
Book Review

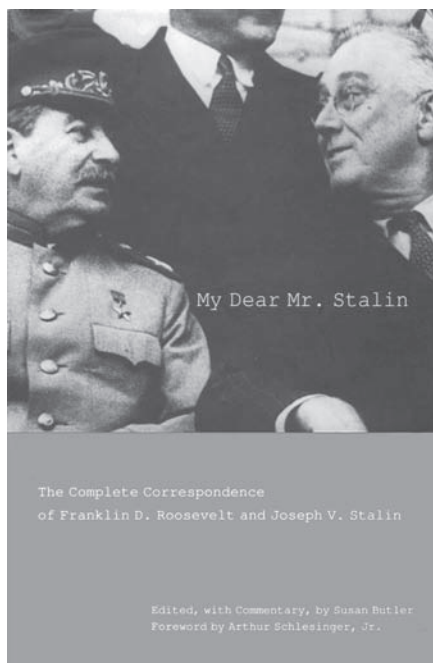
Roosevelt-Stalin Correspondence Sheds Light on FDR Post-War Vision

by William Jones

My Dear Mr. Stalin: The Complete Correspondence of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph V. Stalin

Susan Butler, ed; with a Foreword by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005
361 pages, hardcover, \$35

The publication for the first time of the complete correspondence between Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin provides an important insight into Roosevelt's wartime shaping of his personal relationship with the Soviet leader. While plotting the course of victory over the Axis powers, Roosevelt always kept in view the process of creating the basis for a stable post-war system that might eliminate war. While the correspondence does not provide a comprehensive picture of Roosevelt's "world blueprint" for the post-war world, as journalist Forrest Davis dubbed it, it clearly indicates the direction in which Roosevelt was moving, and underlines the absolute importance he attributed to the participation of the Soviet Union in that plan. Davis, often used to "float" ideas that Roosevelt wanted to get into circulation, had interviewed FDR shortly after the Tehran meeting, and, in a series of articles printed in the *Saturday Evening Post* in May 1944, tried to give an outline to Roosevelt's vision of the post-war world. An understanding of the significance of the issues touched upon in their correspondence is brought into focus by the book's editor, Susan Butler, whose introduction and introductory comments to many of the letters supply the broader context in which the discussion is conducted. The book is appropriately dedicated "to the 405,000 Americans and the 27 million Rus-



sians who died in World War II."

The correspondence also reveals the serious differences that President Roosevelt had with wartime "ally" Winston Churchill, over the course of the war, and, more fundamentally, over the shape of the world that would emerge from it. Roosevelt was intent on reshaping the post-war world around the creation of new nation-states in the developing world that would emerge from the destruction of the old colonial empires, a system which Roosevelt felt had given rise to the war. In that respect, Roosevelt felt that Stalin might serve as a key ally in his attempt to rid the world of the last vestiges of colonialism, and could well serve as a counterweight to the British Prime Minister, who was intent on reviving in some form a post-war British Empire. The correspondence helps also to dispel some widespread myths about Roosevelt's wartime leadership.

Bearing the Brunt of the Nazi Assault

Germany's attack on a totally unprepared Soviet Union in June 1941 meant that the might of that great nation, spanning six time zones, would be pitted against the Nazi behemoth. If it could hold out, victory might yet be had. For this reason, Roosevelt was intent on giving the Soviets whatever they needed to fight. And fight they did.

Writing to Wayne Coy, one of the administrators in Washington, on Aug. 2, 1941, Roosevelt expressed his frustration with the slowness in the deployment of matériel to Russia. "I raised the point in Cabinet on Friday that nearly six weeks have elapsed since the Russian War began and that we have done practically nothing to get any of the materials they asked for on their actual way to delivery in Siberia. Frankly, if I were a Russian I would feel that I had been given the run-around in the United States. Please get

out the list and please, with my full authority, use a heavy hand; act as a burr under the saddle and get things moving.... Step on it!"

Not everybody in the administration was happy about this new relationship with the Soviet Union. Both in the War Department and in the State Department, there were those who wished to sabotage the assistance to Moscow. For this reason, Roosevelt appointed his trusted aide Harry Hopkins as the chief envoy to the Russian leader. In Moscow, Roosevelt also bypassed the normal State Department bureaucracy, and promoted, at Hopkins' insistence, a young lieutenant colonel, Philip Faymonville, who had served from 1932 to 1939 as the military attaché in Moscow. Faymonville was fluent in Russian, and had a great respect for the Soviet Union and had many friends there. He was promoted to brigadier general and put in charge of Lend-Lease shipments.

Again in March 1942, Roosevelt wrote to all U.S. war agencies on the importance of the shipments to Russia, saying he "wished all material promised to the Soviet Union on Protocol to be released for shipping at the earliest possible date regardless of the effect of these shipments on any other part of the war program."

Roosevelt also realized that by sticking to the agreements that had been made, he was building up Stalin's trust in the United States, a factor which he hoped to use when once he could discuss post-war issues with the Soviet leader himself. Writing to Henry Morgenthau in the Spring of 1942, Roosevelt commented that he thought that Stalin was right to be distrustful of Churchill. "Every promise the British have made to the Russians, they have fallen down on ... the only reason we stand so well is that up to date we have kept our promises."

When Stalin's right-hand man, Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, was to make his first visit to Washington in May 1942, Roosevelt was elated. "Molotov can stay with me in the White House while he is in Washington, but we can make a private home nearby available if that is desired," Roosevelt wrote Stalin. Molotov stayed at the White House for the first days of his visit, and only moved across the street to Blair House when Roosevelt left for Hyde Park.

The role of the British Prime Minister did, however, seriously imperil the confidence that Roosevelt was trying to build between himself and the Soviet leader. In particular, Churchill's squelching of the early plans for beginning an Allied invasion of Europe, which the U.S. military leaders had been prepared to undertake already in 1942, tended to sour the relationship with the Soviet leader. In spite of agreements made with Molotov on his visit, Roosevelt was forced to accede to the diversionary operation in North Africa and later in Italy, that Churchill insisted upon.

The British Prime Minister also had his eye on the post-war world, and he was preparing to restore the power of the

British Empire in one form or another. And, as soon would be apparent, he was also angling to cut a back-room deal, without Roosevelt's knowledge, with the Soviet leader on the division of post-war "spheres of influence." When Churchill again tried to divert Allied forces into an invasion of the Balkans, hoping to further delay the launching of a second front, Roosevelt put his foot down.

Building a Four-Power Agreement

When Soviet troops turned the tide at Stalingrad in February 1943, Roosevelt sent a congratulatory telegram to Stalin: "The one hundred and sixty-two days of epic battle for the city which has for ever honored your name and the decisive result which all Americans are celebrating today will remain one of the proudest chapters in this war of the peoples united against Nazism and its emulators," Roosevelt wrote.

Roosevelt was eager to meet personally with Stalin as soon as possible in order to begin more detailed discussions about the war strategy and the shape of the post-war world. Stalin, who had a fear of flying, was, however, not eager to leave the Soviet Union during the war. Roosevelt also had to maintain direct contact with Washington in order to deal with any upcoming legislation. So, Roosevelt sent his personal envoy, Joseph Davies, the former ambassador to the Soviet Union, to discuss with Stalin the possibilities and venue of such a meeting. In what was certainly more than simply a symbolic measure, on the very day that Davies arrived in Moscow, Stalin dissolved the Comintern, the international Communist organization established after the Bolshevik Revolution, to foment revolution around the world. Roosevelt was "gratified" when he heard the news, hoping that this represented a change in policy by Stalin. The American President was in fact proposing to meet with Stalin separately, before any joint meeting of the three Allied leaders. Stalin wondered why Churchill was not being included in their initial meeting. Davies explained the differences between Roosevelt and Churchill over the colonial issue, and felt that the two of them would understand each other better in that respect.

The first meeting of the three leaders was in November 1943, in Tehran. Churchill tried to arrange a meeting with FDR before Roosevelt met with Stalin, but the President declined, fearful that the Soviet leader would feel that he and Churchill were conspiring against him. In fact, Roosevelt had finagled his way into getting an invitation to stay at the Soviet Embassy, where he knew he would be able to enter more freely into discussions with Stalin. In one of their tête-à-têtes in Tehran, the two agreed that Indochina should not be restored to French colonial rule, Roosevelt commenting that the country was now in worse condition than when the French arrived.

Roosevelt also cautioned Stalin privately not to bring up the question of India with Churchill. Roosevelt was trying to



National Archives

Truman, under Churchill's influence, rejected Roosevelt's post-war "blueprint" to eliminate colonialism, in favor of Third World development, and to include the Soviet Union in that process. The two are shown here at the Potsdam conference, July 1945.

bring Indian independence leader Mohandas K. Gandhi into an alliance against the Japanese in return for support for India's independence. Churchill was doing everything in his power to prevent that, making it impossible for U.S. diplomats to even speak with the Indian leader. Churchill considered independence for India a "criminally mischievous" proposition. The Indians, he had written, were "a beastly people with a beastly religion." And he was not prepared to allow Roosevelt to interfere with British India. "The concern of the Americans with the strategy of a world war was bringing them into touch with political issues on which they had strong opinions and little experience," Churchill complained. In this project too, Roosevelt probably figured he would have the support of Stalin.

At their second private meeting, Roosevelt presented his concept for a world peacekeeping organization, with the four great powers, the U.S., Great Britain (shorn of its empire), the Soviet Union, and China, as the kernel around which the other nations might gather. He compared this to his creations of the Pan-American Union, which reversed the imperialist policies of his predecessors toward Ibero-America.

Reviving the War-Torn Economy

The two also discussed the importance of post-war economic cooperation. Russia, which had suffered enormous losses of men and matériel during the war, was eager to secure a major loan for post-war reconstruction. On Feb. 23, 1944, Roosevelt wrote to Stalin about the Bretton Woods conference. "What I am raising here is the question of further steps toward the establishment of United Nations machinery for post-war economic collaboration, which was raised by the Secretary of State at the Moscow meeting and was discussed by you, Prime Minister Churchill, and myself at Teheran. I should appreciate it very much if you would give me your views on the suggestion made by the Secretary of State at Moscow, together with any other thoughts as to the best procedures to be followed in this extremely important matter."

Later, he would encourage Stalin to have Russia play a major role in the International Labor Organization, which Roosevelt hoped to make a linchpin of his post-war policies. When he heard that Russia was not going to send an observer to the ILO conference in Philadelphia, he wrote to Stalin on March 20, 1944: "It is my opinion that the International Labor Organization should be the instrument for the formulation of international policy on matters directly affecting the welfare of labor and for international collaboration in this field. I should like to see it become a body which will also serve as an important organ of the United Nations for discussing economic and social matters relating to labor and an important agency for the consideration of international economic policies which look directly toward improvement in standard of living. It would be unfortunate if both our Governments did not take advantage of the conference in Philadelphia to help our common objectives."

In the meeting of the three, they discussed the long-delayed opening of the Second Front. Stalin agreed to launch a major offensive in tandem with the Normandy invasion by the British and Americans, a promise which he fulfilled to the letter.

As the Russian armies moved forward, the relationship became more difficult. On a visit to Moscow without Roosevelt in October 1944, Churchill tried to cut a deal with Stalin on their respective "spheres of influence" in Eastern Europe. Hearing about this from Averell Harriman, whom Roosevelt had sent to keep an eye on the British leader while in Moscow, he told Harriman to make it clear to Stalin that the U.S. would never accept any such deal that Churchill had proposed.

The subsequent difficulties with Stalin on the Polish situation are well known. But contrary to popular mythology, the next meeting among the three at Yalta did not result in any "sell-out" of Poland. The agreement signed by Stalin, in fact, endorses "the right of all peoples to choose the form of gov-

ernment under which they will live—the restoration of sovereign rights and self-government,” thus setting a standard by which future regimes might be judged. While getting Stalin’s formal agreement on these principles, Roosevelt knew that, at least in the case of Poland, this principle would not be an easy one to implement.

Regarding the issue of Poland’s borders, FDR felt that he had no right to agree to any readjustment, without Senate approval. While agreeing to shift the border of Russia to the West, into Poland, in accordance with the Versailles Peace Treaty’s determination of the Russian-Polish boundary, the so-called Curzon Line, he hesitated in expanding Poland westward, taking a part of Germany, and was hoping to tackle that issue at a later date. The Soviet army was already occupying Poland, and not much could be accomplished without Stalin’s agreement. “It’s the best I can do for Poland at this time,” the President wrote to his chief of staff, William Leahy.

At the same time, Roosevelt knew that the U.S. could provide the economic means for Soviet Russia to quickly recover from the terrible losses of the war—and that that was a valuable asset in dealing with Stalin on all of these problems. Roosevelt was intent on helping Russia rebuild its tattered economy. Stalin had broached the subject with Donald Nelson, the head of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), when he visited Moscow in 1943. Later, Harry Hopkins suggested that a loan be arranged for Russia, since the Lend-Lease requirements only permitted the export of hardware for the military effort. In January 1945, shortly before Yalta, Molotov had made a request for a \$6 billion credit over 30 years, payment to start after nine years, at an interest rate of 2.25%. Roosevelt thought that such a loan would be part of a package of agreements, in which some concessions on the Polish issue might be garnered. Given the difficulties at the time, Roosevelt did not broach the subject at Yalta. With his death, the chances of any aid coming from the United States, on any terms that Moscow might deem acceptable, looked bleak indeed.

At Yalta, Roosevelt succeeded in getting a commitment from Stalin to enter the war against Japan. A treaty of neutrality between the Soviet Union and Japan had held throughout the war, allowing the Soviet armies to concentrate on fighting Hitler and making possible the massive transport of Lend-Lease supplies through the Soviet Far East. With the imminent defeat of Germany, Stalin was prepared to move against Japan. Roosevelt felt that Soviet participation in the Pacific War would also help cement the relations among the Big Four. Soviet operations against Japan would hasten the end, with Japanese troops in Manchuria sure to be quickly overrun by the Soviet armies. The Soviet Navy was already being provided with American-made mine-sweepers and frigates, and Soviet crews were being trained in their operation in Alaska for possible operations against Japan.

The Cold War Begins

On the day before he died, Roosevelt was busy working to prevent Churchill from undermining the trust he had so carefully tried to cultivate with Stalin. In a telegram to Churchill on April 11, he wrote: “I would minimize the general Soviet problem as much as possible because these problems, in one form or another, seem to arise every day and most of them straighten out as is the case of the Bern meeting”—a suspicion by Moscow that the Allies were trying to cut a separate deal with German forces based in Italy. “We must be firm, however, and our course thus far is correct.”

Stalin was shocked by the death of Roosevelt: When U.S. envoy Averell Harriman arrived in Moscow to see him, Stalin stated, “President Roosevelt has died but his cause must live on. We shall support President Truman with all our forces and all our will.” The Soviet leader also ordered Molotov to attend the founding conference of the United Nations at San Francisco, a move to which he would not commit when Roosevelt first inquired. Later, Stalin would ask that the death of Roosevelt be investigated, since he thought the American leader might have been assassinated.

The rapport that had been established between the two leaders would quickly be aborted by FDR’s successor. In Truman’s first meeting with Molotov at the White House on April 23, the new President gave him a dressing-down over Poland. “I’ve never been talked to like that in my life,” was the stunned Molotov’s comment. According to Charles Bohlen, who served as Truman’s translator, Molotov “turned a little ashy” at Truman’s brusque comments. Even the chilly Harriman was a bit taken aback by Truman’s behavior. Truman, completely rejecting Roosevelt’s “blueprint,” made the fateful, and militarily unnecessary decision to drop the newly developed atomic bomb in an attempt to keep the Soviet Union out of the Pacific War, and to send Moscow a chilling message of the new military power of the United States. The message was clearly received. As Gen. Dwight Eisenhower commented to a friend on a visit to Moscow for the Victory Parade in 1945, as related by Edgar Snow: “Before the atom bomb was used, I would have said yes, I was sure we could keep the peace with Russia. Now I don’t know. I had hoped the bomb wouldn’t figure in this war. Until now I would have said that we three, Britain with her mighty fleet, America with the strongest air force, and Russia with the strongest land force on the continent, we three could have guaranteed the peace of the world for a long, long time to come. But now, I don’t know. People are frightened and disturbed all over.”

The stage was now set for Churchill’s reemergence after his disastrous electoral defeat, onto the world stage, to launch the Cold War, and to manipulate the Missouri haberdasher now ensconced in the White House, into policies that would thrust the world into two warring camps, living under the threat of nuclear annihilation for the next 50 years.