

# World War II: “Operation Unthinkable”, Churchill’s Planned Invasion of the Soviet Union, July 1945

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*In late May 1945 Josef Stalin ordered Marshall Georgy Zhukov to leave Germany and come to Moscow. He was concerned over the actions of British allies. Stalin said the Soviet forces disarmed Germans and sent them to prisoners' camps while British did not. Instead they cooperated with Germans troops and let them maintain combat capability.*

*Stalin believed that there were plans to use them later. He emphasized that it was an outright violation of the inter-governmental agreements that said the forces surrendered were to be immediately disbanded. The Soviet intelligence got the text of secret telegram sent by Winston Churchill to Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, the commander of British forces. It instructed to collect the weapons and keep them in readiness to give back to Germans in case the Soviet offensive continued.*

According to the instructions received from Stalin, Zhukov harshly condemned these activities speaking at the Allied Control Council (the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom and France). He said the world history knew few examples of such treachery and refusal to observe the commitments on the part of nations that had an allied status. Montgomery denied the accusation. A few years later he admitted that he received such an instruction and carried it out. He had to comply with the order as a soldier.

A fierce battle was raging in the vicinity of Berlin. At his time Winston Churchill said that the Soviet Russia became a deadly threat to the free world. The British Prime Minister wanted a new front created in the east to stop the Soviet offensive as soon as possible. Churchill was overwhelmed by the feeling that with Nazi Germany defeated a new threat emerged posed by the Soviet Union.

That's why London wanted Berlin [to be taken](#) by Anglo-American forces. Churchill also wanted Americans [to liberate Czechoslovakia](#) and Prague with Austria controlled by all allies on equal terms.

Not later than April 1945 Churchill instructed the British Armed Forces' Joint Planning Staff to draw up *Operation Unthinkable*, a code name of two related plans of a conflict between the Western allies and the Soviet Union. The generals were asked to devise means to

“impose upon Russia the will of the United States and the British Empire”.

The hypothetical date for the start of the Allied invasion of Soviet-held Europe was scheduled for 1 July 1945. In the final days of the war against the Hitler's Germany London

started preparations to strike the Soviet Union from behind.

The plan envisioned unleashing a total war to occupy the parts of the Soviet Union which had a crucial significance for its war effort and deliver a decisive blow to the Soviet armed forces making the USSR unable to continue fighting.

The plan included the possibility of Soviet forces retreating deep into the territory according to the tactics used in previous wars. The plan was taken by the British Chiefs of Staff Committee as militarily unfeasible due to a three-to-one superiority of Soviet land forces in Europe and the Middle East, where the conflict was projected to take place. German units were needed to balance the correlation of forces. That's why Churchill wanted them to remain combat capable.

The War Cabinet stated:

"The Russian Army has developed a capable and experienced High Command. The army is exceedingly tough, lives and moves on a lighter scale of maintenance than any Western army, and employs bold tactics based largely on disregard for losses in attaining its objective. Equipment has improved rapidly throughout the war and is now good. Enough is known of its development to say that it is certainly not inferior to that of the great powers. The facility the Russians have shown in the development and improvement of existing weapons and equipment and in their mass production has been very striking. There are known instances of the Germans copying basic features of Russian armament."

The British planners came to pessimistic conclusions. They said any attack would be "hazardous" and that the campaign would be "long and costly". The report actually stated:

"If we are to embark on war with Russia, we must be prepared to be committed to a total war, which would be both long and costly." The numerical superiority of Soviet ground forces left little chance for success. The assessment, signed by the Chief of Army Staff on June 9, 1945, concluded: "It would be beyond our power to win a quick but limited success and we would be committed to a protracted war against heavy odds. These odds, moreover, would become fanciful if the Americans grew weary and indifferent and began to be drawn away by the magnet of the Pacific war."

The Prime Minister received a draft copy of the plan on June 8th. Annoyed as he was, Churchill could not do much about it as the supremacy of the Red Army was evident. Even with a nuclear bomb in the inventory of US military, Harry Truman, the new American President, had to take it into account.

Meeting Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, President Truman took the bull by the horn. He made a thinly veiled threat to use economic sanctions against the Soviet Union.



The Yalta conference: Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill

On May 8, the US President ordered to greatly reduce the lend-lease supplies [military aid] without prior notification. It went as far as the return US ships already on the way to the Soviet Union back to home bases. Some time passed and the order to reduce the land lease was cancelled otherwise the Soviet Union would not have joined the war against Japan, something the United States needed. But the bilateral relationship was damaged.

The memorandum signed by Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew on May 19, 1945 stated that war with the Soviet Union was inevitable. It called for taking a tougher stand in the contacts with the Soviet Union. According to him, it was expedient to start the fighting before the USSR could recover from war and restore its huge military, economic and territorial potential.

The military received an impulse from politicians. In August of 1945 (the war with Japan was not over) the map of strategic targets in the USSR and Manchuria was submitted to General L. Groves, the head of US nuclear program. The plan contained the list of the 15 largest cities of the Soviet Union: Moscow, Baku, Novosibirsk, Gorky, Sverdlovsk, Chelyabinsk, Omsk, Kuibyshev, Kazan, Saratov, Molotov (Perm), Magnitogorsk, Grozny, Stalinsk (probably Stalino – the contemporary Donetsk) and Nizhny Tagil. The targets were given descriptions: geography, industrial potential and the primary targets to hit. Washington opened a new front. This time it was against its ally.

London and Washington immediately forgot they fought shoulder to shoulder with the Soviet Union during the Second World War, as well as the their commitments according to the agreements reached at the Yalta, Potsdam and San-Francisco conferences.

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