By Invitation | Jaw-jawing at Yalta, 80 years ago

The neglect of Asia was the great failure of Yalta, writes Stephen Kotkin

Black grouse and caviar helped Stalin get much of what he wanted, but his Red Army counted for more, says a notable historian of Russia

ILLUSTRATION: DAN WILLIAMS

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on, follow the course of the conflict week by week, in new instalments every Friday. In our entry of February 7th, we looked back at our coverage of Yalta.

EIGHTY YEARS ago the Big Three—America, Britain and the Soviet Union—assembled for eight days of jaw-jawing at the Crimean resort of Yalta, their second gathering to finish the second world war and adjudicate the post-war order. Yalta proved to be a vastly grander spectacle than the preceding meeting, in late 1943 in Tehran, with far larger delegations. Yet the results proved to be less significant, precisely because of Tehran's decisions. "Yalta made less history than is generally believed," the left-wing journalist Louis Fischer noted just over a quarter-century on, voicing the new conventional wisdom. He was only half right, writing as if Asia did not exist.

Three old men worn down by the war gathered at Yalta: the imperialist and anti-communist Winston Churchill (71 years old), the communist Josef Stalin (67) and the anti-imperialist Franklin Roosevelt (63), who, although the youngest, had congestive heart failure and was to die that April. It was Adolf Hitler who brought the three together, and he was soon dead, too.

As Roosevelt waffled on about rich countries needing to help poorer ones, Churchill looked bored, while Stalin doodled. The drink and the delicacies—black grouse, partridge, venison and caviar—were sensational amid severe wartime deprivations. The despot's Georgian-Russian hospitality came in handy, but his Red Army was handier. It stood within striking distance of Berlin, while the Americans and the British were fighting in the forests of the Ardennes to regain lost territory.

Roosevelt was the first sitting American president to set foot in Russia. Having travelled a third of the way around the Earth, he achieved both of his main strategic goals. The first was Stalin's assent to the formation of a United Nations, with Soviet participation. That win was announced at the conference.

Unannounced, though, was a secret deal for the Soviets to enter the Pacific war against Japan in exchange for significant territorial concessions already set out at Tehran. Roosevelt was on the verge of a monumental victory over Nazi Germany, thanks in no small measure to, in effect, renting the Soviet land army in exchange for lorries, radios and Spam. (Best estimates suggest the Soviets lost more troops in Europe in the few weeks leading up to Yalta and just after than the Americans lost during the entire war in both European and Pacific theatres.) But he still faced a prolonged fight against Japan. The American president reasoned that Soviet territorial aggrandisement was embedded in victory, and that Stalin's appetites did not exceed those of the tsar in the first world war.

Churchill aimed to win a place for France in the victors' occupation of Germany, secure a democratic Poland and keep Britain relevant. He got the first. "He is trying to forget that he has achieved little," the prime minister's doctor observed as the parties left Yalta.

Stalin, a cold-blooded murderer and consummate charmer, relied for his aims on the correlation of forces. He obtained grudging recognition of his demand for German reparations, which, of course, he could (and did) seize anyway, carting off to Moscow everything of value. He got a formal invitation to smash his way into north-east Asia, which no one could have stopped. And he had already occupied Poland.

Like Churchill, Stalin signed up to Roosevelt's Declaration of Liberated Europe, which, echoing the Atlantic Charter of 1941, called for Europeans "to create democratic institutions of their own choice". The despot could apply his own definition of democracy. As for the UN, Roosevelt granted the Soviet Union a veto over its decisions.

In public, Roosevelt and his aides oversold the agreement at Yalta as a new dawn; in private, he described it as the grim best they could manage under the circumstances. Yalta's celebratory mood descended into recrimination, disillusion and second-guessing. A cold war came to replace the wartime coalition.

To this day many analysts insist that cold war could have been avoided, as if it were a mere misunderstanding between powers; such analysts squabble only over whom to blame. In fact, the cold war was an expression of a fundamental clash of interests and, at a still deeper level, of values. The protagonists who stood up to the Soviet Union without provoking an armed conflict deserve credit.

Almost no one had wanted a cold war. The idea that, in 1946, an American diplomat wrote a long telegram to Washington and a just-ousted British prime minister delivered a speech in Missouri and, *voilà*, the cold war was launched, is nuts. Reluctance to wage a new global struggle ran deep after the catastrophe of the second world war.

Stalin's repeated actions, however, ensured that the West could not live in denial for ever. A Soviet-backed communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948 would seem hard to pooh-pooh, yet many did so. A Soviet blockade of Berlin later that year did not overcome entrenched opponents of confrontation. It took North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950, finally, to break the remaining hesitancy.

Options for great-power rivalry are not infinite. The worst option is hot war. Another is appeasement—which, as Churchill once quipped, delivers dishonour and war anyway. Then there's the seduction of Pygmalion, whereby the leading power seeks to transform a street urchin into a lady, or, in the jargon, into a responsible stakeholder in the international system. This leaves only cold war, whose decisive advantages are that it is not hot and that it works.

Getting to cold war constitutes an achievement. It even allows for significant co-operation between bitter rivals. And in an age of mutually assured nuclear destruction, cold war increases the odds of the survival of all life on the planet. A decisive disadvantage, though, is that a cold war between great powers often means hot wars for others, whether as proxies or targets. That remains of burning relevance today.

Looking back at Yalta's eight plenary sessions, we see that Poland came up at seven, while China barely entered the deliberations. The chief exception, in the face of an incredulous Churchill and Stalin, was Roosevelt's stubborn elevation of poor, war-torn China to one of the great powers, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Yet neither Roosevelt nor his successors had a clue how to stabilise a vast country ravaged by Japan's aggression and rent by internal political divisions. The relative neglect of Asia was the great failure of Yalta. Poland's fate was tragic but of no strategic moment in the world order.

Stalin's participation in the spoils of the Pacific war required that he conclude a treaty with the Kuomintang government under Chiang Kai-shek. His representatives travelled to Moscow and got a surprisingly advantageous agreement. Chiang would squander the opportunity, however, failing to grasp Stalin's utter dismissiveness towards the Chinese Communists and his immense distrust of Mao Zedong.

Asia was riven by four post-war partitions: in China, over Taiwan; in Vietnam, informally at the 16th parallel and formally at the 17th; in Japan, at the Southern Kuriles or Northern Territories, but not the home islands, thanks to adroit manoeuvering by the Americans; and in Korea, at the 38th parallel, following maladroit American manoeuvering. In all cases, war or civil war broke out to enact, prevent or overcome actual or prospective partitions.

Before Yalta gave way gradually to a cold war that, given the alternatives, was necessary and welcome, it enabled finishing the rout of the second world war's chief aggressors, Germany and Japan. In the fullness of time, Germany attained peaceful unification. Japan joined the Western alliance immediately (as did Poland, eventually). Yalta's failures over Asia, unlike those over Europe, were real. ■

Stephen Kotkin, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, is a scholar of Russian and global history and a biographer of Stalin.

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