

Alliance: The Inside Story of How Roosevelt, Stalin & Churchill Won One War & Began Another

Jonathan Fenby

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy

The history of World War II can be set in a chronology, which gives the appearance of a series of logical events. The League of Nations was ineffectual in controlling Italy in Ethiopia and Japan's war on China. Hitler used a series of pre-emptive campaigns to absorb territory and neighbours into the Reich. His attack on Poland led Britain and France to declare war on Germany. Germany successfully invaded France, Denmark and Norway. Britain decided to fight on.

Hitler attacked the Soviet Union bringing a major ally to Britain, while Britain's bombing of Germany, the Greek and Western Desert campaigns subtracted troops from the eastern war. America had been giving aid to Britain and the Soviet Union, but it was the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbour that brought the US into the war. 'The Big Three Alliance' defeated the Axis powers on terms of unconditional surrender.

Fenby uses this general framework, but he examines dozens of steps along the chronology, which were far less logical or simple than they appear. He teases out the intimate details of the way the alliance operated, examining the interaction of Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill. Using records of messages and anecdotes, and especially accounts of their meetings, he shows the ebb and flow of the alliance; and that every step involved difficulties, suspicions and hard bargaining.

The personalities, policies and long-term goals of the Big Three were major factors in how the Alliance was constructed and sustained and why it finally crumbled. These topics are the substance of Fenby's book. They provide a fascinating, and on many occasions, breath-taking account of the fears, schemes, motives, ideas and misconceptions held by the Allied leaders. The great strength of the book is the way in which Fenby's detailed research provides intimate details of the private and public thoughts of each leader.

This inside account of the war shows that the actual outcome was repeatedly in danger of being very different and far less successful for the Allied cause. Indeed, Fenby shows that the history of the war might have taken very different directions. The leaders' fears were often the motivation for disagreement, evasiveness and ruthless calculation.

Stalin feared that Britain might come to terms with Hitler, and one of Churchill's nightmares was a peace treaty between Hitler and Stalin. Roosevelt wanted the end of the British Empire, while Churchill fought hard to preserve it. American aid was vital to Britain and Russia, but Churchill knew that the Americans had bought British assets cheaply. In post-war Europe, would Stalin's promise of democratic elections hold? Stalin was a tough negotiator and eventually

signed agreements, but could he be trusted? Should Britain and the US accept that Stalin's real aim was to have a controlled buffer zone in Eastern Europe? These are but a few of the issues that bedevilled the Alliance.

At the beginning of the Alliance all were experienced leaders, Roosevelt was fifty-nine, Stalin sixty-two and Churchill was sixty-seven. None of them were imposing figures, but all believed in the 'great man theory' of history. Yet, they all suffered from ill health, made worst by the burdens of leadership and the huge quantities of liquor and tobacco that they consumed at interminable dinners and private talks.

Fenby reveals Roosevelt as a patrician populist, who loved manipulation and plotting. Convinced that he could reason with and influence Stalin more readily than Churchill, he ignored evidence of highly placed Soviet agents in his administration. Stalin, constantly demanding more aid and a second front, was singular in his goal to create a buffer zone between Western Europe and the Soviet Union. Churchill the old warhorse, who saw his role as part of destiny, fought desperately to preserve the empire and Britain's standing.

This is a gripping account of how the Alliance won the war, only to divide Europe and begin the Cold War. Germany's defeat gave Stalin the power to ensure east European states were controlled by the Soviet Union and the large and powerful communist parties in western countries added to the fear of communism.

The Potsdam conference revealed the crucial cracks in the alliance. The conference was designed to resolve the post-war problems in Europe, the war against Japan and the operation of the United Nations. The breakdown grew from the failure to ensure the east European states had 'free expression' in how they were to be governed. Stalin was now seen as untrustworthy, but the West had no means of holding him to his word.

The 'iron curtain' became the symbol of the ideological division between communism and democratic capitalism. The continued modernisation of US and Soviet forces, their huge size, the added power of nuclear weapons and regional proxy wars fuelled the Cold War for over forty years. As Fenby notes 'the alliance had been for war, not for peace'. ♦

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