

Russian Diplomat On FDR Post-War Design

by Mary Burdman

The Feb. 11, 1945 Yalta summit among President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill “could have become a new chance for the world,” Russian Professor of History Valentin Falin said, in an interview with *RIA Novosti* on the 60th anniversary of the summit. Speaking with *Novosti* military commentator Viktor Litovkin, Falin emphasized Roosevelt’s commitment to work with Stalin and the Soviet Union, which was closer than his commitment to Winston Churchill. Falin’s conclusions are based, he said, on the memoirs of FDR’s Secretary of State, Edward Stettinius, Jr., an influential industrialist, who was at Yalta.

Falin was Soviet Ambassador to West Germany in the 1970s, during a period of economics-centered cooperation negotiated by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. He subsequently became a top Soviet information official, heading *Novosti* and then the International Information Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee.

A long-time student of World War II, in the 1980s Falin organized regular Soviet-German seminars on history called the Falin Roundtable. He has been involved in uncovering new archival material, and organizing discussions of some of the most sensitive phases of 20th Century history, such as the Ribbentrop-Molotov (“Hitler-Stalin Pact”) agreements of 1939. In his *Novosti* interview, Falin proposed to look at Yalta more substantially than as a geopolitical map-drawing session for the post-war world.

One “major detail” of the Yalta talks, which no one writes about, Falin said, was that President Roosevelt promised Stalin a loan of \$4.5 billion (a huge sum at the time) for post-war reconstruction. Roosevelt, Falin noted, “knew that Stalin offered the Americans a vast number of concessions and exceptionally good investment conditions, and was pondering the idea of creating a market economy in the Soviet Union. The dream did not become reality only because Roosevelt was succeeded by Truman, a man who ordered Eisenhower on the way from the Potsdam Conference to draft a plan of a nuclear war against the Soviet Union, called Totality.”

The Yalta agreements were highly controversial already in 1945, and more so during the Cold War, Falin said. Stettinius considered Yalta “the summit of U.S. cooperation with the Soviet Union and partly with Britain.” Most decisions there were based on U.S. proposals, not Soviet ones, Falin

said. FDR wanted to end arms races after the war, because he considered a healthy world economy incompatible with an arms race.

Roosevelt’s View of Stalin

As for Roosevelt’s evaluation of Stalin, Falin considers it sophisticated, as against the widespread notion that the Stalin bamboozled him: “Next, Roosevelt understood Stalin very well; he saw that Stalin, while outwardly acting according to Marxist-Leninist principles, was in fact a die-hard pragmatist. For Stalin, ideology was a cover, a camouflage, if you want. And there is documentary proof, in particular in the documents of Churchill, Roosevelt, and even Hitler, that the U.S. did not view Stalin as a communist. The issue of ideology as such was important for the public, but was always of secondary significance for taking fundamental historical decisions.”

Roosevelt had objected to the Stalin’s purges of the Soviet military and other show trials in the 1930s, and to the Soviet attack on Finland in 1939, Falin added, but in some ways FDR was more critical of the British than of the Russians.

FDR “was a sober and far-sighted politician who thought that America’s economic might, even in the absence of strike forces, would ensure his country the leading role in the world.” At the same time, he realized that the Soviet military saved the U.S. from catastrophe in 1942, when it held on in Stalingrad. Said Falin, “Secretary of State Stettinius wrote that the U.S. was within a hairbreadth of catastrophe in 1942. If the Russians had lost faith at Stalingrad, if the battle on the Volga proceeded according to Hitler’s plans, Germany would have conquered Britain, established full control of Africa and the oil-rich Middle East, and seized Latin America. This would have had extremely negative consequences for the United States. This is what the Americans thought during the war, and so the alliance between Stalin and Roosevelt was no accident.”

In early 1945, U.S. troops were embattled in the Ardennes, but the Red Army attacked (again, as it had for over two years!) ahead of schedule, saving the Allies on the Western Front.

Falin pointed out that FDR also rejected Churchill’s idea to conquer Germany and use Germans to hold the Russians back at the Oder River, which never would have worked: “He saw through Churchill’s promises about putting Germany in the Anglo-Saxon pocket and leaving Russians in the cold, stopping them at the Vistula or the Oder, at the most. It was not a practical policy but fantasy; it was better for America not to sever relations with Russia but to continue cooperation with it, so that the post-war world would be foreseeable and predictable, without the threats America was facing at the time. Roosevelt wanted a post-war world that would correspond to at least some of his views of democracy and human and social justice.” Roosevelt wrote at the time, “We shall have to take the responsibility for world collaboration, or we shall have to bear the responsibility for another world conflict.”