

Bush denounces the Yalta Treaty of 1945

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The twentieth century refuses to die a quiet death. The shadows of its unresolved controversies lie heavily upon contemporary politics. There can be no such thing as a “simple” commemoration of the past. Invariably, invocations of history serve present-day political interests.

The celebration of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe is a case in point. With his speech in Latvia, denouncing the Yalta agreements of 1945, President George Bush sought to provide an ideological justification for present-day American militarism and Washington’s self-proclaimed right to attack and invade any country, in any part of the world, that it perceives to be a threat to its interests.

“As we mark the victory of six decades ago, we are mindful of a paradox,” declared the president. “For much of Germany, defeat led to freedom. For much of Eastern and Central Europe, victory brought the iron rule of another empire. V-E Day marked the end of fascism, but it did not end oppression. The agreement at Yalta followed in the unjust tradition of Munich and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. 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*” (emphasis added).

As it was the US president who made this statement, it represents an unprecedented repudiation and denunciation by the government of the United States of a foreign policy decision made by a previous administration. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt now stands publicly condemned by President Bush as a criminal—for how else can one describe an individual who authored one of history’s “greatest wrongs”? One might ask, to what other “historical wrongs” might the president have been comparing the Yalta agreements? The Holocaust?

Denunciations of the Yalta agreements have long been part of right-wing political rhetoric in the United States. For the extreme right and elements within the American state who advocated the “roll-back” of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, and even the total destruction of the USSR, Yalta

was the symbol of capitulation to communism. The claims that the Yalta agreements were the product of communist subversion of the US State Department provided fuel for the post-World War II witch-hunts spearheaded by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

But despite these denunciations of Yalta, there existed a consensus within the most influential sections of the American ruling class that Roosevelt had played his cards at Yalta as well as could be expected given the circumstances that he confronted. His acceptance of a dominant Soviet role in Poland and much of Eastern Europe was little more than an acknowledgment of military and political realities. The Soviet army was the most powerful force on the European continent. The destruction of the Nazi war machine had been achieved principally by the Soviet army. The bulk of German forces had been deployed on the eastern front. Without the victories won by the Soviet forces in 1943 and 1944, an Anglo-American invasion of France would have been unthinkable.

In the course of liberating Eastern Europe from German occupation, the Soviet Union had suffered staggering human and material losses. Roosevelt recognized that the Soviet Union, having been nearly destroyed by Nazi Germany, was not going to withdraw its troops from Eastern Europe and accept passively the reinstallation of hostile governments that might become part of a new invading coalition. As historian Eric Alterman has recently noted, the USSR was no more prepared to accept installation of a pro-American government in Poland than the United States was prepared to accept the establishment of a pro-Soviet government in Mexico (*When Presidents Lie*, New York: 2004, pp. 37-38).

The only political conclusion that can be drawn from Bush’s Latvian statement is that he believes the United States should have taken military action to achieve the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe. For this to have been done in 1945 would have required Washington to conclude a separate peace with Nazi Germany and redeploy what remained of the latter’s military forces in a joint German-American campaign against the USSR.

This was a political scenario which key Nazi leaders, such as SS-leader Heinrich Himmler, and even elements within

the American military command, such as General George Patton, hoped to realize. However, this course was never considered a viable option within the most influential sections of the American political establishment. Aside from being militarily impossible, a separate peace with the Nazis and an attack on the Soviet Union would have provoked mutiny within the American army—whose GIs viewed the Soviet troops as comrades-in-arms—and massive political protests among the American people at home.

The political mood within the United States was very different in 1945 than it was in 1948. It would require three years of incessant anti-Soviet propaganda and virulent red-baiting within the United States before substantial sections of the American public were prepared to accept the prospect of war with the Soviet Union. A critical element of this propaganda was the claim that Roosevelt had “sold out” Eastern Europe at Yalta.

As always, the Bush administration counts on the refusal of the media to subject the president’s statements to any serious political and historical analysis. Once again, he has not been disappointed. Bush’s reference to “the captivity of millions in Central and Eastern Europe” has gone unchallenged. The American people are left with the impression that Soviet occupation of Eastern European countries cruelly trampled on flowering democracies.

The truth is very different. The regimes of Eastern Europe were cesspools of political reaction. Prior to the outbreak of World War II, Poland was ruled by a quasi-military dictatorship run by the successors of the late Marshal Pilsudski. Fanatically anti-Soviet, the Pilsudski regime was the first European government to conclude a treaty with Hitler, signing a non-aggression pact with the Nazi government in 1934 that was directed against the USSR. The regimes of Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania had all been part of the Nazi-directed Axis of World War II. In Hungary, the dictatorship of Admiral Miklós Horthy had aligned his government with the Third Reich even before the war, and participated with Bulgaria in the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia in May 1941. Just one month later, Hungary joined Hitler in the invasion of the Soviet Union.

Romania was ruled by a dictator, Marshal Ion Antonescu. His government joined the Axis in November 1940, and established the closest links between the German and Romanian economies. Antonescu encouraged murderous pogroms against Romania’s Jews, and sent troops into the Soviet Union when Hitler launched his invasion. In the areas of the Soviet Union occupied by Romanian troops, Bessarabia and Bucovina, the Jewish population was exterminated. Romanian troops also played a major role in a horrifying massacre in Odessa, which resulted in the deaths of 280,000 people, most of whom were Jews.

In Latvia, where Bush gave his speech, 75,000 Jews were murdered along with an estimated 15,000 “politically undesirable elements.” This mass killing was spearheaded by right-wing Latvian nationalists organized in such units as the Arajs Kommando, which carried out pogroms and helped the Nazis herd tens of thousands into pits in the Rumbula forest, where they were massacred.

After the defeat of the Nazis, it was inconceivable that the USSR would permit the reestablishment of anti-Soviet governments in these countries.

In countering the grotesque historical fabrications of the Bush administration, it is not our intention to prettify the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, let alone glorify the Stalinist regimes that were established in the aftermath of the war. But the Marxist and socialist critique of Soviet policy has nothing in common with the democracy versus dictatorship mythology promoted by Cold War imperialist ideologists.

The Marxist critique of Soviet postwar policy explains the essentially conservative and counterrevolutionary character of Soviet policy in Eastern and Central Europe. Soviet policy was dictated by conventional considerations of national defense, not international revolutionary strategy.

While seeking to establish a defensive buffer of client states on the periphery of the USSR, the ruling Soviet bureaucracy provided guarantees for the defense of capitalism throughout Western Europe. The Stalinist suppression of revolutionary movements of the working class in the immediate aftermath of the war proved, in the long run, to be of decisive significance in the ultimate demise of the USSR.

Bush’s demagogy in Latvia serves to underscore the doctrine of preventive war: that the United States will not shrink from war whenever and wherever “democracy” is threatened, or to put it more precisely, whenever and wherever key American interests are at stake.



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