

# WW2 HISTORY.COM

## Yalta A Level Extension Task

### Introduction

In the decades after the Yalta Conference many castigated Roosevelt and Churchill for betraying Eastern Europe in general and Poland in particular at Yalta. From the extracts below decide whether this accusation is justified.

Using the extracts, note down key points on the line below. Place them on the line depending on whether they indicate that FDR and Churchill were selling out or not.

LAURENCE REES: At Yalta, when the 'Big Three' get together for the last time, there's a sense, isn't there, that Roosevelt is not really that interested in European borders?

DAVID REYNOLDS: Well, Roosevelt says during the Tehran Conference when they have a conversation about Poland, 'wake me up when we get to Germany, I don't care two hoots about Poland'. And what he's expressing there, and it's the same for people like Cordell Hull, his Secretary of State, is that what matters is the big picture for the post-war world. It's setting up a framework of great power co-operation within the general institutional structure of the United Nations. And if you can do that, particularly if you can get the Soviet Union in it, that's what really matters compared to the suspicion and the alienation of the inter-war years.

A secondary issue as far as the Americans are concerned is exactly where these wretched lines run through Europe, because after all, Woodrow Wilson had spent weeks on that in Paris in 1919, and what had it done to prevent another war? Roosevelt's view is - it's big picture stuff - getting great power co-operation and particularly getting the Russians in from the cold. For Churchill the borders obviously have to matter more because Britain is much closer to it and also because Britain had officially gone to war over Poland in 1939, so the fate of Poland is something that is a matter of, as Churchill says at Yalta, honour to Britain and a matter of security, because Britain has interests in the continental balance of power in a way that America, 3,000 miles away, doesn't.

LAURENCE REES: Of course, George W. Bush in Latvia in 2005 described Yalta as being shameful in the sense that Munich was shameful. Is that right?

DAVID REYNOLDS: The so-called Yalta myths have been a great part of Republican mythology ever since the 1940s. They were a way of attacking Roosevelt and the Democratic Party and it's been brought up at various times since. The assumption behind it is that Roosevelt sold out Poland and Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union. It's hard really to square that with the realities of 1945. The Red Army is in control of most of Poland by the time they meet at Yalta, so unless you embarked on a war to evict the Red Army from Poland there really is nothing you can do about that.

Churchill and Roosevelt are looking at Yalta as a way of making the Polish situation better. They hope they can get more of a mixed government and they want to reconstruct the government, including Communists, but also Poles from London, the part that had fled to Britain in 1939. They hope that Stalin will entertain some degree of political pluralism. That is a Utopian expectation as we now know, particularly in a country that Stalin deemed so vital to Soviet security. So you could say that by recognising the Polish government in June and July 1945, as they eventually do, which is essentially the Communists with one or two token non-Communists in it, Roosevelt and Churchill have sold out Poland. But I think the practicalities of the matter are that they could either have said we will recognise the government with no change, with some token changes, or we won't recognise it at all, but they can't change what is happening in Poland, particularly after Stalin has so ruthlessly in the spring of 1945 liquidated all the anti-Communist armies.

LAURENCE REES: And so to the Yalta conference. Was Yalta a betrayal of the ideals for which the Western Allies thought they were fighting the war?

ANDREW ROBERTS: It's a betrayal of the ideals because we went to war for the integrity of Poland and the independence of Poland. In fact, what we wanted in April 1939 was a trip wire for Hitler, something that triggered a war. It could have been Poland, it could have been anywhere else frankly, the key thing was to get us into a war with Germany before Hitler took anymore of Europe. One could argue forever about whether or not it would have been better to have done it earlier at Munich but certainly by the time Poland was invaded there was no alternative.

But what we didn't ever promise to the Poles was that we were going to be able to land an army on the other side of Europe and fight. We didn't ever promise them that we were going to attack Germany from the west, and we were in no position to do so either. So in that sense it was a betrayal of the ideals, but I'm not sure if it was really a betrayal of the country itself because there was simply nothing that could be done short of using a nuclear bomb, or threatening to, which was obviously impossible against our great and glorious comrade that had lost 20 million people fighting the Nazis.

LAURENCE REES: Why then pretend at Yalta that we actually believe Stalin is going to allow free elections in Poland and elsewhere, when there is zero evidence from elsewhere that Stalin was likely to do this?

ANDREW ROBERTS: Because he promised he would, this is the thing. There was an enormous amount of wishful thinking involved, but at the same time you have to remember that Poland and the independence of Poland was not at that stage the No.1 issue. It wasn't even the thing that they spent more time talking about than anything else. The key thing at Yalta was to try to get Stalin to stump up with the promise to go to war with Japan 3 months after the end of the war in Europe and also to try and get the Soviet Union into the United Nations organisation that was going to be set up after the war as well. After that you came up with free elections in Eastern Europe, and so it wasn't even the prime desiderata of the British and Americans. I think, as well as wishful thinking, there was a sense that the kinder and nicer you were to Stalin the more likely it would be that he was going to go into a world organisation that was inclusive, and that he wasn't going to sabre rattle and pursue imperialist pre-war style policies. This sounds ridiculous coming from somebody, Winston Churchill, who had, after all, denounced appeasements, which were precisely the same thing effectively only a decade earlier. But I think Churchill was an appeaser to the USSR up to and including Yalta.

LAURENCE REES: Was Poland 'betrayed' by the Western Allies?

ANITA PRAŻMOWSKA: What always strikes me is that writing on Polish issues, in particular relating to the Second World War and the immediate post war period, is approached as a sort of moral test. I see Polish history as something that one has to study for what it was and we should attempt to understand it rather than make it into a sort of theology course. And because of that I don't think that the word betrayed as such is appropriate, because I think that the Poles saw what was happening, although of course they didn't have much authority or ability to change what was happening. They were most certainly victims of first German aggression and then Soviet long term plans in which Britain really played a fairly minimal role in the end. So Poland is a victim state but it's not an unusual situation for a small state to be in, that you don't have much control over the way decisions are made.

LAURENCE REES: So you don't think that at Tehran first and then at Yalta Poland was betrayed?

ANITA PRAŻMOWSKA: Well, I see things like the Woodrow Wilson 14 points and the Atlantic Charter as PR exercises. And there is a place for such exercises because during both the First and Second World Wars the Home Front is extremely important. You have to actually put some sort of major objectives here, and at that particular time Britain's dependence on Polish units was quite sizeable, in particular in the Middle East, and you have to play a PR game.

LAURENCE REES: But that's just cynical?

ANITA PRAŻMOWSKA: It is cynical but that's nothing new. The interesting thing is did the Poles think that this was going to happen to them? And the interesting thing is that the Polish government in exile, Sikorski, had good relations with Churchill. And then you have constant contacts between the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs here and the Foreign Office, and they

knew full well that the British were making no commitments, and they knew full well that they were handing over troops for the British to use without there being any assurances given. So one could say that what the Poles hoped was, against all odds, that they would be able to make an impact there, and that they would be able to carve out some political influence. But it's not as if it caught them by surprise. People like Anders actually always distrusted the British, it was a very complicated relationship with the British.

LAURENCE REES: What's your view on Yalta?

SIR MAX HASTINGS: I think that Yalta has become a completely false symbol. In one sense Yalta made explicit all manner of things that actually had been implicit in the way that the Allies had conducted strategy all the way along. Nobody on the western side had any grounds to be proud of what was done at Yalta. Roosevelt, there's no doubt, still hoped in a pretty naïve fashion that he could do business with Stalin and that it would be easier to do business with Stalin if he distanced himself from Churchill. Roosevelt also displayed a pretty cynical indifference to the fate of Eastern Europe, that Eastern Europe was to be liberated from one tyranny in order to be surrendered to another.

Churchill was also naïve. Churchill worked himself up into an almost emotional fever in his distress about, especially, the sacrifice of Poland and, especially, the fact that Polish freedom, for which Britain had gone into the Second World War, was to be sacrificed to the Russians. But Churchill refused to recognise the logic of his own position, that if the western Allies had been serious about wanting to see that eastern Europe was free, they would have had to have got into the war on a very big scale and they would have had to have had D Day in 1943. If they then fought like tigers and accepted casualties many times the scale of those that they did, then they might, they might, have been able to save eastern Europe and Poland from the Russians, though even then it's pretty doubtful. But what would have happened if Roosevelt and Churchill had gone to their own electorates and said we are actually going to launch a major campaign on the continent which is going to cost hundreds of thousands of extra lives, not in order to accelerate the defeat of Hitler, but in order to make sure that all these poor Polish and Romanian and Czech and Hungarian peoples don't fall prey to the wicked Russians?

No British or American government could have survived that, because the other thing one has to remember is the colossal popular enthusiasm for Russia especially in Britain. British people are saying that they thought Russia was absolutely wonderful. Reading people's diaries from that period it is absolutely extraordinary, the euphoric expressions of enthusiasm for Uncle Joe Stalin and what he was doing. The man whose armies had killed 2 or 3 million - the heroic Soviet people. And all the time there was a rage towards their own government for not getting into the war more. So any notion that the British public or the American one would have supported Churchill or Roosevelt in "standing up to the Russians," it was just never on. And yes it's true that things were made explicit at Yalta, which looked pretty ugly, but the nature of the Yalta decisions was settled in advanced.

There's also been a lot of sentiment about some aspects of Yalta. For instance, on one issue in

particular, the repatriation of Russians who had been fighting in German uniform. Well, first of all, in that climate, at that stage, when the Russians were liberating a lot of British prisoners any idea that when the British were desperate to get their own prisoners back from all these camps in Poland we would refuse to do a reciprocal deal for repatriation with the Russians is unrealistic. Secondly, the Cossacks - because everybody thinks of them all dancing in fancy clothes and so on - the Cossacks weren't like that. The Cossacks who fought in German uniforms had done terrible things on German orders in northern Italy and Yugoslavia. Their atrocities had become a by-word. I don't mean that anyone for a moment could applaud the fact that these wretched people were returned to be cold bloodedly slaughtered by Stalin, but any idea that one was returning these poor innocent foes of Stalin, I don't buy that at all, and I think those authors who have are just plain wrong and naïve.

So all that happened at Yalta was that a rubber stamp was put on a lot of ugly, ugly things which should have been bound to happen for at least 2 or 3 years because of the way that the West had planned its strategy through the 2nd World War.

LAURENCE REES: To what extent can we think of Yalta as a betrayal of the ideals that the West was supposedly fighting the war for in the first place?

RICHARD OVERY: One could see, I suppose, that the Soviet Union is going to sit in Eastern Europe as a betrayal, because, of course, the ideals of the West were anti-Soviet as much as they were anti-Fascist. Of course there was nothing you can do about it, and you hope that you've judged Stalin right as less of a wild card than Hitler was. But in fact most informed opinion knew in October 1939 that you were never going to get Poland back and that wasn't why you fought the war, of course. You'd fought the war because you wanted to defend the Western world and the Western way of life.

LAURENCE REES: The trouble is you'd told everyone that you were fighting the war over the question of the integrity of Poland.

RICHARD OVERY: Well, you did, yes, but I don't think many people took that terribly seriously except the Poles. And they very soon realised that it wasn't the case.

LAURENCE REES: Pretty terrible for Poland though?

RICHARD OVERY: Yes.

LAURENCE REES: And yet we consider we won the war.

RICHARD OVERY: Yes. Well, we won the war that we went to war for, which is the war for the Western world and not the war for Poland.

LAURENCE REES: But we said it was a war for Poland.

RICHARD OVERY: We said it was a war for Poland but I don't think anybody had any

illusions about that. During the run up to the outbreak of war, during September itself, we treated the Poles appallingly. That's because we had written them off more or less. They were not people that the British or French liked very much anyway, and the idea was that this was a sticking point, where you finally said to Hitler, now you've got to stop because after Poland there'll be this and there'll be that and so on. So very quickly it becomes a war between different systems, different ideologies and different world views and not a war any longer for Poland. Although, of course, in 1945 there were many people, Churchill included, who might remember why it was that they'd gone to war formerly.

In the first place you've got to be realistic. You know you're not going to be able to send forces of intervention as you'd done in 1918 to Poland to keep the Russians at bay.

LAURENCE REES: So let's think about the Yalta conference in February 1945. To what extent can we say that Yalta was a betrayal of the ideals the West said they were fighting a war for?

ROBERT SERVICE: Geopolitics took over from idealism; the Allies did geopolitical deals that were softer than the ones that everyone thought they were fighting the war for. So Yalta involved concessions to the Soviet Union that were definitely going to give the Kremlin influence over Eastern Europe and East Central Europe that at the start of the war no one had thought conceivable. And the Soviet Union is treated as one of the big three powers in the world. It's in this period, 1944 and 1945, that the Soviet Union emerges as one of the superpowers, a superpower on the way up, whereas the British superpower is already in decline. So deals are done. It's understandable that both the British and the Americans sought to find ways of ending the war that would limit the number of soldiers and civilians that they lost, and would ease the way towards peace, but in the process nations were liberated from the Third Reich only to find that they were subjected to the iron heel of the Soviet regime.

LAURENCE REES: So would you agree with the statement that Yalta was a betrayal of the ideals the West said they were fighting a war for?

ROBERT SERVICE: I think that Yalta involved a betrayal of some of the ideals of the three Allies, as explained at the beginning of the alliance. Obviously so many of the effects of the victory were of a positive nature. I mean, the Third Reich was eliminated, the German Empire had ceased to exist in Europe, but there were national casualties, and those national casualties were all of the countries to the East of the iron curtain. Half of Europe.

LAURENCE REES: Is that one of the reasons why Roosevelt doesn't seem too concerned about the extent to which Stalin will control much of Eastern Europe after the war?

ROBERT DALLEK: I think there are two things that operate on this question of control in Eastern Europe by Stalin at the end of the war. Roosevelt's conviction was that you needed to concede things to Stalin, and of course he does in Asia by promising at Yalta some Japanese territory to him. Roosevelt is also giving them a sweetheart deal in China where they're going to have rights in Port Arthur and control of the Manchurian railways. So he's paying a price which he understands, or he feels he believes he needs to in order to get Russian co-operation. Because he doesn't trust them, he doesn't think they're great, good guys and that they're going to do this out of sentiment, he realizes that they want something for their sacrifices. But he's

also a realist, and the realism is, as George Kennan, the great diplomat and later historian said; the price we paid for the Soviets tearing the guts out of the Nazi war machine in World War Two was their domination of East Central Europe. And Roosevelt's assumption was what choice do we have? We're going to go to war with Russia over Poland, over the Baltic states?

Roosevelt was pressured by Eleanor Roosevelt about the Baltics. He was pressured by the Poles about what he was doing for Poland. And behind the scenes he's contemptuous of this. He says at one point: do you expect me to go to war with Stalin over the Baltics? Sure, democracy, freedom, the rhetoric tumbles off their lips; the declaration of liberty for the East, a declaration of freedom for the liberated countries from Nazi control in Eastern Europe; it's rhetoric. The reality is what dictates, and Roosevelt, before he goes to Yalta, has a famous conversation, well not so famous, with some members of his Senate Foreign Relations Committee to whom he says, "Gentlemen, history is controlled by spheres of importance, by balance of power." You see, he's a real politician. Whatever his rhetoric in public, whatever his idealistic lingo, it's the hard nosed realities that he always tried to think of first.

**REALISTS**



**TRAITORS**