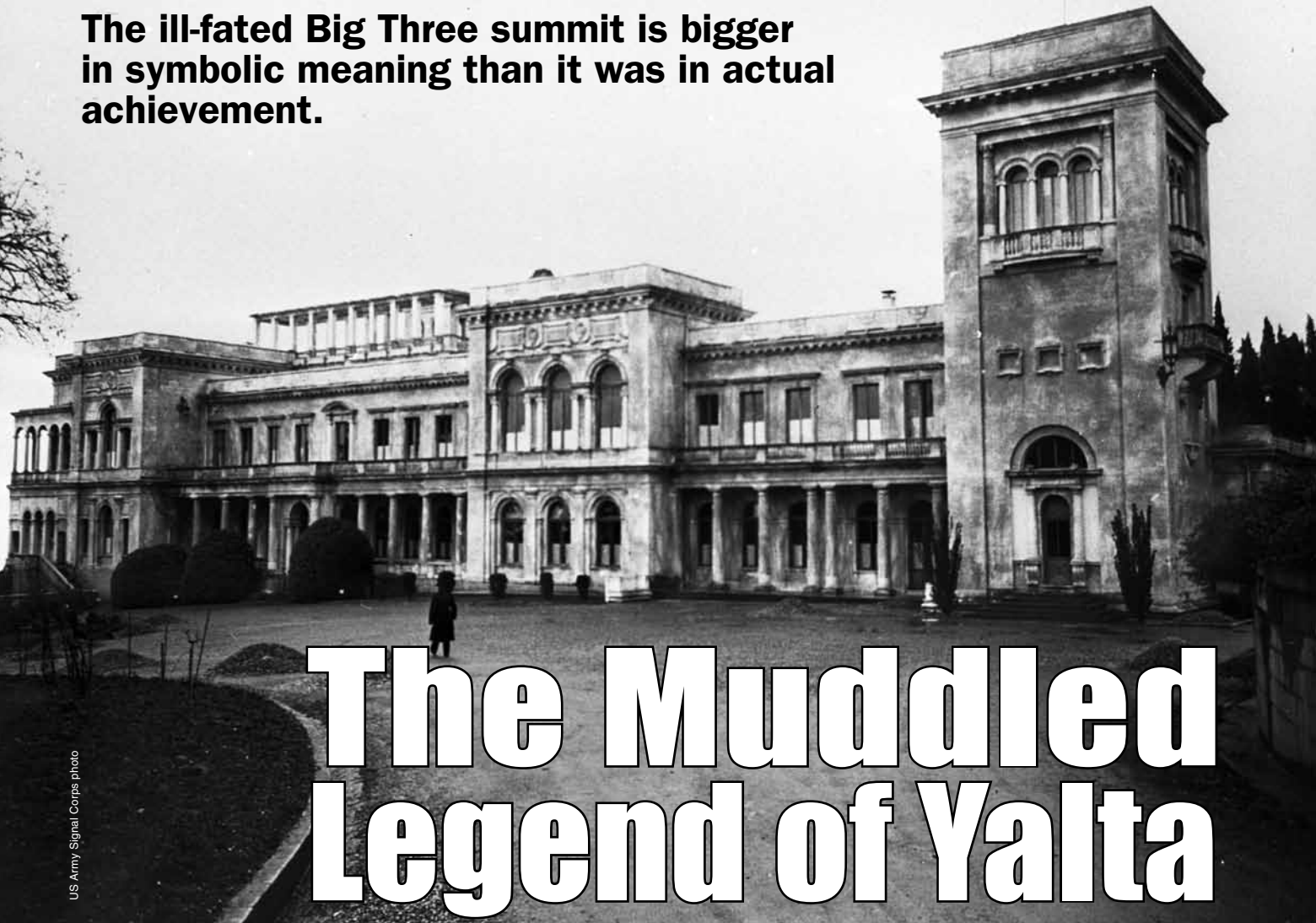


The ill-fated Big Three summit is bigger in symbolic meaning than it was in actual achievement.



The Muddled Legend of Yalta

US Army Signal Corps photo



By John T. Correll

National Archives photo

The war in Europe was not over yet as 1945 began, but the outcome was not in doubt. The Germans were in retreat everywhere. The Allies were about to enter the Rhineland on the western front. To the east, the Soviets were within 400 miles of Berlin.

The prewar governments of most European nations were defunct, having fallen to invasion between 1938 and 1941. Borders had been moved and moved again. Industries, economies, and national infrastructures were in ruins. Refugees were a common sight, displaced by war and political turmoil. Germany itself would soon be in the hands of its former enemies.

The allied Big Three leaders—President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States, Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain, and Premier Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union—met at Yalta in the Crimea on the coast of the Black Sea Feb. 4-11, 1945, to decide the postwar fate of Europe. In eight days, they agreed among themselves on new governments and boundaries for the defeated and liberated nations.

Yalta, initially heralded as a success, is mostly remembered today as a failure,

On the previous page. Top: Livadia Palace, where Roosevelt was lodged and most of the Yalta meetings took place. Bottom: The Big Three—(l-r) Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin—pose for photos on a patio at Livadia.

but the legend is muddled. Some of the things attributed to the conference happened there. Some didn't. However, it is Yalta that is linked—sometimes fairly, sometimes not—to the beginning of the Cold War and the takeover of eastern and central Europe by the Soviet Union.

Stalin refused to travel, so war-torn Yalta in the Soviet Union was chosen as the venue. Churchill said, "If we had spent 10 years on research, we could not have come up with a worse place in the world."

Coffee? No, Vodka

Yalta offered a panoramic view of the Black Sea from the tip of the Crimean peninsula, not far from Balaclava, where the British Light Brigade charged into the "Valley of Death" against Russian guns in 1854. Yalta was an imperial resort in the days of the Romanovs, but the Germans did not leave much of it standing when they pulled out in April 1944. The Soviets managed to refurbish just enough to house the conference participants.

The Americans and British, some 700 of them, gathered in Malta and flew the rest of the way. The transports, mostly C-54 Skymasters, took off singly and made their 1,500-mile journey by night to avoid detection by scattered Luftwaffe interceptors still operating in the Balkans. The aircraft carrying Roosevelt and Churchill had P-38 fighter escorts. The

others flew without protection. From the landing field at Saki, 85 miles from Yalta, the delegations traveled south to the "Russian Riviera" by a six-hour motorcade over rough roads.

Roosevelt and his party were lodged about five miles from the small town in the 116-room Livadia Palace, built in 1911 as a summer residence for Tsar Nicholas II and his family. More recently, it had been occupied by German Army Group South. Stalin's headquarters was just down the shore at Koreiz Palace, and the British were at Vorontsov Palace, some 12 miles farther along.

Amenities, especially restrooms, were in short supply. Everyone except the most senior individuals lined up to wait their turn. In a rare concession to luxury, the Russians brought a double bed down from Moscow for Churchill, who liked to work in bed and spread out his papers.

Cabbage soup was served every day for lunch. For breakfast there was Cream of Wheat and butter spiced with garlic. One morning, Adm. William D. Leahy, Roosevelt's Chief of Staff, asked for egg, toast, and coffee. Fifteen minutes later, the waiter brought caviar, ham, smoked fish, and vodka.

The American delegation included senior administration officials and military leaders. The new Secretary of State, Edward R. Stettinius Jr., was a lightweight on foreign policy but was offset by the presence of W. Averell Harriman, the

RIA Novosti photo



German troops, such as those pictured here in Crimea after being captured by the Russians in 1944, left much of the former Tzarist resort Yalta in ruins.



able US ambassador to the Soviet Union. Alger Hiss, a Soviet agent embedded in the State Department, was also there, but it does not appear he did any damage at Yalta. Hiss reported through Soviet military intelligence channels but his keepers were not particularly interested in the agenda of the conference.

Churchill led a strong British team anchored by his friend and longtime colleague, Foreign Secretary R. Anthony Eden. Stalin's right hand man at Yalta was his protégé, V. M. Molotov, the Foreign Minister.

At Stalin's initiative, conference sessions were held at Livadia for the convenience of Roosevelt, who was in a wheelchair. The plenary, or main sessions, always chaired by Roosevelt, began around 4 p.m. and ran until the early evenings. Diplomatic and military members of the delegations held their own meetings earlier in the day.

The Yalta conference was not paper-work intensive. There was no official record. Each of the nations kept their own notes and contributed to a summary joint communiqué at the end. The looseness of the plenary sessions suited Roosevelt and Churchill. Both of them liked to talk and often improvised as they went along.

At Yalta, Stalin ran rings around them.

At 63, Roosevelt was the youngest

of the Big Three. Ravages of chronic illness made him look older and he had two months left to live. Despite his frailty, his mental capacity at Yalta was not impaired. His political style was intuitive and personal. He saw the Soviet Union as an ally rather than a potential threat. Despite cautions from Harriman, he was inclined to trust Stalin.

The Atlantic Charter

Like many Americans, Roosevelt had a distaste for "spheres of influence," the 19th century practice in which strong nations established domination—if not outright rule—over their weaker neighbors. He was committed to the principle of self-determination and looked forward to the breakup of the European colonial empires.

Churchill, 70, had led Britain through the darkest days of the war. By 1945, British power was in decline relative to that of the United States, which had more than twice as many forces engaged and had assumed the leadership position previously held by the British. Churchill understood, but he did not like it.

He had joined Roosevelt in 1941 in proclaiming the Atlantic Charter, which promised "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live."

At the time, however, Churchill was

A Russian artillery crew in Poland in 1945. A USSR puppet government retained control of Poland after the war, despite Stalin's promises at Yalta of free elections.

seeking to induce the United States to enter the war. He did not regard the principle of self-determination as applying to colonies of the British Empire.

Unlike Roosevelt, Churchill did believe in spheres of influence. He and Stalin met bilaterally in Moscow in October 1944 and settled on a division of influence in the Balkans. By a formula proposed by Churchill, Britain got predominance in Greece—traditionally a British sphere of influence—in exchange for Soviet hegemony in Rumania and Bulgaria. The Russians did not interfere as British troops disarmed pro-communist forces in Greece and installed a government favorable to Britain.

At Yalta, Churchill wanted to provide for a postwar balance of power in Europe, offsetting Soviet expansion. An independent Poland, if it could be achieved, would be of enormous value. With US troops expected to go home soon after the victory, Churchill also sought to strengthen France to help with defense of the west.

Stalin, 66, felt that the Soviet Union had carried the war in Europe without much help from the Western Allies, who

did not open a second front until D-Day in 1944. He saw no reason to negotiate about territory the Red Army had taken and now held. From Stalin's perspective, freedom for his neighbors was a security risk. Germany had twice invaded the Soviet Union through Poland. Self-determination for eastern Europe was not part of Stalin's plan.

The Americans and the British had already revealed they would not risk the cohesion of the alliance for the sake of small nations. At the first Big Three meeting at Teheran in 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill had agreed that Stalin could keep the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia when they were recaptured from the Germans.

Roosevelt's Priorities

Roosevelt came to Yalta with two main objectives: to persuade Stalin to enter the war against Japan and to secure Soviet support and participation for the United Nations, of which Roosevelt was the leading sponsor.

The United States had done most of the fighting in the south Pacific. British commitment was minimal and the Soviet Union was still party to a neutrality pact with Japan, signed in 1941 when Stalin needed to concentrate on Europe without worrying about his eastern border.

Roosevelt did not believe that a naval blockade and strategic bombardment by B-29s would force a Japanese surrender anytime soon. The atomic bomb in development at Los Alamos, N.M., was not a significant factor in his thinking. He assumed that defeat of Japan would ultimately require an invasion of the Japanese home islands.

To Roosevelt's pleasure, Stalin agreed at Yalta to a deal that had been discussed at Teheran and promised to declare war on Japan as soon as Germany was finished. In a secret protocol, Roosevelt agreed to a Soviet sphere of influence in the Far East. It included parts of the Sakhalin and Kurile Islands, access to the ice-free ports at Dairen and Port Arthur, and joint control with the Chinese of railroads in Manchuria.

The United Nations, as envisioned by Roosevelt, would vest executive power in "four policemen"—the US, USSR, Britain, and China—to guarantee world security. The concept was further defined at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., in 1944.

At Yalta, Stalin agreed to virtually the entire US plan. He wanted separate membership for the Ukraine and Belorussia, which were, he argued, Soviet

republics in their own right. Roosevelt agreed, although the extra memberships for the Soviet Union were not disclosed publicly. France was added as a fifth UN executive "policeman" and approved as a fourth occupation power in Germany.

Roosevelt was elated with the success of his two priorities and wanted to secure them from risk. He softened the United States position on issues of importance to Stalin, including the war reparations to be imposed on Germany and the new borders and government for Poland.

No Allied nation had suffered more grievously from German aggression than the Soviet Union. As the German armies fell back from Moscow, they destroyed anything they had left standing on the way in. Stalin proposed that the Allies extract \$20 billion from Germany, with half of that going to the Soviet Union. The amount, he said, was equal to about 20 percent of the actual Soviet war losses.

Churchill urged restraint. The victors had not gained much from punitive reparations, more than Germany could pay, after World War I. The international economy was disrupted and the total collected in reparations, about a billion pounds, was possible only because of US loans to Germany. The United States did not want reparations in 1945, but saw no reason that Germans should have a postwar standard of living higher than that of the Soviet Union.

Roosevelt and Churchill eventually agreed to Stalin's numbers, with reparations to be collected in kind rather than in money. Consequently, the Soviets stripped their part of Germany—occupation zones had been established in 1944—of plants, factories, and rolling stock as well as "surplus" food and raw materials. Additional reparations were taken in forced labor.

The Agony of Poland

"Poland had been the most urgent reason for the Yalta conference," Churchill said. It was discussed at seven of the eight plenary sessions, but several of the critical decisions were already made.

Under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939, Hitler and Stalin divided up Poland with the USSR taking the eastern third. Yalta confirmed the Allied agreement at Teheran that the Soviets would keep the part of Poland seized in 1939 and that the Poles would be compensated by the addition of conquered German territory in the west.

The net effect was to shift Poland more than 100 miles westward. Fixing the new

German-Polish border was deferred, and the border was not set until the final Big Three meeting at Potsdam in 1945.

Two groups of Poles were competing for postwar control. The government in exile group operated from London and was supported by the British. The Soviets supported the "Lublin Poles," so called for the city in eastern Poland where they began.

The Lublin Poles had gained considerable advantage in 1944 when the Polish Home Army in Warsaw, loyal to the government in exile in London, was destroyed by the Germans while the Red Army, approaching from the east, halted in place and offered no help. The uprising lasted 43 days, during which the Germans wiped out more than 200,000 members of the Polish resistance. When it was over and the Germans ousted, the Lublin Poles moved into Warsaw as the provisional government.

Stalin Shows His Hand

Churchill and Roosevelt managed to convince themselves that Stalin was open to the idea of a coalition government and free elections in Poland, even though he had given diplomatic recognition to the provisional regime in January 1945. According to Churchill, Stalin said elections could be held "within a month, unless there is some catastrophe on the front, which is improbable."

So satisfied were Roosevelt and Churchill with Stalin's indicated cooperation that they did not quibble about the wording of the joint communiqué, which stated, "The provisional government which is now functioning in Poland should therefore be reorganized on a broader democratic basis with the inclusion of democratic leaders from Poland itself and from Poles abroad." The provisional government was cited by name, but the government in exile in London was not. The communiqué also promised "free and unfettered elections as soon as possible." A Big Three commission, operating out of Moscow, would consult with the Poles on the reorganization.

The Americans put great stock in inspirational words on paper and Stalin was happy to oblige. The Yalta communiqué included a "Declaration on Liberated Europe," which recognized the Atlantic Charter and "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live."

Returning home, Churchill and Roosevelt proclaimed Yalta to have been a great success. Churchill told the House



President Roosevelt signs a bill in 1944. Although only 63 years old, his health was in steep decline. He died just two months after the Yalta conference.

of Commons that he believed “Marshal Stalin and the Soviet leadership wish to live in honorable friendship and equality with the Western democracies.”

In his address to Congress, Roosevelt said, “We have made a good start on the road to a world of peace.” He cited the prospect of a “free, independent, and prosperous Polish state” as one of the achievements, and said the Yalta agreements should “spell the end” of the old system of spheres of influence.

Unfortunately, as Churchill later said, “our hopeful assumptions were soon to be falsified.” There was no sign of elections in Poland. Using their control of the provisional government as a wedge, the Soviets blocked rival candidates from the deliberations of the new government and refused access to American and British observers.

“Averell is right,” Roosevelt said. “We can’t do business with Stalin.”

Stalin revealed his intentions in April, after the death of Roosevelt, in a letter to Churchill and US President Harry Truman. “The Soviet government cannot agree to the existence in Poland of a government hostile to it,” Stalin said.

Enthusiasm for Yalta in Congress and the news media dropped with developments in Poland, and the uproar worsened when it was revealed that the Soviet Union had been given extra seats in the United Nations. However, there was not much that could be done about it, and in July, the United States and Britain recognized the pro-Soviet regime as the government of Poland.

On Aug. 6, the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The Soviet Union declared war on Japan Aug. 8, fully three months after Germany’s surrender. A second atomic

bomb, dropped on Nagasaki Aug. 9, brought on the Japanese surrender of Aug. 15. The Red Army swept across Manchuria, carrying away captives and loot, and securing the new Soviet holdings in the Far East. Soviet operations had no effect on the outcome of the war with Japan.

In 1946, Churchill declared “an iron curtain has descended” across Europe. Behind it, the nations of Eastern Europe were held under Soviet control for another 40 years.

Harriman, considering later what had actually been gained from the eight days in the Crimea, said, “The agreement on voting in the [UN] Security Council was the most concrete political achievement of the Yalta Conference.”

Yalta Lives On

In the 1950s, the story was spun out of factual recognition by Sen. Joseph McCarthy, who made “the sellout at Yalta” a staple of his diatribes. McCarthy claimed that Hiss had been “Roosevelt’s chief advisor at Yalta.”

However, criticism of Yalta crossed party lines. In May 1997, Strobe Talbott—the deputy secretary of state and a close friend of President William J. Clinton—said, “After World War II, many countries in the east suffered nearly half a century under the shadow of Yalta. ... That is a place name that has come to be a code word for the cynical sacrifice of small nations’ freedom to great powers’ spheres of influence.”

The issue flared up anew in May 2007, when US President George W.

Bush, en route to Moscow on the 60th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany, denounced the results of the Yalta conference in a speech in Riga, Latvia.

“The agreement at Yalta followed in the unjust tradition of Munich and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact,” Bush said. “Once again, when powerful governments negotiated, the freedom of small nations was somehow expendable. Yet this attempt to sacrifice freedom for the sake of stability left a continent divided and unstable. The captivity of millions in Central and Eastern Europe will be remembered as one of the greatest wrongs of history.”

Back in the United States, liberal historians and Roosevelt loyalists counterattacked furiously. Jacob Heilbrunn of the *Los Angeles Times* called it “cheap historical revisionism” and a “slander against Roosevelt.” Historian Robert Dallek of Boston University said, “This idea that Roosevelt and Churchill gave away Eastern Europe to the Soviets is nonsense.” Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis said, “If the Yalta conference had never taken place, the division of Europe into two great spheres of influence would still have happened.”

For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin said, “Our people not only defended their homeland but also liberated 11 countries of Europe.”

Historian S. M. Plokhy, the foremost modern analyst of Yalta, comments, “There is always a price to be paid for making alliances with dictatorships and totalitarian regimes. If you support an ally of convenience and build up his power, it can then become difficult to keep him in check.”

The best that can be said for Roosevelt and Churchill is that Yalta did not make that much difference. The United States might have exerted more leverage than it did. Stalin was in dire need of postwar American economic aid when wartime Lend-Lease aid ran out. Even so, Stalin’s position was strong and he was determined to control Eastern Europe. It is unlikely that he could have been denied.

In the course of the Big Three conferences, Stalin got almost everything he might have hoped for—including western recognition that conferred legitimacy on his subjugation of Eastern Europe—and he got it at a bargain price. ■

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