

THE YALTA PROBLEM IN THE MID-EIGHTIES

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In public parlance, the term "Yalta" signifies the division of Europe and the subjection of several Eastern European countries to Soviet occupation. Whoever refers to Yalta, will imply that the Western powers have acknowledged Soviet decision-making in respect of the economic, political and social systems ruling in these countries; furthermore, they have tacitly accepted that the Soviet Union may apply military force to the safeguarding of these systems which are serving its own purposes.

There is little doubt that, in actual fact, these assumptions are more-or-less consonant with the interpretation of the Yalta agreements, and the acceptance of their long-term validity, by the leadership of the great powers. It is well known that, in August 1968, Brezhnev put the question, through diplomatic channels, to the then President Johnson: Did the United States acknowledge the unchanged validity of the results arrived at in Yalta and in Potsdam? Johnson's reply — on the 18th August — confirmed that the agreement stood, as far as Czechoslovakia and Romania were concerned; in the case of Yugoslavia — if necessary negotiations should take place. In the dawn of 21st August, Soviet troops occupied Prague...

If this is the true meaning of the Yalta agreements, then this poses a very difficult political dilemma for all those who have the fate of Eastern Europe at heart. Because Yalta is also one guarantee of peace in Europe. If either party would declare the Yalta Agreements null and void, the framework of peace in Europe would collapse. A true "either — or" situation... Either we have to accept that our peace depends on the recognition of the Soviet Union as the "Gendarme of Eastern Europe" — or (were we to demand that the Western powers denounce the Yalta agreements) we would have to countenance the danger of war in Europe.

How to deal with this dilemma? It would be easiest, of course, just to bypass it. Meaning a situation wherein the Soviet state would either desist of using its powers sanctified by Yalta — or would be forced to renounce these powers. This was the scenario sketched by the spokesmen of KOR in the late seventies: "Let us assume that in one or another Eastern European country a social movement would emerge — well-organized and therefore capable of self-restraint — outside the bounds of the hierarchical order created by the Party State. A bargain could be struck whereby the geo-political interests of the Soviet state would be safeguarded, in exchange for a limited but sensible pluralism. If no bargain would be countenanced, a catastrophe would be hazarded. Is it completely out of the question that the Soviet leadership and their local satraps would accept the lesser evil and come to terms?"

In my opinion, the idea of a self-limiting social movement is still a valuable and fruitful concept, even after the 13th December 1981 in Poland. The experiences of 1980-81, however, cast light on the shortcomings of this idea too. In relation to our question, they have shown that the emergence of an organized social movement,

willing to come to terms, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a Soviet willingness to bargain. As long as it remains the accepted practice in the international sphere that — come the crunch — the Soviet Union may use brute force, it is more than likely that they would prefer a military solution to an uncertain compromise.

Sometimes one hears, in the way of wishful thinking, ideas like: maybe the events of 1956, 1968 and 1980-81 could occur in several countries simultaneously, and the Soviets could not deal with this by armed intervention; or, that some internal crisis of the Soviet military machine might paralyse it; or, that some sort of democratic renewal may emerge in the Soviet Union itself. These are possible but not very likely eventualities, and we best disregard them. Enough to say: if we think that the dilemma of Yalta can be circumvented, we have to trust Lady Luck alone.

It is very difficult to come to terms with this state of affairs, especially today. Ever since the *coup* of Jaruzelski, Eastern Europe finds itself in a blind alley. The situation is inherently unstable, and not only in Poland. There, state power is incapable of liquidating Solidarity — which has only been forced underground: Solidarity is equally incapable of enforcing its open recognition. The whole area suffers from an economic crisis; the copious and cheap Soviet raw material and energy reserves are threatened by exhaustion; reserves of manpower are equally diminishing; the expenditure on rearmament knows no bounds; competition in the markets of the world is getting sharper and sharper; the costs of environmental damage are becoming manifest. The consequence of all these factors is that the economic structures of Eastern European countries, based on the Soviet model, simply cannot carry on with the previously experienced economic growth. The need for economic reforms is pressing, but the political conditions of reform are missing. Stagnation, deterioration, hopelessness are the rule everywhere. Eastern Europe is being threatened with the fate of relapsing among the rotten dictatorships of the Third World.

It is an oft-repeated commonplace that Yalta brought us to this pretty pass. It is also a commonplace that Yalta cannot be changed. Let us have a closer look at this belief: how far is it true? Let us face up to the dilemma of Yalta. Is it an immutable certainty that by denouncing Yalta we would inevitably destroy the status quo in Europe? And, is it also immutable that, by sticking to Yalta, we are handing all power to the Soviets, including the right to military intervention?

A unilateral repudiation of Yalta would doubtless conjure up the danger of war. Of course, if the Yalta agreements could be invalidated by negotiation, by common consent, there would be no danger to peace — but this is not a serious proposition. A whole series of important agreements were built on the conference decisions of Yalta and Potsdam, regulating the relationships ruling today in Europe: like the treaties of Poland with both Eastern and Western Germany; the contractual relationship between the two Germanies; the four-power agreement on Berlin: the acceptance of the two German states into the UN: the Helsinki agreement: and quite a few others. There cannot be a responsible power that would endanger all these with a stroke. On the other hand, there seems to be no earthly reason why the Soviet Union would even contemplate a rearrangement of this kind — what prize could it possibly gain in exchange for foregoing the main achievements of its diplomatic efforts pursued for decades? Matters once closed are extremely difficult to re-open, without very solid and compelling reasons. However, there is one question among those thrown up by the second world war that is still unresolved: the victorious Allied Powers have never concluded a peace treaty with the successor states of the Third Reich. This should be the beginning: every other change should ensue from a settlement of the German question.

Of course it is not an accident that the question of a German peace treaty was carefully avoided in the seventies, when the frontiers in Europe were finalized, when

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the status of Berlin was settled, while the two Germanies were accepted in the comity of sovereign nations. Namely, in the course of drawing up a peace treaty, it should have to be decided, openly and unconditionally, whether the division of Germany should be a permanent or a transitional state of affairs. I doubt whether the majority of Germans would ever accept a permanent division, indeed, the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany clearly declares the aim of re-unification. A permanent division, sanctified by international law, would assuredly meet a violent resistance. So would re-unification: and not only by the Soviet Union. Germany's eastern and western neighbours, first of all France and Poland, would be equally upset by the prospect of this. In conclusion we may say that the solution of the German problem can only be the result, not the starting point of a comprehensive re-arrangement of things in Europe.

The peaceful invalidation of Yalta looks therefore to be a very distant prospect. Within the foreseeable future, we shall probably have to accept the framework of Yalta as a fact of life. And this leads us to the other horn of our dilemma: is it a certainty, an indubitable fact, that — by the acceptance of Yalta as the basis of a European status quo — the Soviet Union has a free hand for everything in Eastern Europe, including the right to military intervention?

The answer to this question is not so self-evident as we might think following forty years experience. It is true that the Yalta agreements do contain a point that could be stretched up to an acquiescence in the use of force: but there is no proof that such an extension was consonant with the explicit intentions of the negotiating partners. Indeed, we may find clearly contradictory statements among the documents of the conference. I refer to the text of the "Declaration about Liberated Europe": this repeated the message of the Atlantic Charter: the Allies would only recognize the legitimacy of those new governments that came to power via free elections. These transitional governments must ensure fundamental rights of freedom and must include all democratic forces. In the literal sense, this declaration explicitly excludes the right of any of the allied powers to prevent free elections, to remove freely chosen governments, to bring to power — or to maintain in power unrepresentative, not freely established governments. I call this the "Atlantic interpretation" of the Yalta agreements.

It is true that these severe prohibitions were instantly disregarded at the Yalta meeting itself, concerning the first disputed case. This was the question of the recognition of a Polish government by the Allies. The leaders of the United States and of Great Britain argued the legal continuity of the Polish state as it had stood on the 1st September, 1939; therefore, they considered the Polish government-in-exile in London as the legal and rightful one. The Soviet Union — having participated in the dismemberment of Poland alongside Nazi Germany in 1939 — did resume diplomatic relations with the Polish government-in-exile in 1941; in 1943, however, it withdrew its recognition and, once Soviet troops set foot in Poland, established a National Liberation Committee (made up of Communists and fellow-travellers) in Lublin. In 1944, this Committee transferred itself to Warsaw and operated, to all intents and purposes, as a transitional government.

The Soviet behaviour in this case had no standing according to the terms of the Declaration. Stalin, however, did not bother with the principles of democracy or sovereignty. His claims were made on behalf of the security of the Soviet Union. He declared that the Polish government in London was anti-Soviet: the Soviet state could not allow the existence of hostile regimes along its frontiers. Especially not in Poland, the classic *glacis* for German attacks against Russia, as had been proven in two world wars.

Stalin's arguments may have gained some moral weight in consideration of the terrible bloodletting suffered by the Soviet Union. The war was still on, and Churchill and Roosevelt could not have remained indifferent to this sacrifice. Nevertheless, realities weighed more in the scales than sentiments (Poland was by then occupied by the Red Army), not to speak of self-interest: Churchill wanted to strengthen the influence of Great Britain in the Balkans, whilst Roosevelt badly wanted a Soviet entry into the war against Japan. In the end, the two Western leaders gave ground. It is true that they acknowledged the Soviet right to decide the nature of neighbouring governments in a limited form only: they refused to accept the Lublin "government" as it stood and insisted on some sort of unification of the two governments. Still, it is an indisputable fact that they gave up the principles of the Declaration. This sorry solution of the Polish problem was the precedent allowing us to make a second interpretation of the Yalta agreements. I would call this the "Lublin interpretation".

At the time this concession may have appeared to be a temporary one. After all, the three leaders agreed that elections would be held in Poland within a few months — following which there would have been no dispute about recognition. Nobody asked the question: if it was possible to withdraw recognition from a government enjoying legal continuity, on account of its being a "danger to Soviet interests", what would have prevented a similar veto against a freely and democratically-elected new government? Thus the Yalta agreements took two contradictory stands in the question of Soviet rights in occupied countries: the "Atlantic answer" and the "Lublin answer".

Before going further, we may observe that the two were not mutually exclusive. It was not beyond the bounds of imagination that some kind of governance might be established that would come into being through free elections but at the same time would have been able to satisfy the claims of security demanded by the Soviet Union.

A compromise of this nature, agreed in Hungary in September, 1945, may have had such an aim: the parties in the temporary government agreed among themselves — and with the Soviet President of the Allied Control Commission — that albeit free and regular elections would be held, the composition of the government would not depend on the ratio of parties in the new Parliament. It remained an open question how far a discrepancy could be sustained in the power relationships in Parliament on one side and in the civil administration on the other, and how this would affect the stability of the system. In Hungary, conditions seemed reasonably favourable for a solution of this kind: in Romania, Bulgaria and particularly in Poland, the conditions were far from promising. The Allies failed, however, to scrutinize the possibilities of an equilibrium between their compromise of the "Atlantic" and "Lublin" solutions on the one hand, and the social and political situation of the whole area on the other. The two Western leaders did not agree even among themselves.

At the time of the Yalta conference, the anti-fascist coalition had already arrived at a turning-point. The Nazi danger was by then fast disappearing: its threat was not enough to suppress the ideological and political antagonism between the Soviets and the Anglo-Saxons any longer. Real conflicts came out into the open, when the Soviet Union began its reordering of matters in the liberated or occupied countries in Eastern Europe. However, it was felt at the time that a complete rupture might still be avoided — nobody had any inkling, how imminent this already was. In these circumstances, the obvious answer seemed to be the well-worn diplomatic manoeuvre: whenever and wherever there could be no agreement, the minutes of the conference were clothed in a deliberate vagueness.

All the loose talk about possible solutions favoured, of course, the Soviet Union, it being in possession on the ground. In the following months, the Soviet Union extorted one concession after another from the Western powers, almost all of them contrary not only to an "Atlantic interpretation" but also to a "Lublin interpreta-

tion", nullifying the supposed limitations of the latter.

In the first instance, the Soviet Union rammed down the throat of its partners its own ideas about the re-organization of the Polish government: instead of a completely new government, a couple of ministers from the London one were to be co-opted to the existing Lublin group. Next, it extorted an outcome, favourable to itself, in the crises concerning Romania and Bulgaria. In Romania, the King was forced to withdraw his demand for the resignation of the completely un-representative government of Groza, against the concession that two members of the opposition would join the cabinet. In Bulgaria, the Western powers abandoned their objections to elections based on a unitary list, in exchange for a similar face-saving formula.

Sooner or later, however, it became clear that there was to be no end to this blackmail. Consequently, the United States and Great Britain became increasingly reluctant to accept the "Lublin interpretation". From the end of 1945 onwards, the Western powers returned to the use of the Atlantic rhetoric; they levelled accusations against the Soviet Union, charging it with breaches of the Yalta agreement; they started to behave in a manner pretending that Roosevelt and Churchill had never recognized the right of the Soviet Union to subordinate the principles of the Declaration to its geopolitical interests, as far as the European theatre was concerned. The fast deteriorating relationships, however, did not put a brake on Stalin — far from it. Sensing that a permanent compromise had become impossible, he did not bother any longer to stick even to the Lublin interpretation". On the contrary: it was he who accused his erstwhile partners of warlike preparations, on the pretext of defending the "Atlantic" principles, and of attempting to upset, in a forcible manner, the status quo achieved in 1945. The Yalta agreement dissolved into two irreconcilable interpretations — the Cold War broke out in earnest. This meant that, between 1945 and 1947, no clear and mutually acceptable interpretation of the Yalta agreements had emerged that would have been capable of offering a common basis for the changed relationship, once the Cold War came to a close. The empty framework could be equally filled by two scenarios: on the one hand, the return of sovereignty and democratisation to the sovietized Eastern European countries (provided that the Soviet Union would be satisfied with geopolitical safeguards offered by sovereign governments); on the other hand, the wholesale Sovietization of the area, not excluding Soviet military interventions from time to time (the Western powers receiving certain concessions acceptable to them in these conditions).

The real meaning of Yalta emerged only later, in 1956 and in 1968. The defeat of the Hungarian Revolution followed by the occupation of Czechoslovakia proved that no agreement is possible with the Soviet Union, either on the basis of the "Atlantic interpretation" or on the basis of a compromise between the "Atlantic" and "Lublin" concepts. Strangely enough, however, this scaring experience has contributed just as much to the start of détente, as the gradual abolition of Stalinist terror, and the opening up of the Soviet sphere to commercial and cultural contacts, and the emergence of a rough strategic balance. The harsh fact is that 1956 and 1968 put paid to any illusions the West may have had about the temporary nature of soviet rule over Eastern Europe. This opened the door to a clarification of the true contents of Yalta, to a mutually acceptable interpretation of it.

The Western powers acknowledged that the Soviet-type governments of Eastern European countries were legitimate ones: indeed — at least in secret diplomatic contacts — they acknowledged that the Soviet Union was entitled to the use of armed force if any of these governments would be threatened. In exchange for this recognition, they attempted to attach a more precise and accountable meaning to the other half of the Yalta agreements: the one that does impose certain limits on Soviet free-

dom of action in the area. There was no more talk about recognised opposition, about representative government; but it appeared feasible to conclude international agreements safeguarding basic human rights. This did not seem to be in contradiction with a recognition of these Soviet-type régimes. The results of efforts in this field was the International Covenant on Human Rights, as well as the so-called "third basket" of the Helsinki Final Act (setting out agreed rules on the free movement of people and of communications &c.).

By the middle seventies, we have seen the emergence of a unified and mutually acceptable interpretation of the Yalta agreements; I would call this the "Helsinki interpretation".

At first, it appeared that the "Helsinki interpretation" might offer the chance for well-ordered long-term relationships in Europe. The leadership of the Soviet Union was granted the demands originally denied it in 1945: a final settlement of the Armistice frontiers, the recognition of the East European Soviet sphere of influence, the international acceptance of the Soviet-type governments in the area. A certain insistence on human rights may have seemed an acceptable price — particularly because there were very few, and not easily verifiable, concessions which they were expected to make. I shall return to these presently.

The Western side may also have felt some satisfaction: the status of Berlin was settled and contacts between the citizens of the two Germanies became regularized, if not fully liberalized. Longer-term expectations seemed even more promising. There was a reasonable expectation that, following international approval of respect for human rights, a gradual opening up of contacts might render life more tolerable in the Soviet-dominated area. Soviet satellite governments then might acquire a measure of legitimacy among their subjects; the lessening of political tension might lead to some let-up in repression; finally, it was hoped that all this might lead towards some kind of more pluralistic economic and political order. From Henry Kissinger to Willy Brandt, this was the meaning of the "Helsinki bargain" to most leading circles in the West.

Alas, this compromise proved to be no more stable than the previous one. Many things, from outside the European theatre, contributed to its collapse: the impasse of disarmament, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Central American imbroglio and many others. But let us not delude ourselves: the Helsinki Final Act was underlined from the very outset. It defined the area of human rights in an extremely liberal manner: freedom of assembly — also the right to work, the right to health, even the right to recreation were included in it. This broad spectrum in itself supplied the pretext for any breach of basic rights. No government on earth can render all the solemnly proclaimed good things to its citizens at the same time. So the Soviet Union and its satellites could easily argue that perhaps less had been achieved in the field of negative rights but much more in the area of positive ones. Whilst this was bad enough, it was even worse that light years of distance still existed between rhetoric and realities just like at the time of the "Atlantic" interpretation. When the Western powers compelled the Soviet Union to subscribe to basic human rights, they apparently did not expect the emergence of independent organizations and institutions or of a free press in Eastern Europe. They were looking for more modest results: a somewhat more liberally-handled emigration policy, more movement between East and West, perhaps a few Western periodicals in newspaper kiosks and the like. In all this they could have co-operated with the Soviet Union — give or take the occasional friction.

The sudden birth of KOR, of Charter 77, of Soviet groups for monitoring the Helsinki agreement, the spread of uncensored publications these phenomena created an unexpected crisis. The Soviet Union behaved in the same manner as in 1945-47:

being in possession of the ground, it did not give one jot. The persecution of Soviet dissidents, the brutal behaviour of Czechoslovak forces of violence towards Charter members, surpassed anything seen before. And when the KOR movement broadened out into a movement embracing the workers, giving birth to Solidarity, 1956 and 1968 were replayed: they confronted the universal will of the people with naked force. The Western powers had no means to prevent all this — but they could not just swallow the bitter pill of disappointment either. In consequence, the "Helsinki interpretation" fell apart in the same way as its predecessors one side flourished the banner of universal human rights, the other side rejected alleged interventions into internal matters. This is the state of affairs today forty years after Yalta, ten years after Helsinki.

Looking back at the dilemma I have initially indicated, we can now state quite clearly that the accepted common interpretation of Yalta led to a false view. The original agreement struck at Yalta contained no clause empowering the Soviet Union to use force to protect the ruling systems of the countries occupied by it. This concession belongs to a later, quasi-historical interpretation of Yalta. Between 1976 and 1981, this interpretation was shaken to its foundations. The future of Europe depends to a large extent on the question: what will replace this interpretation? No one can count on the repeal of the Yalta agreement, but a re-interpretation of it cannot be evaded any longer. Would it be possible to arrive at an interpretation that would not include the right to forcible intervention on the part of the Soviet Union, that would apply more determined measure safeguarding basic human rights? This is the correct question. A positive answer to this would be the only means whereby the Soviet-type regimes of Eastern Europe might be able to get out of their social and economic blind alley, and — last but not least — the stability of the European status quo would also depend on a solution of this problem.

At first glance, the lessons of the Cold War do not seem to offer much encouragement. The Soviet Union, in all likelihood, would react in a very hostile manner if limitations were attempted to its freedom of action in its sphere — limitations it would not introduce of its own free will. It is, of course, self-evident that no solution could be stable without its acceptance by the Soviet Union. But we must not assume that the Soviet Union today would refuse everything it rejected forty years ago. Between 1945 and 1948, the Soviet Union was only a regional power: its army was the traditional land-based one; its economy, its cultural and scientific establishment was isolated; it was only for a short period that it was able to support its own development from the material and spiritual exploitation of its newly-acquired domains. Today, the Soviet Union is a world power; militarily incomparably stronger than at the end of the second world war. But by the same token, it simply cannot avoid some kind of accommodation with the United States. It cannot obtain the capital and the technology, indispensable for its economy (as well as its progress in armaments) from the semi-developed, debilitated, East European countries (themselves regressed through aping the Soviet model). It cannot even produce enough grain to feed its population. A thousand and one threads are tying it now into the outside world — a return to self-isolation would lead to quite unforeseeable consequences.

The lessons of the period of detente are more complex. It is true that the disputes about human rights remind one, in an eerie way, of the fruitless rhetoric expended about free elections. But this dispute was not sparked by the Western powers making unrealistic demands on the Soviet Union. They would have been satisfied with quite modest results. It was the East European peoples themselves who rebelled against what they saw as the unrealistically restricted concessions they had received from the attempted concord between the West and the Soviet Union. In the course of the Cold

War, totalitarian terror ruthlessly suppressed every kind of local resistance. Once, however, oppression became somewhat more restrained — and more calculable — it became clear that stability in the region could only be achieved by permanent concessions. Not only are those solutions unstable that do not enjoy the acceptance of the Soviet Union: anything the peoples of Eastern Europe are not prepared to live with, is equally unstable.

Following 1956, then 1968, the Soviet Union did offer certain concessions that eventually led to a period of peace and quiet in the area. After the Hungarian 1956, they offered more normalcy in everyday life, a second, "small" de-Stalinisation and, above all, an economic upswing based on the supply of Soviet raw material. After 1968, they allowed a more relaxed range of economic and cultural contacts with the West, and a further injection of Soviet raw materials and energy products. After 1981, there is nothing the Soviet Union can offer. It is forced to reduce its supplies, it is compelled to raise its prices; it makes every attempt to shepherd the subject countries back into the straitjacket of a self-sufficient Comecon; whenever possible, it tries to make them pay for Western investments required for the Soviet economy. In these conditions, it simply cannot expect to maintain an orderly rule over Eastern Europe. Of course, no one can count on its spontaneous retirement from the area.

For these reasons, the propositions of KOR are still on the agenda. What will happen to them, will depend on the new meaning of Yalta being developed among the powers whose task it is to maintain the peace of the world.