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# How the West lost World War II at Yalta

by Dan Hannan | February 10, 2020 11:00 PM

Seventy-five years ago, we lost the war. Or, more precisely, we gave up on winning it.

Among all the 75th anniversaries marked by our politicians — D-Day, V-E Day, V-J Day — this week's is the one that should make us squirm. On Feb. 11, 1945, at the Crimean resort of Yalta, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, and Winston Churchill agreed to a carve-up that condemned hundreds of millions of Europeans to tyranny and left the USSR as the only state to come through World War II wholly victorious.

That is not an easy thing to acknowledge. Even as I was writing the last paragraph, I felt as if I was somehow slighting the American, British, and other Allied soldiers (my late father among them) who, without making a fuss, dropped what they were doing and rushed to do their duty. Yet, 75 years on, we should be honest.

Why, after all, did World War II begin? There were a lot of contributory factors, obviously, but the immediate casus belli was Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland. Britain and France went to war to defend Polish sovereignty against a neighboring dictatorship that aimed to swallow up a large chunk of its territory. They ended up agreeing to leave Poland under the domination of a neighboring dictatorship that swallowed up a large chunk of its territory.

We can offer all sorts of explanations and excuses. Roosevelt was dying — he lived for only two more months, not long enough to see the socialist enslavement of Eastern Europe. But, frankly, even had he been in full health, watchful and alert, it is not clear how much more he could have done.

“Whoever occupies a territory gets to impose his own social system on it,” Stalin told the Yugoslav Partisan Miloslav Djilas. “Everyone imposes his system as far as his army can reach.” At that moment, Stalin's army reached very far indeed, the most powerful force under mobilization. Denis Healey, the future Labour minister who was at that time a British Army major, remarked that “all the Red Army needed to reach the North Sea was boots.”

To challenge Soviet hegemony in the Eastern Europe, the Western allies would have needed to threaten force credibly. Churchill was prepared at least to consider that option, one of the reasons he was turned out of office in the election of July 1945.

Roosevelt was not prepared to do that. Credulous at the best of times, he placed great store by Stalin's promise to implement the Four Freedoms. (How the old gangster must have chuckled.) In any case, he was desperate to bring the USSR into the war against Japan — a

commitment that Stalin was happy to give.

So, the deed was done. Bulgarians, Czechs, Estonians, East Germans — all were condemned to two generations of occupation and misery. Polish soldiers had fought with grim patriotism across the Western theater — at the Battle of Britain, in North Africa, in Normandy. They sustained fearsome casualties at Monte Casino and Arnhem. Yet their Western allies were in no position to return the favor when, in 1945, their homeland was overrun for the second time.

Stalin was able to impose a ready-made government, put together in the Kremlin but lacking domestic support inside Poland. It was the same story in every conquered satrapy, except, to some degree, Yugoslavia. There were fewer than 4,000 Hungarian Communists when Matyas Rakosi returned to Budapest with the Red Army, and fewer than a thousand Romanian Communists (out of a population of 20 million) when Ana Pauker came back to Bucharest.

But Stalin knew how to work with useful idiots. His satellite parties were initially instructed to join coalitions or Popular Fronts, maintaining the facade of democracy until, through a combination of force and fear, they could assume total power. Western socialists mulishly refused to see what was happening.

We have been telling ourselves a lie ever since. It is perhaps an understandable lie, a lie born out of respect for the fallen. But it is a lie nonetheless.

The lie holds that, somehow, communism is not as bad as fascism. We like to think that the ascendancy of Stalinism, the secret police, the torture chambers, the gulags, was a price worth paying. We British, especially, need to tell ourselves that it all worked out in the end. Otherwise, what was our sacrifice for? We emerged in 1945 broken and bankrupt. We have still not paid off our wartime debt. We desperately want to believe that we won.

In fact, it was not until the Thatcher-Reagan years that we finally made some restitution to the nations betrayed at Yalta. If we must identify a Western victory, it came in 1989. Too late for millions.