# 'Yalta, from failure to myth' from Le Monde (5 February 1985)

**Caption:** From 4 to 11 February 1945, the Yalta Conference was attended by Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin who were to determine the future of Europe. Forty years on, André Fontaine questions the real significance of the Conference in an article published in the French daily newspaper Le Monde on 5 February 1985.

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## Yalta, from failure to myth

**There is no everlasting sharing**

What has remained of the Crimea Conference — inaccurately called Yalta, for it actually took place in the neighbouring town of Livadia — whose 40th anniversary we celebrate on 4 February?

Nothing, or little, if we take into consideration its main objective which the participants, on parting, thought had been fully met: the maintenance, *ad vitam aeternam*, once peace was restored, of an understanding between the conquerors of Nazi Germany. Everything, if we prefer the unparalleled force of the myth to the reality of a crushing failure. Although the opposite has been shown a hundred, a thousand times, everyone — from the man in the street to the Head of State, and not just in France — continues to believe that three old gentlemen, meeting on the Black Sea shore, shared out the world amongst themselves one fine morning and that, for some strange reason, their agreement has escaped the general rule that even the most concrete treaty is built on sand.

In fact, the Yalta Agreements are just like any other: the ink was hardly dry on the paper when they were broken. We need only listen to Churchill's change of tune. On 27 February, he told the House of Commons: 'I bring back from the Crimea the impression that Field Marshal Stalin and the Soviet leaders want to live in friendship and on honourable terms of equality with the Western democracies. I believe also that they speak with one voice.' It took only a fortnight for him to sing a different song. 'We find ourselves,' he wrote to Roosevelt on 13 March, 'confronted by an enormous failure, a complete breakdown of what was agreed at Yalta.'

Roosevelt himself, who had pinned so many hopes on Yalta, cabled Stalin on 1 April, a few days before his death. The message read: 'any solution which leads to a barely disguised reinstatement of the present regime in Warsaw [dominated by the Communists] will be unacceptable and will lead the people of the United States to consider the Yalta Agreements a failure.'

Unacceptable? Yet this is more or less what was accepted the following May by Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's *éminence grise*, sent to Moscow by the newly installed President Harry Truman to try and sort out with Stalin the questions left unresolved at Yalta, one of which was Poland. After having resolved, to the satisfaction of the Kremlin, the question of the eastern boundary, the Three had of course reaffirmed their desire to see the restoration of a 'strong, free, independent and democratic' Poland. Roosevelt had even announced that the Polish elections should be 'like Caesar's wife: above suspicion'. But words did not count for much to the man Roosevelt and Churchill called Uncle Joe. As he said to Tito in April 1945: 'This war is not like wars in the past: whoever occupies a territory can impose his own social system. Everyone imposes his social system as far as he can go. It could not be any other way.'

He had every intention, at all events, that Poland should not be an exception: Mikolajczyk, Head of the Polish Government-in-exile in London, did become, after Hopkins' trip, Vice-President of the Government in Warsaw. But the elections which followed took place under such conditions that he was forced to return into exile a few months later.

Moreover, on 27 February, the day when the British Prime Minister reaffirmed, with unaccustomed frankness, his faith in the sincerity of the Generalissimo, the latter had dispatched Lieutenant Vischinski to Bucharest to force the young King Michael to head a government which was, to all intents and purposes, of his composition.

Churchill had only himself to blame: so that he might have a free hand in Greece, he had concluded with Stalin, the previous October, an agreement which practically gave him Romania and Bulgaria, from the outset already occupied by the Red Army. In Hungary and Yugoslavia, it was agreed that the influence of the two countries would be exercised *fifty-fifty*. The United States had hardly been consulted and were not to be involved.

If there was a sharing out, it was at this moment, and not at Yalta, that there was an attempt to substitute a peaceful world order for the system of spheres of influence, which Roosevelt, a few months earlier in front of both Houses of Congress, had emphasised would 'never happen again'. That is why it was decided at the Crimea Conference to create the 'United Nations Organisation', ambitious by its very name. The UN, thanks to institutions stronger than those of the defunct League of Nations, was supposed to succeed where the latter had failed. Today, we can judge for ourselves.

Needless to say, in the mind of their President, the United States would occupy a dominant position at the heart of this Organisation. As Roosevelt had confided to his son Elliott, he saw the Americans quite simply acting as mediators 'between the British who preach Empire and the Russians who preach Communism'. He was from the outset not far from believing that Stalin, falling for his well-known charm, was about to become a true democrat. If not, how could he have taken seriously the signature that the Generalissimo was about to append to the declaration on a free Europe or the paragraph on a free, independent and democratic Poland? Above all, how could he have declared, as he had done once before in Tehran in 1943, that, once the war was over, American troops would rapidly leave Europe?

Khrushchev reminded Kennedy of this promise when they met in early June 1961 in Vienna during the Berlin crisis. It was a serious promise: the American people were keen to see their 'boys' return home. It was actually one of the main reasons why Churchill had pushed so strongly at Yalta for the restoration of France as a great power with a proper army at its disposal.

It was a constant feature of British politics not to let power collect in the hands of one country on the Continent. Marlborough's heir was greatly afraid that, once the Americans had gone, the Soviets would try and extend their influence as far as the Channel and the Atlantic.

**The myth of sharing**

What we may justly blame Roosevelt for at Yalta is not for having shared Europe with Stalin, but for having negligently envisaged leaving the whole of the Continent practically defenceless against a Red Army at the height of its power. If things turned out as they did, it was because, overnight, Hiroshima gave Roosevelt's successor the means to resist Soviet pressure for a period of many years and with no great risks involved. Germany, Europe and the world was divided, not by the decision of three men, but by the sword of Damocles in the shape of nuclear power.

In fact, the only sharing out that took place at Yalta concerned the Far East: the USSR's participation in the final phase of the war against Japan had to be assured. In this way, Stalin, not content with reclaiming the land that the Land of the Rising Sun had taken from Russia in 1904, managed to obtain some small parts of China — without any kind of consultation. Ultimately, this was all in vain, for when the Red Army set out to deal with Japan, three months, as agreed, after the surrender of the Third Reich, Hiroshima had already been reduced to a heap of ashes. For the United States, the bomb had overnight turned the USSR from an indispensable ally into a troublesome partner, destined to become a rival.

It cannot be repeated often enough: Yalta belongs to the pre-atomic age, in other words, to prehistory. It was mutual discussion which fixed the borders of Europe and, from 1948, cut into two a Germany which the Three Great Men had decided in Potsdam, in July 1945, to keep undivided.

Why has this myth grown up of Yalta being about the sharing out of the world? Was it de Gaulle's fault, as has frequently been suggested? On rereading his *War Memoirs*, it is striking how discreet he is on the subject. Certainly, he was furious that France, meaning he himself, was not invited to the Conference and had no doubt that everything would have gone more smoothly had he been present. But nor could he forget that it was at Yalta that France secured a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations and a zone of occupation in Germany, which gave France the status of great power, something by which he set great store.

It was much later that the notion of deliberate sharing out took hold, the height of absurdity and untruth

having been reached with the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, explained away by Yalta, when there had never actually been any mention of this country. Had President Beneš not boasted unwisely, two years earlier, of having sorted out the problem with Stalin, 'in such a way', he had said to de Gaulle on his return to London, 'that we have not surrendered our independence'?

Even more so than in France, it was in the United States that the myth of Yalta was born. Millions of American voters of Eastern European origin did not like to see their relatives back home falling under Soviet control. It was tempting for the Republican Party to make Roosevelt, and therefore the Democrats, take responsibility for abandoning these countries to the Russian Bear, and they did not resist. This led Truman to publish the minutes of the Crimea Conference. But who was going to have the strength of will to read this interminable document?

At all events, it is enough to look at the history of these Cold War years and the supposed 'détente' to see that, if there had been any sharing out, it had never ceased being called into question. Indeed, for the Soviet Union, as Khrushchev said with his usual frankness, the status quo could only be viewed in a 'dynamic' form, because history, from time immemorial, had written into its programme the final triumph of socialism. Kennedy summed this up in a remarkable way: 'what is mine is mine; what is yours is negotiable.'

Moreover, how was it conceivable that a Soviet Union, bled to the bone in the war, ruined and nourished by Bolshevism, would willingly agree — as Roosevelt wanted in the final analysis — to the consolidation of a world order dominated by the United States, which had become, largely thanks to the war, the richest and most powerful country of all time?

History provides us with no example of an alliance that has long survived the danger that it was set up to combat. At the time of Yalta, Germany had already been invaded and its surrender was imminent. But the main preoccupation was still to stop the beast from reawakening, to demilitarise and destroy any future capacity for harm. The day when we realise that defeat has vaccinated the country for a long time to come against the spirit of conquest and that the idea of seeking 'revenge', of which Moscow so readily accused Germany, was only in the minds of a tiny minority of the population will be the day when the Cold War will have taken over from conventional war.

The many crises and armed conflicts that have marked the post-war years are the result thereof. In the final analysis, the only continent where, apart from the split between Yugoslavia and Albania, the demarcation line between East and West has not moved, despite the two Berlin crises and Communist attempts in Portugal after the 'Revolution of the Carnations', is Europe. Over the years a sort of tacit understanding has been established on this point. Everything happens as if, with the help of mutual dissuasion, each of the two camps has adopted the American policy of containment, elaborated in 1947 by George Kennan, according to which any encroachment by the opponent must be countered, by force if necessary.

Can this situation go on forever? Will there always be soldiers of the West and the Warsaw Pact face-to-face along an everlasting Iron Curtain, an everlasting Berlin Wall? It is certainly hard to believe this could be the case, if only because, by definition, history is change. As Lenin said once and for all, all sharing is a result of relative strengths, and changes in those relationships must sooner or later result in a reconsideration of the shares. How will this come about? In the apocalypse of a nuclear war? By the gradual weakening of the imperial powers, or one or other of them? By Germany sliding into neutrality?

The times in which we live are not those of the great prophets: we no longer have a Napoleon, a de Tocqueville, a Trotsky or a de Gaulle, who, in Corneille's words, are men 'for whom our destiny is an open book.' People who predict the future are often wrong, and the character missing from Solzhenitsyn's epic works is a child by the name of Hope. However, if there is one thing for certain, never has this bleak curtain that cuts Europe in two let through so many ideas, words and now images, which, if the tanks do not get there first, will eventually reduce it to dust.

André Fontaine