economic revival in the 1950s.

Containment: Soviet Style

The Soviet Union originally allied itself with Nazi Germany. But, that did not go very well. Hitler's Germany attacked the Soviet Union. One more time over history, shades of Napoleon's France, where Russia and now Soviet Russia were threatened by the West.

The Soviets did not want that to happen again. They set up a buffer zone, a "zone of influence" in Eastern Europe. The Soviets built up a large military arsenal, including nuclear weapons. And, the Soviets built up their economy, using communist principles.

Their new rival, the biggest threat to their safety and well-being, was the United States. Alexis Tocqueville, the French observer of the American scene, saw this happening back in the 1830s. The United States and the Soviet Union were the two superpowers.

The Soviet Union knew that superpowers gain influence both militarily and economically. The Soviet Union had to contain (limit) the power of its primary rival. The Marshall Plan was a means for that rival to gain economic power over Europe.

[**Containment** is the word used to discuss the policies used by the United States to limit the spread of communism. But, the Soviet Union had its own containment policies.]

The power of the purse meant the United States would be able to call the shots. It would in practice be a means for the United States to have an economic and financial monopoly. And, what happens when one side had too much power? Historically, it meant danger to Russia.

The United States wanted the Soviets to take part, as a sort of "junior partner" in the Marshall Plan. The leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin said, refused to take the bait. The Soviet leaders in Moscow would find another way.

Soviet Alternative

The Soviet Union refused to allow Eastern Europe, the countries under their sphere of influence, to take part in the Marshall Plan. The Soviets used their own resources to rebuild. They also pursued other foreign relationships to build their own international economy.

Rather than become a second-class ally the Soviet Union instead increased its separation from the West. For instance, it tried to completely close off Berlin, which resulted in a major United States airlift [Berlin Airlift] to provide supplies. The Soviet Union ended the blockade, but it was a major point of no return.

They focused on retaining its control and influence in Eastern Europe. In a few years, the United States and Western Europe would organize into a formal military alliance under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Soviets responded with the Warsaw Pact, an alliance with Eastern European nations.

The Soviet Union also directed Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania) to develop economic plans following *communist* principles. No non-communist political parties would be allowed. The Soviets would provide assistance and be their major trading partner. They basically set up an "anti-Marshall Plan."

It's Complicated

[Kristen R. Ghodsee](#) is a historian of Eastern Europe. She has written many articles and books that provide a nuanced view of how communism actually worked in the Soviet Union and countries like Bulgaria. Her biggest theme is that it was not all bad. It was complicated.

I found her writings interesting and helpful. We are taught that there was an "[Evil Empire](#)" and the actions of Putin today in Russia do not help in the effort suggesting it is wrong. But, even granting that the "other side" in the Cold War deserved to lose, we should understand its perspective.

The Soviet Union rejected the offer to take part in the Marshall Plan for various reasons. These reasons were logical, even if from our perspective it was in some fashion wrongminded. And, by understanding its side of things, we can more fully understand the whole story.