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978-0-521-85677-5 - Yalta 1945: Europe and America at the Crossroads

Fraser J. Harbutt

Excerpt

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I

The Confusions of Yalta

Yalta's tantalizing combination of political drama and deep public emotion, as well as the urge to understand an event that so obviously lies near the center of the break-up of what Churchill liked to call "the Grand Alliance," has engaged many historians. There is also a natural professional interest in transitions, in the way great conflicts end and lead into a new, often unanticipated phase. But Yalta, even when viewed simply as a technical problem in diplomatic history, presents more difficulties than most such cases. The conference lasted only ten days; it took place before the end of the war whose ravages it supposedly aspired to mend; and it was conducted in complete secrecy. The other great terminal conferences of modern history seem transparently clear by contrast. The 1815 Congress of Vienna is generally seen as a success because the plenipotentiaries knew each other and took their time. They wined, dined, and seduced their way through about a year of spasmodic activity. "The conference dances but it does not move," complained one observer.¹ Still, they created, at least temporarily (some would say for a century), a stable, post-Napoleonic order. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 self-consciously followed this model; it also took several months, and though it is generally regarded as a failure today we at least have a clear record and a substantial measure of academic agreement as to the aims of the Great Powers and what was said and done.²

¹ Attributed to Prince Charles-Joseph Ligne. Tim Blanning, *Times Literary Supplement*, June 13, 2003.

² See Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919* (New York, 2002); and Charles K. Webster, *The Congress of Vienna, 1814–1815* (London, 1920).

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Yalta was not a conventional, punctuating negotiation in this sense. Indeed, there was no such comprehensive peace conference after World War II. Instead, we see a string of often hastily arranged meetings between 1941 and 1946, several of which may be held to have contributed in some measure to the final outcome. Naturally, the three great summit conferences have drawn much attention: Teheran in 1943, a strategy-oriented meeting that saw the introduction of basic but not yet crystallized political themes; Yalta in February 1945, for better or worse a kind of creative, architectural moment; and Potsdam in mid-1945, a necessary confrontation with practical postwar problems. But, as will be seen, this narrow fixation on the three summits offers only a spurious clarity – a brilliant surface, certainly, but one that elevates the “Big Three” concept excessively and obscures and diminishes less glamorous negotiations and a number of other causative impulses.

The high public emotion that Yalta has always inspired is another problematic for the historian. The wide variety of entrenched perspectives is daunting. These include a bitter Polish interpretation, natural enough considering the territorial and political violations visited upon that tragic country; a deeply resentful French view, soon to become a generalized European sense of subjection to a United States–Soviet hegemony; a British suggestion of a hard-won victory prejudiced by tragically clumsy diplomacy on the part of the two emergent superpowers; a Soviet belief that President Harry S. Truman, abetted by Churchill and American capitalists, betrayed Roosevelt’s well-intentioned Yalta commitments; a conservative charge in the United States that FDR had been either traitorous or incompetently naïve; and the Truman administration’s conviction that Stalin had violated his Yalta pledges, especially his declared acceptance of Polish independence and Eastern European democracy.³

The natural corrective to a witches’ brew of this kind would have been a full documentary account. None was made available until the official American record of Yalta was released in 1955. By that time politicians, editorialists, and memoirists had established the dominating, sharply edged images. Yalta had already become not only a primary cause of dissension between the United States and the Soviet Union, but also a symbol for the

³ See, variously, R. Umiastowski, *Poland, Russia and Great Britain, 1941–1945, A Study of Evidence* (London, 1946); Arthur Conte, *Yalta ou le Partage du Monde* (Paris, 1966); Chester Wilmot, *Struggle for Europe* (London, 1952); Diane Clemens, *Yalta* (New York, 1970); Felix Wittmer, *The Yalta Betrayal: Data on the Decline and Fall of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1953); and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Origins of the Cold War,” *Foreign Affairs* (October 1967), pp. 22–52.

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Europeans of their eclipse at the hands of the two supposedly hegemonic superpowers; a token for small countries of Great Power domination; and a harsh measuring point for many Americans of Roosevelt's reputation. By the time an authentic record had become available all these feelings were already deeply entrenched, as indeed they are to this day. Historians had already lost the battle for definition. Much of their effort thereafter was concerned with only half-successful attempts to discredit proliferating myths rather than with patient reconstruction.⁴

The Cold War inevitably brought its own distorting pressures. There was a widely felt need everywhere, but especially in the United States, whose citizens felt that they had been suddenly pitchforked into a role that cut right across their historical tradition of detachment from Europe, for quick explanations of the disappointing outcome of World War II and for justifications of the new, assertive postwar policies. Yalta – initially portrayed by the Big Three as a great success and then, within weeks, exhibited to the world as a failure – was quickly and perhaps inevitably seized upon as the crucially causative diplomatic event and was then caught up in a worldwide media whirlwind of partisanship and recrimination that only slowly spilled over into academic circles. Professional historians during the Cold War wrote books about Yalta that endeavored to be even-handed but that, as we will see, tended to mirror the political atmosphere of the day. It was difficult to be objective. There was an emphasis on answers and justification. Complexities were brushed aside as Yalta was made to serve, as it still does today, as a shorthand explanation of the origins of the Cold War, much as “Munich” has been used since 1939 as a catch-all reference point for the lead-up to World War II. And there is nothing more functional than today's conventional view, a distillation of Yalta's many diverse characteristics, that the three powers created there the postwar division of Europe as well as “Yalta orders” for that continent and Asia.

We are talking here, to be sure, of images, not reality. The creation of the symbolic Yalta (or Yaltas) is potentially a large, fascinating subject in cultural-intellectual as well as political terms. But my main purpose in this book is simply to offer an explanation of Yalta itself and not, except in

⁴ The United States documentary record is in FRUS, *The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945* (Washington, D.C., 1955). The British records are in PREM 3/51/4. The Soviet government's published account is *The Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences: Documents* (Moscow, 1960). Three varying perspectives on Yalta are found in John Snell (ed.), *The Meaning of Yalta: Big Three Diplomacy and the New Balance of Power* (Baton Rouge, La., 1956); Clemens, *Yalta*; and Russell Buhite, *Decisions at Yalta: An Appraisal of Summit Diplomacy* (Wilmington, Del., 1986).

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these ground-clearing comments, to probe deeply into the epidemic imagery that has obscured its real significance. Still, having mentioned some general reasons for the distortions, it seems appropriate to single out one tangible cause that does establish some sense of connection between the event and the image, and also helps explain the extraordinary fervor of the widespread public emotion we have just noted.

This is the role of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Yalta was in many ways his conference. Stalin chose the remote site, to FDR's and Churchill's dismay, but Roosevelt did most to stage-manage Yalta's form and character. He began by refusing to join the Europeans in the traditional task of setting a preliminary agenda. Determined to control the conference's presentation, he took with him carefully chosen domestic political figures who could convey the right impression to the American people. He took the lead in refusing any independent press coverage and selected a trusted photographer whose group portraits of the three could be relied upon to send out from the Crimea a striking image of Allied power and unity. Viewed bleakly across six decades, these pictures are in fact disturbingly suggestive far beyond the president's intentions: Roosevelt manifestly haggard and ill; Stalin mostly aloof and in most photographs cold as a statue; Churchill grimly brooding. But at the time the grainy newspaper reproductions served the cause.⁵

More to the point, Roosevelt, by artful use of the language he had persuaded the European allies to accept in the Declaration on Liberated Europe, gave the world the impression, in the glowing vision he and his associates created publicly after the conference, that he had been able to bring about a surprising and deeply gratifying degree of harmony and constructive promise among the Big Three victors, who would now go on, under the hospitable auspices of a liberally refashioned world organization, to build a progressive Wilsonian order of justice and goodwill.⁶ This oversold vision, which Churchill later likened to "a fraudulent prospectus," had profound consequences. Roosevelt, suddenly rendered defenseless by death, was succeeded by Harry S. Truman, who took the view that the Declaration was a treaty that Stalin, already acting unilaterally and oppressively in Poland and elsewhere, was deceitfully violating. But an increasing

⁵ For conference preparations and recommendations, see FRUS, *Yalta*, pp. 3–428. For photographers and censorship, see Roosevelt to Churchill, January 22, 1945, in Warren Kimball, ed., *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence*, 3 vols. (Princeton, 1984), vol. III, p. 515 (hereafter cited as *Correspondence*, volume and page).

⁶ The Declaration on Liberated Europe is in FRUS, *Yalta*, pp. 971–973.

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number of Americans also blamed the supposedly naïve FDR, who now became for many of them (and for even more Europeans) a logical if not inevitable scapegoat for Yalta's failure to rein in the Soviets and for much else that was now going wrong in Europe. Alarming revelations of Roosevelt's secret dealings at Yalta – his willingness to give additional United Nations memberships to the Soviet Union, territorial concessions made to Stalin at China's expense, the forced repatriation of Soviet citizens – which emerged shortly after the conference and mostly after the president's death, stoked the fire. As Cold War tensions grew, he became the focus of McCarthy-era allegations that he had “sold out” Eastern Europe and China at Yalta. He was accused of treason by American right-wingers. Even some moderate American opinion was inclined to wonder whether Roosevelt's dubious public portrayal of Yalta had not led more or less directly to the breakdown of United States–Soviet cooperation.⁷

To put matters in this way, however, is not to endorse any particular view. The natural question, of course, is why President Roosevelt felt it necessary to act in this fashion, effectively creating two Yaltas. As we will see later, he had his reasons, perhaps very good reasons. Let us suspend judgment. My present purpose is simply to draw attention, in the briefest possible way, to some of the causes of the initial confusion that set Yalta off on a Cold War career of polemics, crises, and raw emotions, ending finally in the strangely distilled “Yalta Order” of today's common editorial usage. For the moment it is enough to note that in 1955 President Eisenhower published the documentary record of the conference. This had the effect of clearing Roosevelt of “betrayal” charges but left him branded as a “naïve” statesman who had not properly understood Stalin or Soviet/communist aims – a charge made by Churchill, with some delicacy but with crystal clarity, a year on so before in the final volume, *Triumph and Tragedy*, of his immensely influential war memoirs.⁸

We will return in a moment to the various ways in which Yalta was received in the United States. But first let us see how the combination of

⁷ For the “prospectus” comment and letter, see Churchill to Roosevelt, March 8, 1945, *Correspondence III*, pp. 547–551; Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*, Vol. 1, *Year of Decisions* (New York, 1955), pp. 15, 24–25, 71–72, 77, 82. See also Athan Theoharis, *The Yalta Myths: An Issue in United States Politics, 1945–1955* (Columbia, Mo., 1970), pp. 19–22, 29–33 and passim. For Stalin's reaction to post-Yalta events, see Fraser J. Harbutt, *The Iron Curtain: Churchill, America and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York, 1986), pp. 95–99.

⁸ See Theoharis, *The Yalta Myths*, pp. 195, 200–202, 206–208 and passim. See also Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 6, *Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston, 1953), pp. 346–402.

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Roosevelt's supposedly gullible Yalta diplomacy, American postwar hegemony, and Europe's misery and decline – all increasingly subsumed in the “Yalta” indictment – encouraged a pervasive sense of victimization in the old continent. This began immediately after Yalta with the understandably bitter protests of the Polish exile government in London and their supporters in the large Polish diaspora over the fate meted out by their supposed allies: political subjection to the Soviet Union, and severe territorial amputation in the east with as yet only vague compensation in the west, which, when regularized, would leave postwar Poland even more beholden to Moscow as the indispensable protector against German irredentism.⁹ The French were also aggrieved from the outset. They, especially General Charles de Gaulle, resented their exclusion from the conference, manifestly signifying their lost status. Yalta was henceforth seen in Paris as the symbol first of a keenly disliked Anglo-American and then of a United States–Soviet hegemony. British writers, drawing on revived memories of President Woodrow Wilson's alleged ineptitude in Paris in 1919, soon joined the parade of resentment, beginning in the early 1950s to suggest that Roosevelt had similarly prejudiced a hard-won victory by his irresponsible Yalta diplomacy.¹⁰

The circle of grievance soon widened. As they recovered some self-confidence in international affairs, German spokesmen and writers in the Federal Republic also began to look to Yalta as a prime source of their postwar tribulations. By the mid-1950s, as the post-Stalin Soviets began to talk seductively of “disengagement,” we find German scholars blaming “the punitive attitude” of the British and Americans at the conference for the division of their country. By this time the Italians were also expressing the continental angst. The geopolitical theorist Luisi Bonnanti complained that Italy's postwar political system, which was often in disarray, had been imposed by the victors at Yalta. Other views occasionally broke through. In 1958 an Italian academic journal even published a pro-Roosevelt article by an American historian, though the editor found it necessary to warn his readers in a prefatory note that the author had not seen fit to mention FDR's errors at Yalta, for which, he pointed out, Europe had suffered so much during the previous twelve years.¹¹

⁹ Umiastowski, *Poland, Russia and Great Britain*, pp. 436–441.

¹⁰ Charles de Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope: Renewal and Endeavor*, trans. Terence Kilmarton (New York, 1971), pp. 199, 226. See also Roger Gromand, “De Gaulle et Yalta,” *Revue des Deux Mondes*, no. 9 (1982), pp. 629–634; and Wilmot, *Struggle for Europe*, p. 714 and *passim*.

¹¹ H. Herrschaft, “Zur Dokumentation von Jalta,” *Militär Politisches Forum*, 4, 5 (1955), pp. 21–31; Luisi Bonate, “L'Italia nel Nuova Sistema Internazionale, 1943–1948,”

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“Eurocentrism” of this kind may perhaps be seen as a mirror image of what we think of as “Americocentrism.” Both reflect a high degree of self-preoccupation. The most acute point of sensitivity for European commentators was the apparent subjection of their continent to the hegemonic Anglo-American and/or Soviet powers. They tended to see Yalta and all it stood for as an unwelcome and politically annihilating visitation from outside, an attitude summed up by the headline “Europe Out of the Game” that the French historian Jean Laloy gave to his discussion of the consequences of 1940.¹² The abdication failure or reluctance of continental European historians through the Cold War era to look for alternative explanatory scenarios that might have recognized some purposeful European political role in the wartime Allied coalition (Anglo-Soviet if not French) naturally reinforced tendencies in the United States to assume that there had been an all-encompassing American control of the significant events.

In general, it was the grievance-ridden French who most strenuously and creatively asserted the malign significance of Yalta, often attaching more blame to the American “false friends” than to Stalin’s Soviet Union, which was treated by many Parisian intellectuals as at best a benign model and at worst a political force of nature whose excesses in the unfolding of history’s design could be excused. One should not exaggerate French anti-American sentiment. It is demonstrable that Yalta served for millions of French and other Europeans through the Cold War as a kind of rallying point for Americophobic sentiment. But balancing this there was also a strong pro-American symbolism associated, for instance, with memories of Lafayette, World War I, and the Marshall Plan. For every Jacques Servan-Schreiber raising the alarm in his *The American Challenge* one can find a Jean Francois Revel celebrating American vitality, as he did in his book *Without Marx or Jesus*. Similarly with Yalta: Arthur Conte’s critique of Yalta in *Le Partage de Monde* must be juxtaposed with the work of a number of other French historians, from Andre Fontaine to Pierre de Senarclens, who have challenged the notion that it led to an American-mandated division of Europe at the Crimean meeting.¹³

Comunita, 27 (1973), pp. 13–75; Walter Johnson, “L’Opinione Pubblica e la Politica Estera Americana,” *Rassegna Italiana di Politica di Cultura*, 35 (1958), pp. 211–224.

¹² Jean Laloy, *Yalta: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (New York, 1988), p. 8.

¹³ Jacques Servan-Schreiber, *The American Challenge* (New York, 1969); Jean Francois Revel, *Without Marx or Jesus* (New York, 1984); Conte, *Le Partage du Monde*; Andre Fontaine, *Histoire de la Guerre Froide*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1965); Pierre De Senarclens, *Yalta*

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It was the French too who were initially instrumental in putting Yalta to constructive uses in Europe. During the Cold War era the continental lament was steadily transformed into a foundation of Europe-wide solidarity. At every stage in the postwar move toward unity – in the progressive social democratic Franco-British impulses of the late 1940s; during de Gaulle’s federally oriented “Third Force” period in the 1950s and 1960s; and later with the idea of a new Europe built around Franco-German reconciliation and leadership – Yalta featured in at least some French public commentary not simply as a moment of unwanted division imposed from outside, but as a catastrophe to be transcended, a fresh point of departure. French President Francois Mitterand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl were particularly focused on this. As Mitterand put it in 1989, “Yalta is the symbol of the division of Europe into zones of power or influence between the Soviet Union and the United States. I dream of a reconnected, independent Europe. I dream about it and I work for it.”¹⁴

Effusions of this sort, looking beyond the grievances of the immediate postwar years to a larger European identity and the repudiation of “Yalta’s dark legacy,” repeatedly appeared in editorial comment at the anniversaries of the conference and steadily acquired an all-European character. In the 1980s, Eastern Europeans also began to see themselves as part of a continent-wide struggle against what many had long seen as Yalta’s hegemonic superpower imposition, despite a natural sense of the difficult odds during the Cold War. The Hungarian intellectual George Konrad, writing in 1984, drew from the failure of the 1956 uprising against Soviet rule the pessimistic conclusion that “it is impossible to alter the Yalta system from inside by means of dynamic, uncontrolled mass movements.”¹⁵ But this jeremiad was confounded at the end of the decade as the success of the Polish Solidarity movement, the decisive emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev, and the collaboration of the United States came together in the late 1980s. One of the striking features of those heady days was the constant reference to a “Yalta Order,” supposedly now being brought to a welcome close. The Cold War, whose origins had seemed so messy and complex to many, now appeared to have a clear start and finish, with the Yalta conference and the destruction of the Berlin Wall emerging to general approval as the respective political

(Paris, 1965); *Time*, April 13, 1987. See also Conte, “Le XXe Siecle,” *Nouvelle Revue des Deux Mondes*, 5 (1979), pp. 289–294.

¹⁴ *New York Times*, November 30, 1989.

¹⁵ “The Post-Yalta Debate: George Konrad Interviewed by Richard Falk and Mary Kaldor,” *World Policy*, 2 (1984/1985), pp. 451–466.

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book ends. From the sharp-edged clarity of 1989, the whole world could now look back to Yalta as the foundational sin of the postwar era.¹⁶

How do British attitudes fit in here? It is a question that brings to attention a curious feature of the whole post-Yalta process, namely, the immunity from serious criticism of Britain and its wartime leader. Certain flinty European conservatives never let Churchill off the hook. In his war memoirs de Gaulle was still grumbling about the “endorsement given by the Anglo-Saxons at Yalta” to the Soviets. Alexander Solzhenitzen also wrote scathingly of “the cowardly pens of Roosevelt and Churchill.”¹⁷ But this is unusual. Most British commentators took their line from two influential books. The first to appear was reporter Chester Wilmot’s *Struggle for Europe* (1952), which was fiercely critical of Roosevelt’s supposed naivete at Yalta. Wilmot revived many of the old resentments about American diplomacy after the previous war and, in the words of one reviewer, “gave voice to the nagging anti-Americanism that lurked beneath the English sense of dependency and focused it on Roosevelt.” Fast on the heels of Wilmot’s book came Churchill’s *Triumph and Tragedy* (1953), which faulted the former president with compelling and unique authority and gave these negative emotions a respectable gloss. Politically this thinking was perfectly compatible with the administrations of Truman and Eisenhower, with whom Britain was now collaborating closely, and who had also now turned away self-consciously from Roosevelt’s supposed legacy.¹⁸

Triumph and Tragedy was the last of Churchill’s six volumes on the Second World War. It included an artfully Brutus-like critique of Roosevelt’s conduct at Yalta. The historian David Reynolds, in a recent book aptly titled *In Command of History*, suggests that “Churchill’s main object ... was to prove that he had been a far-sighted prophet of the Soviet threat” and “to shift responsibility for Western mistakes on to the Americans.” American liberal reviewers, with some solicitude for FDR’s reputation, had seen this coming and had laid down a series of warnings as Churchill’s previous volumes had appeared. Thus, as early as 1948, the pundit Anne O’Hare McCormick had expressed admiration for *The Gathering Storm* but predicted that when Churchill’s account reached 1945 “the historian

¹⁶ *New York Times*, April 13, 1988 (Fuentes), and February 17, 1990 (“Yalta II”): *The Sunday Times* (London), July 9, 1989.

¹⁷ De Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope, Renewal and Endeavor* (New York, 1971), p. 226.

¹⁸ Wilmot, *Struggle for Europe*, p. 714 and passim; D. C. Watt, “Britain and the Historiography of the Yalta Conference and the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History*, 13, 1 (Winter 1989), p. 79; Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy*, pp. 346–402.

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will have a hard time justifying the statesman.” By that time, however, with Roosevelt and his closest associate, Harry Hopkins, long dead and the Cold War in an intense phase, Churchill had an undistracted global audience at his feet. While discreetly conveying an overall impression of his own perception and a contrasting American credulity, he explicitly criticized FDR for his carelessly volunteered statement that no American troops would remain in Europe after two years and for making the Far Eastern deal with Stalin (which he called the “least defensible” agreement at Yalta) and went on to question Roosevelt and (more delicately) other American leaders for the post-Yalta failure to face up to the fact and implications of Stalin’s violations.¹⁹

For the next two decades this line of thought, lumping Soviet expansionism and Rooseveltian naivete together as primary causes of the Cold War, appears to have been the accepted wisdom in British thinking about Yalta. As late as 1985 a respected columnist in *The Times*, David Watt, condemned “Roosevelt’s fatuous belief in his own abilities to ‘handle’ Stalin in 1944 and 1945.” Not that there was very much scholarly work in Britain on such topics during most of the postwar era. A traditional suspicion of “contemporary” history, combined, perhaps, with the perception of declining British power in a fast-changing world, seems to have inhibited the development of a school of Cold War historians. This was the reverse of the situation in the United States, where, following World War II, a heightened sense of national power, destiny, and purpose led many toward Cold War studies. But this juxtaposition, which has over time produced an unfortunate imbalance in the field, was not due simply to emotional distaste in Britain or to glory mongering in the United States. Much of the difficulty was that the British documents for the World War II era were released only in the 1970s, nearly two decades after the American Yalta documents had appeared. From that moment on, British (and later some American) historians began to break down, to some degree, the politically established Churchillian view of an intimate Anglo-American wartime relationship that came to grief with the fateful divergence at and immediately after Yalta, and to develop a more typically European perspective. But, in general, the Wilmot-Churchill perspective persists in much British thinking. One finds innumerable echoes of it in books such as R. W. Thompson’s *Churchill and Morton*, where the author refers to “the sinister Roosevelt,”

¹⁹ David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London, 2004), pp. 138, 425, 434, 470.