Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe, 1945-1949

By the end of this spread you should be able to:
1. describe Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe, 1945-1949
2. explain how it was achieved

The Iron Curtain
The frontier between Soviet-dominated Europe and the West. During 1947-1948 it was closed on Stalin’s orders, ending all tourist and trade contacts between them.

Fig. 1 Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, 1945-1949

Key
- Areas occupied by the Red Army, May 1945
- Countries which became Communist (with dates)
- Communist states dominated by the USSR
- Other Communist states
- The Iron Curtain
- Divided cities
- Areas of Germany and Austria under Western control
- Areas of Germany and Austria under Soviet control
- Pre-war boundary of USSR
- Post-war boundary of USSR

Yugoslavia
Not occupied by the Red Army as resistance fighters led by Marshal Tito were mainly responsible for freeing the country from German control. In 1945 Tito took power as a Communist dictator and worked closely with the USSR. In 1948 he quarrelled with Stalin who cut trade links. Yugoslavia survived as an independent Communist state.

Case study: Poland

1939 Poland’s pre-war leaders set up the Free Polish Government in exile in London.
Polish resistance fighters set up Home Army loyal to Free Polish Government.
1940 In the Katyn Forest, the Red Army massacres 4500 captured Polish army officers likely to lead post-war opposition to Communist rule.
1941 Germans drive Red Army from Poland.
Stalin sends agents to help resistance by Polish Communists loyal to Moscow.
1944 The Red Army enters Poland again.
In Warsaw the nationalist Home Army rises against the Germans.
The Red Army waits for the Germans to destroy the nationalists before taking Warsaw (Jan 1945).
Soviet agents set up a Communist Provisional Government.
1945 At Yalta (page 51) Stalin agrees that members of the Free Polish Government will join the Provisional Government.
Stalin invites 16 Home Army leaders to Moscow and imprisons them (page 51).
The Provisional Government of National Unity set up. Non-Communist members include Free Poles.
1947 Many members of popular non-Communist parties are imprisoned.
Despite their unpopularity, the Communists win an election.
Communist leader, Bierut (trained in the USSR) becomes head of a one-party Communist state.
Fig. 2 How did the USSR manage to dominate Eastern Europe, 1945-1949?

The events and timing were different in different countries but there was a common pattern:

**Step 1** 1939-1945. Many Eastern European Communist Parties, though small in numbers (and politically weak), take a lead in resisting German occupation.

**Step 2** 1944-1945. The Red Army drives German forces west and occupies Eastern Europe. By May 1945, Soviet troops controlled all states but Yugoslavia, Albania, and Greece (fig. 1).

**Step 3** 1944-1945. Communist Parties welcome the Red Army and receive its support. Pro-German groups were executed or debarred from power. Despite being a minority, Communists exercise strong influence.

**Step 4** 1944-1945. The emergence of Communist leaders prepared to take orders from Moscow. Many return home after spending part of the War in the USSR.

**Step 5** 1945. Coalition governments are set up. They include Communists and non-Communists. Since Eastern Europe was mainly agricultural with land worked by peasants, most non-Communists came from the popular political parties representing peasants and small farmers.

**Step 6** 1946-1949. Backed by Moscow and the Red Army, the Communists gradually force non-Communists out of power. Methods include intimidation, vote rigging, show trials, imprisonment, and executions. By 1949 all countries behind the Iron Curtain are one-party Communist states taking orders from the USSR.

**Case study: Czechoslovakia**

**Until 1938** Czechoslovakia had held free elections and enjoyed a free press. In 1945 the Czechs expected these freedoms to be restored. In 1948 it was a shock to the West when the only pre-war democracy in Eastern Europe, finally turned Communist.

**1945** Czech President Benes wants Soviet help in rebuilding the country. In return, he agrees to appoint Communists to run important ministries in charge of the police, communications, and the armed forces.

**1946** ‘National Front’ coalition government set up of non-Communists and Communists. Divisions among non-Communists give Communist minority additional influence.

**1947** Stalin forbids the Czechs to take part in the USA’s Marshall Plan (page 55)

**1948** Communist Interior Minister dismisses senior police officers, replacing them with pro-Communists. Non-Communist ministers resign in protest hoping to bring down the Government.

Armed Communists take over the offices of radio, newspapers, and political parties. Police crush student protests.

Leading non-Communist minister, Jan Masaryk, is found dead. Unclear whether it’s suicide or murder. Communists win general election after take-over or suppression of all other parties.

Purge of non-Communists in civil service, education, armed forces.

**Benes resigns and is replaced by a Communist.**

1 Make a timeline to show when the various states of Eastern Europe fell under Communist control.

2a Use the experience of Poland to illustrate the six steps to Soviet control (fig. 2).

b What other factors were significant in Poland’s case?

3a In what respects was Czechoslovakia different from other Eastern European states?

b Why was the USSR eventually able to take control there?