
Roosevelt's Failure at Yalta

Arnold Beichman

Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace

For some time now I have been researching a political biography of former Vice President Henry A. Wallace and trying to understand why during his incumbency from 1940 on he adhered so closely to Soviet foreign policy ambitions. In seeking answers to this question, I felt that it would be valuable to make a study of the politico-cultural climate of the Wallace period. I was amazed at the extraordinary pro-Soviet atmosphere in the United States from the White House on down during the years of World War II.

The murderous Moscow trials were overlooked, and Stalin's dictatorship was redefined as a new form of democracy. *Life Magazine* described the FBI as roughly analogous to the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, and described Lenin as "perhaps the greatest man of modern times." It devoted an entire issue, March 29, 1943, to glorifying Russia including these words: "If the Soviet leaders tell us that the control of information was necessary to get this job done, we can afford to take their word for it." Hollywood produced pro-Soviet films like *Mission to Moscow*, *Song of Russia*, *North Star*, and *Counterattack*. James Reston of the *New York Times* asserted that "anti-Russian remarks [were] a shabby un-American game." The *New York Times* itself gushed that "Marxian thinking in Soviet Russia is out . . . the capitalist system, better described as the competitive system, is back."¹

American attitude heavily pro-Soviet during World War II.

¹ George Sirgiovanni, *An Undercurrent of Suspicion: Anticommunism in America during World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1990), 4-5.

Collier's Magazine in 1943 suggested that the Soviet Union was moving "toward something resembling our own and Great Britain's democracy." The *Saturday Evening Post* published 24 articles between 1943 and 1945 by its correspondent Edgar Snow, all of them pro-Soviet. George Kennan summed up the situation well: "Those who criticized the Soviets during the crucial years of 1942-1943 were sometimes accused of near treasonous behavior."² As Evelyn Waugh put it: "During the German War it was thought convenient to attribute heroic virtues to any who shared our quarrel and to suppress all mention of their crimes."³

Since the end of the Cold War there has been considerable re-viewing of President Roosevelt's policies towards the Soviet Union. Most notable has been the essay of Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who has argued that the 1989 counter-revolution in Central Europe vindicates President Roosevelt's wartime diplomacy which, he says, had been criticized for its "naivete" about Stalin.

*FDR ignored
informed
State
Department
critics.*

However, I argue that, from the time he took office in 1933, FDR ignored informed assessments within the State Department of the nature of Soviet diplomacy and that, consequently, the peoples of Central Europe for some four decades paid the price. As sources for my rebuttal of Schlesinger, I will cite the writings and memoirs of Charles Bohlen, Averell Harriman, Loy Henderson and George Kennan, participant-observers in the development of Soviet-American diplomacy between 1933 and 1945. I begin with a discussion of Professor Schlesinger's article as he is the most authoritative of FDR's defenders.

The eminent Pulitzer prize-winning historian's op-ed essay in the *Wall Street Journal* was titled, "FDR Vindicated." Professor Schlesinger's theme was that despite longtime disparagement of President Roosevelt's wartime diplomacy, especially the 1945 Yalta agreement, the successful counter-revolutions in Central Europe were really "the fulfillment of Roosevelt's purposes at the Yalta conference."⁴

² Paul Willen, "Who 'Collaborated' With Russia?" *Antioch Review* XIV:3 (September 1954), 259-83.

³ Evelyn Waugh, *The Spectator* (February 12, 1994), 11.

⁴ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "FDR Vindicated," *Wall Street Journal* (June 21, 1990), 12.

“Roosevelt was much criticized too for naivete,” wrote Professor Schlesinger, “in supposedly thinking that he could charm Stalin into amiable postwar collaboration . . . FDR’s determination to work on and through Stalin was, it seems in retrospect, founded on shrewd insight. As Walter Lippmann once observed, Roosevelt was too cynical to think he could charm Stalin.”

I argue to the contrary that President Roosevelt was naive about Stalin and about communism from 1933 until some days, perhaps, before his death in 1945. I will argue from the published record that Professor Schlesinger’s essay is a piece of a historical revisionism aimed at restoring FDR’s blemished reputation as a statesman. Those I quote in rebuttal of Professor Schlesinger’s thesis, such as Kennan, Bohlen, Henderson, and Harriman, can in no way be described as representing a rightist viewpoint.

*Historical
revisionism.*

I do not intend to argue about President Roosevelt’s “purposes” at Yalta. Obviously the co-author of the Atlantic Charter could not have wanted Central Europe to fall prey to Stalin’s postwar designs. The question, then, is not the virtuousness of FDR’s purposes but the quality and intelligence of his diplomacy in seeking the fulfillment of those purposes.

I begin by examining President Roosevelt’s decision to engage in personal diplomacy in 1933 on the question of recognition of the Soviet Union.⁵ He had already demonstrated his preference for the lying reportage of Walter Duranty, the *New York Times* man in Moscow, to the informed opinion of State Department experts.⁶

In the early years after the Bolshevik Revolution some U.S. diplomats, who had begun to specialize in Soviet affairs, believed that we should have as few dealings with the USSR as possible. Loy W. Henderson, a longtime career diplomat and one of the principal architects of twentieth-century U.S. diplomacy, opposed the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union until it

⁵ For a careful examination of the pitfalls of summitry and personal diplomacy between heads of government, see the admonitory article by Dean Rusk, “The Presidency,” *Foreign Affairs* 38:3 (April 1960), 360ff. It was written, obviously, before his appointment as secretary of state by President Kennedy.

⁶ See S. J. Taylor, *Stalin’s Apologist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 4, 184.

could give credible guarantees not to interfere in U.S. internal affairs.

In his memoirs Bohlen says that Henderson “led the quiet struggle in the [Roosevelt] administration against the soupy and syrupy attitude toward the Soviet Union. A man of the highest character, absolutely incorruptible, he always spoke his mind, a practice that did not make him popular.”⁷

*Revolutionary
ambitions
disqualified
USSR for
recognition.*

Henderson was concerned that Lenin’s revolutionary ambitions had rendered the USSR institutionally incapable of fulfilling the international accords it signed, let alone of abiding by the private assurances it gave. He wrote:

It was my belief that since leaders of the Kremlin eventually were intending to contribute to the violent overthrow of all the countries with which the Soviet Union maintained relations, they considered Soviet relations with every country to be of a temporary or transitional character, subject to change at any moment.⁸

As the editor-annotator of Henderson’s memoirs put it:

Throughout his [37] years of service in the diplomatic corps, Henderson asked a fundamental question about our relations with the Soviet government: “Can the Soviets be trusted?” His answer, consistently, was “no.”

The fundamental continuity of Soviet foreign policy vis-à-vis the Western democracies from day one of the Bolshevik Revolution, which is luminously clear to Henderson and his subalterns, was apparently not so clear to President Roosevelt and to those around him like Harry Hopkins, who simply did not, could not, or would not understand the meaning of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism.

A few months after his March 4, 1933, inauguration, the State Department’s Eastern European Division presented FDR with a paper on how he might proceed in the negotiations for recognition of the Soviet Union. The memorandum, dated July 27, 1933, contained this prescient paragraph:

The fundamental obstacle in the way of the establishment with Russia of the relations usual between nations in diplomatic inter-

⁷ Charles Bohlen, *Witness to History: 1929-1969* (New York: Norton, 1973), 125.

⁸ Loy W. Henderson, *A Question of Trust: The Origins of U.S.-Soviet Diplomatic Relations*, ed. and introduced by George W. Baer (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), xx. Also see Chapter 25, 227ff.

course is the world revolutionary aims and practices of the rulers of that country. . . . It would seem, therefore, that an essential prerequisite to the establishment of harmonious and trustful relations with the Soviet Government is abandonment by the present rulers of Russia of their world revolutionary aims and the discontinuance of their activities designed to bring about the realization of such aims. More specifically and with particular regard to the United States, this prerequisite involves the abandonment by Moscow of direction, supervision, control, financing, et cetera, through every agency utilized for the purpose, of communist and other related activities in the United States.⁹

Little attention was paid in the White House to this memorandum, which dealt with other bilateral issues as well. President Roosevelt was as determined to recognize the USSR as he was to ignore the openly avowed purposes of the Communist International, the Comintern. Even though the documents leading up to recognition contained a Soviet concession that it would refrain from subversive and propaganda activities in the United States, the document failed to mention the Comintern by name. Within a week after the announcement of the establishment of diplomatic relations, the *Daily Worker*, the Comintern voice in the U.S., was boasting that any claim that “the Litvinov Pact applies to the Communist International will meet with defeat.”¹⁰

It was an ominous event: the Soviet Union was flouting its agreements before even the ink was dry. In the ensuing decades, Soviet disregard of its agreements would be repeated over and over again, events which American policymakers usually shrugged off with a what-can-you-do-about-it frown, often seeking to conceal the violations from the American public.

Soviets repeatedly flouted agreements.

The United States Government was fully warned, almost prophetically, by its diplomats who had studied the Soviet Union and understood what recognition entailed. As late as 1953, George Kennan wrote that the United States “should never have established de jure relations with the Soviet government.”¹¹ Yet FDR,

⁹ The memorandum is entitled, “Problem Pertaining to Russian-American Relations Which, in the Interest of Friendly Relations Between the United States and Russia, Should be Settled Prior to the Recognition of the Soviet Government.” Henderson, *op. cit.*, 230.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹¹ Alders Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 349 footnote 1, Kennan letter to McGeorge Bundy. February 2, 1953.

with willful ignorance, embarked on a recognition policy without even seeking an enforceable *quid pro quo*. American recognition of the USSR, formally announced on November 16, 1933, only strengthened that totalitarian state.

What else but this same willful ignorance would account for the foolish White House statements about Stalin during World War II? What else but a frightening opportunism could account for President Roosevelt's silence on the Katyn Forest massacre when he knew from Winston Churchill that Stalin was responsible for this atrocity?¹² Despite Professor Schlesinger's *ex post facto* apologia, one observer at Yalta, Charles Bohlen, the President's interpreter, sharply criticized FDR at Yalta:

I did not like the attitude of the President, who not only backed Stalin but seemed to enjoy the Churchill-Stalin exchanges. Roosevelt should have come to the defense of a close friend and ally, who was really being put upon by Stalin . . . [Roosevelt's] apparent belief that ganging up on the Russians was to be avoided at all cost was, in my mind, a basic error, stemming from Roosevelt's lack of understanding of the Bolsheviks. . . . In his rather transparent attempt to dissociate himself from Churchill, the President was not fooling anybody and in all probability aroused the secret amusement of Stalin.¹³

Bohlen, who was at Yalta, said that President Roosevelt didn't understand the great gulf that separated the thinking of a Bolshevik from a non-Bolshevik. President Roosevelt, wrote Bohlen, "felt

¹² *Churchill and Roosevelt, The Complete Correspondence*, edited by Warren F. Kimball, volume II, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 388-99. Churchill sent FDR a secret report on Katyn to be returned "when you have finished with it as we are not circulating it officially in any way." According to the London *Economist*, "Proust and Katyn," May 5, 1990, p. 111, "Roosevelt forbade an associate to investigate the [Katyn] matter."

¹³ Bohlen, *op. cit.*, 146. There may have been a personal reason for FDR's attitude to Winston Churchill. In 1918 the young FDR, then assistant secretary of the Navy, on a visit to England attended a dinner for the war ministers at Gray's Inn. He was introduced to the minister of munitions, Winston Churchill, who seemed to have offended the visitor from Washington. "I have always disliked [Churchill] since the time I went to England in 1918," FDR told Joseph P. Kennedy, his ambassador to the court of St. James, at the White House in 1939. "He acted like a stinker at a dinner I attended, lording it over all of us." In a subsequent conversation with Kennedy, he added that Churchill had been "one of the few men in public life who was rude to me." Geoffrey G. Ward, "FDR's Westem Front Idyll," *Military History Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn 1989), 119. See his book, *A First Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt* (Harper & Row, 1989), 392-93.

that Stalin viewed the world somewhat in the same light as he did, and that Stalin's hostility and distrust, which were evident in war-time conferences, were due to the neglect that Soviet Russia had suffered at the hands of other countries for years after the Revolution. What he did not understand was that Stalin's enmity was based on profound ideological convictions. The existence of a gap between the Soviet Union and the United States, a gap that could not be bridged, was never fully perceived by Franklin Roosevelt."¹⁴

W. Averell Harriman, Roosevelt's ambassador to Stalin, was also critical of the president, describing him as a statesman who had "no conception of the determination of the Russians to settle matters in which they consider that they have a vital interest in their own manner, on their own terms. . . . The President still feels he can persuade Stalin to alter his point of view on many matters that, I am satisfied, Stalin will never agree to."¹⁵

Had political leaders like President Roosevelt (who, at war's end, held the world in his hands) and his *eminence grise*, Harry Hopkins, understood Lenin's revolution, they would have understood Stalin's resolution. Thus they would not have mindlessly and naively misjudged the imperialist treaty diplomacy of the Soviet Union, quondam ally of Nazi Germany. Here for example are the words of Harry Hopkins, after Yalta 1945:

In our hearts we really believed a new day had dawned, the day we had for so many years longed for and about which we had talked so much. We were all convinced we had won the first great victory for peace, and when I say we, I mean all of us, all civilized mankind. The Russians had proved that they could be reasonable and far-sighted and neither the President nor any one of us had the slightest doubt that we could live with them and get on peaceably with them far into the future. I must, however, make one reservation—I believe that in our hearts we made the proviso that we couldn't foretell how things would turn out if something happened to Stalin.¹⁶

And listen to the words of FDR himself talking about Stalin:
I think that if I give him everything that I possibly can and ask

¹⁴ Bohlen, *op.cit.*, 211.

¹⁵ W. Averell Harriman and Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941-46* (New York: Random House, 1975), 369-70.

¹⁶ Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins* (New York: Harper, 1948), 870.

nothing from him in return, *noblesse oblige*, he won't try to annex anything and will work for a world of democracy and peace.¹⁷

Noblesse oblige, indeed!¹⁸

FDR conceded
he'd been
mistaken
about Stalin.

By the time FDR realized he had failed at Yalta, it was too late to do anything about it. On March 23, 1945, nineteen days before he died, President Roosevelt confided to Anna Rosenberg, "Averell is right. We can't do business with Stalin. *He has broken every one of the promises he made at Yalta.*"¹⁹ In other words, FDR had really believed that Stalin would keep his promises and treaty engagements.²⁰

Watching what was going on during and after the war, Kennan deplored "the inexcusable ignorance about the nature of Russian communism, about the history of its diplomacy." He wrote in 1960:

I mean by that F.D.R.'s well-known conviction that although Stalin was a rather difficult character, he was at bottom a man like everyone else; that the only reason why it had been difficult to get

¹⁷ Fred Iklé, *How Nations Negotiate* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 89.

¹⁸ The full text of FDR's quote comes from William C. Bullitt, the first U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, who never missed an opportunity to warn FDR of Stalin's treachery. But Roosevelt responded: "Bill, I don't dispute your facts; they are accurate. I don't dispute the logic of your reasoning. I just have a hunch that Stalin is not that kind of man. Harry [Hopkins] says he's not and that he doesn't want anything but security for his country, and I think that if I give him everything that I possibly can and ask nothing from him in return, *noblesse oblige*, he won't try to annex anything and will work for a world of democracy and peace." William C. Bullitt, "How We Won the War and Lost the Peace," *Life* (August 30, 1948).

¹⁹ Harriman. *op. cit.*, 344 (italics added).

²⁰ FDR wasn't the only *naif* to have occupied the White House. In 1949 President Truman said: "I like Stalin He is very fond of classical music I got the impression Stalin would stand by his agreements and also that he had a Politburo on his hands like the 80th Congress." Mr. Truman must have forgotten the meaning of the Truman Doctrine ("to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressure," quoted in William Taubman, *Stalin's American Policy* [New York: Norton, 1982], 100). In his recently published private journals, however, President Truman wrote: "[Stalin] broke twenty agreements he's made with Roosevelt and he broke thirty-two with me. I don't know how you're going to be able to tell in advance that a man is going to make agreements and then break them: He didn't live up to the agreements but nobody could really have predicted that in advance." Margaret Truman, ed., *Where the Buck Stops: The Personal and Private Writings of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 368-69.

on with him in the past was because there was no one with the right personality, with enough imagination and trust to deal with him properly; that the arrogant conservatives in the Western capitals had always bluntly rejected him, and that his ideological prejudices would melt away and Russian cooperation with the West could easily be obtained, if only Stalin was exposed to the charm of a personality of F.D.R.'s caliber. There were no grounds at all for this assumption; it was so childish that it was really unworthy of a statesman of F.D.R.'s standing.²¹

To paraphrase Kennan, there are no grounds at all for Professor Schlesinger's assumption that the Central European revolutions of 1989 vindicate President Roosevelt's wartime diplomacy. On the contrary, had President Roosevelt not been naive as well as closed-minded about Stalin, Central Europe might have escaped Stalin's yoke in 1945, thus obviating vindictive essays about FDR in 1990.²²

A much later verdict on FDR comes from Professor Simon Schama who has written:

Roosevelt's amiable characterization of "Uncle Joe" had an effect on American perception, turning a sinister and murderous dictator into a character from Main Street.²³

Causality in history is not easy to prove, certainly not with any conclusiveness and not without the risk of oversimplification. Still I think we can say with some justification that Roosevelt's nego-

²¹ George Kennan, *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), quoted in Ernst Topitsch, *Stalin's War* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987), 129. Earlier, Kennan said that "FDR and others found charitable and comforting explanations for Soviet behavior." In *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Norton pb, 1966), 23. For a comprehensive analysis of the FDR-Stalin relationship, see the two articles by Robert Nisbet, "Roosevelt and Stalin," *Modern Age* (Spring 1986 and Summer-Fall 1986), 103-12 and 205-17. Also Nisbet's book *Roosevelt and Stalin: The Failed Courtship* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1989).

²² In 1945, Maxim Litvinov, Stalin's longtime foreign secretary, was quoted by Edgar Snow as saying privately: "Why did you Americans wait until now to begin opposing us in the Balkans and Eastern Europe? . . . You should have done this three years ago. Now it's too late." "The Cycles of Western Fantasy," *Encounter* 402 (February 1959), 11, n. 17. Litvinov once was asked by Richard C. Hottelet, the CBS correspondent: "Suppose the West were suddenly to give in and grant all Moscow's demands . . . ? Would that lead to good will and easing of the present tension?" Litvinov answered: "It would lead to the West's being faced after a more or less short time, with the next series of demands."

²³ Simon Schama, "The Games of Great Men," *New Yorker* (May 2, 1994), 96.

tiations with Stalin had little to do with the eventual liberation of the Soviet satellite states in the late 1980s. If anything, FDR unwittingly helped Stalin enforce his domination over Central and Eastern Europe.