

Seven.

Planning for the post-1945 settlement - for each of the wartime combatants - began a long time before the declaration of victory over Germany. This made much sense, given the unpredictable outcome of previous European conflicts. In 1919, after all, the Whites came within an ace of taking Bolshevik Moscow. They would have too, if only the Poles (saving themselves great agonies in the years to come) had consented to assist the White general, Deniken, in this task. And in 1941 the German invader came very close indeed to physically occupying Moscow and breaking the political will of the Soviet dictatorship: or both. If either had happened, the late twentieth century history of Europe would have been markedly different to what it was. In any case, the Germans faltered at Moscow, Leningrad and Stalingrad; in essence, they were broken at that latter contest, though they fought their long retreat with tremendous courage and tenacity.

But back, inexorably back, they were driven; and by 1942, certainly by the following year at the latest, it was clear that Hitler's armies were going to be driven out of Soviet territory. The question was: how far? And what would happen if the Germans then made a unilateral peace with Russia's allies in the west?

In other words, what were the various possible shapes of the post-war settlement in Europe? And what, for each of the contestants, was the most-favoured shape among these options?

As far as the Russians were concerned, the answers were obvious. Many centuries of tsarist history indicated clearly that their aspirations would be to secure the western border of the empire: but this time, on a grander scale than ever before. That is, subjugate

the Baltic states and Poland; even better, throw in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and whatever else could be grabbed along the way. And compensate for the failure of the German communists to seize their country in the early Thirties by at least grabbing half of it by force of arms. As a trade-off, perhaps they would share the Balkans with the western powers, and cede Greece to Britain.

But how far beyond these minima could Stalin go? What could he get by way of extra, thanks to bluff or treachery or force of arms? What could be taken at once, and what could be earmarked for taking later? And how might the situation develop in his interests - or against them? Above all, how could the Americans - with their huge industrial and commercial and military might - be decisively out-manoeuvred?

After all, by the later stages of the conflict Soviet war production was barely hitting its stride. But even then airplanes, tanks, artillery pieces and trucks were pouring off the production lines, and there was no shortage of fuel or steel or rubber or specialised skills or equipment or metals to keep them in service. Nor was there any shortage of ammunition.

In other words, as the war drew to its end, it became clear to the Soviet planners that - if they were so inclined - they enjoyed the option, albeit at some considerable risk, of driving on to the shores of the Atlantic. They might not have gone quite as far as that, of course. After all, on the western flank of Germany were to be found the armies of Britain and the United States. The atomic bomb had not yet been used: would the Americans have dared use it in Europe or Russia in any case? Could the Soviets have survived a strike at that stage? How many bombs did the Americans actually have to drop anyway? And even if they could have got atomic weapons

delivered safely over Soviet population centres (having to fight their way there through ferocious Soviet air defence systems): would the destruction of a city or two have broken the Soviet will? Much more importantly, could these same weapons have disabled the dispersed army groups at Stalin's command? Could either Russia or America have risked a titanic conventional military ground war in a nuclear-devastated Europe, when the Americans still had to resolve their war with Japan? And if the Americans had risked a ground war in Europe, how long would it take them to push the Russians back? Could they have pushed them back at all? And how far?

In other words, how far could Stalin have pushed his luck? Both Stalin and the blood-drenched guttersnipes of his leadership were no strangers to bluff and treachery and brute force; three of the great traditions of Soviet politics. What possibilities did they discuss in the Kremlin in the course of their night-long drinking sessions? What about seizing Denmark, to guarantee an outlet to the North Sea? What about Kiel and the fire-bombed ruins of Hamburg, where a deep-water naval fleet might be stationed? Or a deal with Japan, perhaps? Having secured her borders in Europe, what about a treaty with the Emperor, who at that point was facing the invasion of the Japanese mainland by American forces massing on the islands to the south? It had to be a seaborne invasion, after all, which depended on airpower to destroy Japan's defensive capabilities. If Stalin's existing air (and submarine) power had been switched to the Far East just after the fall of Germany: could the Americans have been stopped in their tracks, and the western Pacific snatched as a Soviet sphere of influence?

Nobody knows the answers to these questions. Nobody knows either what deals might or might not have been concluded

between the United States and Russia at Tehran, or indeed earlier or - in strictly bilateral negotiations - later in the war. But somewhere along the line there was a deal: somewhere along the line, someone in Soviet strategic planning saw a window of opportunity in the fluid situation of European power politics as the Second World War drew to a close.

That window was between the surrender and occupation of Germany in May 1945, and the conclusion of America's business in the Pacific. The nights were long, the seas were smooth, most of the British army was safely on the mainland of Europe; and the Americans, for one reason or another still unknown, were not prepared to object. The Soviets - in five long-practised steps - moved, and moved very quickly. And as a result the matter - largely - was resolved within little more than a week.

It may be supposed that the decision to invade Britain had been taken in the immediate wake of the Tehran conference, although it seems more than likely that the prospect of such an attack had been proposed and discussed much earlier.

In any case, there was from that point a steep increase in Soviet intelligence activity on British soil. Legal Soviet intelligence operations were enhanced greatly over the winter of 1944-1945, when all eyes were on the rapid German retreat through Poland and - at length - the eastern provinces of the Reich. Thus Soviet operations multiplied unseen, although it is easy in retrospect to identify the course of them. After all, it is a matter of record that there was a huge increase in the complement of military advisers, observers, and liaison staffs centred on the London embassy and the multitude of missions which had developed throughout the years since 1941.

There was clearly too a greatly increased effort in the field of illegal espionage work, albeit much of it fairly routine business of the sort that might be conducted on the territory of a potential rival. Strangely, though this activity was well-enough known to British security, its significance was never correctly identified.

With the intelligence field clear for play, the infiltration began of units of special forces under a variety of legal and illegal guises. Many of these units were held in readiness on Soviet-flagged merchant and naval vessels at or close to British ports. Others enjoyed the shelter of one or other of the many military missions scattered around the country. At least two were smuggled into the London embassy in the guise of trade delegations. A number of others was concealed by sympathisers in some of the industrial districts. Yet more had been landed by submarine and had concealed themselves in coastal countryside until the moment to strike came. Others, it is supposed now by military historians, were landed from submarine at the last moment, or perhaps dropped by parachute at dusk on the Saturday evening.

In any case, the first strike went home an hour or so before dawn on the Sunday morning. The targets of these squads were individuals, almost entirely, who had a significant role to play in government and the military establishment. All across London and the south of England, search-and-destroy teams made their way to sleeping homes. Well before dawn the symbolic, administrative and political leaderships of the state, the War Cabinet, the ministers, the chiefs of staff, lords of Admiralty, the heads of the civilian and military intelligence and security services, were dead, or under close arrest. And if by some mischance the target of the operation had been missed, the members of his family were seized by way of

hostages. It was all exceedingly easy: after all, the country was asleep, and still in the throes of a victory-hangover. And nobody in their wildest dreams would have expected this sort of thing, in the stillness of an English Sunday morning!

Later, when the Liberation and Occupation had given way to the Settlement and the Protectorate, the memoirs of some of those involved with these special forces had been published; at the time, nobody was quite sure whether this was by design or by accident. But it was clear from this material that these men and women had been in training for the operation for a long time, at a series of special training-school somewhere to the east of the Urals.

An entire village had been built for them, in which the lingua franca was English: there had even been a pub with old copies of the Sunday newspapers and long runs of the angling and country-pursuits magazines. Clearly, the standard of planning had been very high; street plans, even floor plans of individual buildings, had been available long in advance.

According to these memoirs, some five hundred special forces teams had been deployed, each consisting of around six to a dozen members. Their style of operation had been at times laughably casual; but then, their targets had been laughably casual too. On a number of occasions, teams in civilian clothes had simply driven to the town houses of politicians, knocked politely on the door, and forced their way in when it was, with some ill-tempered surprise, opened to them. Others, with countryside targets to attend to, had on occasion booked into local hotels, and spent the Saturday evening drinking, not always lightly, until it was time to act.

In any case, by dawn that Sunday morning the second stage of the operation was under way. Some hundred principal civilian

and military airfields came under attack from heavily armed paratroops, who had secured grounded aircraft, anti-aircraft systems, runways, control and communications towers and perimeters, within an hour of landing.

According to the official reports on the Liberation - as it was styled - these paratroops had been flown from airfields in western Poland and sites to the east of Berlin. They enjoyed no fighter cover and needed none either, for nobody in any of the armies sprawled across western Europe scrambled interceptor squadrons, or bothered to interrogate by radio. (Much later, this was attributed to Soviet infiltration of military air-traffic control). And anyway, Germany was well and truly defeated: the notion of two-hundred strong fleets of planes, wave upon wave, loaded with paratroops and streaming quietly across the southern North Sea in the very early hours of a summer Sunday morning, seemed ridiculous. By the time people realised that planes in RAF livery were dropping parachutists on the local airfield, and bothered to ask why - well, it was just too late to do much about it.

Within an hour, even less in places, of the first assault securing the airports, further waves of aircraft appeared, under heavy fighter escort. This time the livery was that of the Soviet Air Force. And by lunchtime they had landed very heavily-armed airborne infantry, along with light artillery, tanks, half-tracks and trucks. It was not the sort of force that could sustain serious battlefield attack, of course: but then it was not intended to do any more than hold the fort for a time.

Once again, these troops operated according to a tight and detailed schedule. Principal targets of attention were transport and communications facilities, along with administrative centres and

ammunition and fuel dumps. These last were quickly taken by assault commandos. With two exceptions, they accomplished their objectives on that soft Sunday morning with charm and guile. After all, who really expected chaps speaking English, in British or Commonwealth or American uniforms, to roll up just before lunch and ask for a look round? By the time anybody realised that something strange was under way, it was too late.

Meanwhile, the entire transport system of the country had been brought to a standstill. Rail junctions were seized with ease, the lines simply blocked with disabled trains. Much the same sort of things was done on the main roads, and if motorists caused any trouble they were shot dead in full view of the rest. This proved an effective means of restoring order quickly to the highways. Once or twice roads were mined and blown apart, but in general it was not necessary.

Similarly, small groups of soldiers were able to seize many of the country's principal broadcasting relay transmitters, telephone exchanges, and post offices, while some few thousands of commandos drove straight into central London. Who was to stop them, after all? By early afternoon, they had seized the principal communications buildings of the armed forces, the BBC, and the major newspaper printing plants. Special squads also took possession of the headquarters of every principal department of state, the Houses of Parliament, and the royal palaces in the capital. Those found in each of these places were at once seized as hostages.

By mid-afternoon, in other words, the country had been occupied and seized by a few thousand soldiers whose endeavours had hardly been noticed by the populace. Military radio systems

were dead, the broadcast wireless was under control of the invader, and the few thousand captains of politics and public affairs were in custody. The vast bulk of the armed forces was abroad; either enjoying a lazy Sunday somewhere in occupied Germany, or still at war in the Far East. Any air force planes were safely on the ground and under Soviet control; and as for Royal Naval vessels in port or at sea in home waters - who was to tell them what to do, and what in any case might they have done?

There were some significant battle-vessels in a few of the south coast harbours; some more on the Clyde, and yet more on the Forth. By teatime that Sunday, they had been sunk as a result of Soviet submarines, or long-range torpedo bombers.

And throughout the course of the afternoon and into the long summer evening, the landings of the main forces went on. Important ports - mainly on the east coast, and Channel ferry ports - came under undefended attack from paratroops and battle-hardened marines from the Crimea. In every case the airborne troops landed outside the town and the marines came ashore on beaches some distance away. The towns, without exception, had been secured by the time the seaborne convoys of infantry and armour were arriving.

Landings went on throughout the Sunday night, and by Monday afternoon Soviet control of the country was largely complete. The major cities and ports were secure along with military installations, while power stations were garrisoned, along with fuel and ammunition stores. There had been no significant opposition of any kind: and a few minor civil disturbances had been suppressed with entirely un-necessary savagery and at the cost of some thousands of civilian casualties.

But on the military front there had been very few casualties for an operation of this scale. In the early hours, there had been some small-arms shooting during the assault on the airfields. One or two Soviet aircraft had also come under anti-aircraft fire, but almost all had landed safely. After all, RAF bomber and fighter squadrons were at rest at their bases at home or dispersed throughout France and Germany. Naval forces in European waters were either in harbour or at sea. But without clear orders, they were quite powerless. And the key personnel of naval command, and the communications centres, had been seized and neutralised by lunchtime at latest on the Sunday. In other words, the ships remained at anchor or remained at sea, awaiting orders that never came.

By late on the Monday, the flow of orders was under way again, with all army, naval and air units ordered - in the name of the appropriate authority - to remain where they were. And by then, it was too late for firepower anyway.

In short, the invasion had been a brilliant demonstration of the application of central military principles: meticulous planning, speed, perfect intelligence, surprise, treachery - the art of the least expected, the art of attacking when and where no reasonable person could reasonably imagine possible: and in overwhelming strength.

At six o'clock on Monday, then, normal service on the BBC resumed. Broadcasting had in fact resumed earlier in the day, but only of non-stop military music without any continuity presentation to interrupt it. At six, however, the news returned, though with an unknown presenter. The first item informed the listeners that patriotic elements in the former government had called on the

assistance of allied powers to maintain order in the face of an imminent fascist coup d'état. Fraternal assistance had been rendered, and government was now secure. People were to remain calm, and further information would shortly be available. Prominent members of the former leadership had disappeared. Chief among these was King George VI and his family. Their personal security was a matter of grave concern to the authorities. Extremely generous rewards were to be offered for any information leading to the discovery of these fugitives. Similarly, any collaboration in their concealment would result in summary justice of the most severe character. A process of political normalisation would soon begin. From nine o'clock that evening, for a period of twelve hours, there would be a nationwide curfew in force: penalties for infringement would be extremely severe. Armed units of a fraternal power would enforce these penalties on a summary basis.

That constituted the news. Another programme of military music followed. Then a full production of St Joan. Not the German one, nor the English, but the Russian one. Thoughtful listeners were left to wonder what it all meant. Others wondered exactly what political normalisation might mean.

They would not have long to wait in finding out.