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LUCA RICCARDI, *YALTA. I TRE GRANDI E LA COSTRUZIONE DI UN NUOVO SISTEMA INTERNAZIONALE*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2021, 327 p.

Reviewed by Bogdan Živković*

Luca Riccardi, Italian scholar of the history of international relations best known for his seminal work on Italian relations with the Middle East, devoted his latest book to one of the crucial events in the history of international relations – the Yalta Conference. Of course, the issue is far from being unknown or understudied. Even so, Riccardi deemed that revisiting it might be relevant and useful. A scholarly publication on Yalta was needed not only because of the importance of the topic itself, but primarily because of the popular and widespread misconceptions about its nature.

As noted in the first pages of the book, the fiftieth anniversary of the Prague Spring revived such misinterpretations. Initially launched by de Gaulle, who was excluded from participating in the conference, and later developed and disseminated by various anti-communist politicians and Eastern bloc dissidents, a *topos* of Yalta emerged in the Western public. According to such interpretations, Yalta was the source of the Cold War. It was regarded by many as a symbol of Western impotence and appeasement of Soviet aggressive expansion, a conference that sanctioned a division of Europe which left its eastern part at the mercy of the “Evil Empire”.

Using the traditional method of the history of international relations, Riccardi had two main goals. Firstly, to demonstrate that such perceptions are flawed, and that Yalta was far from sanctioning a division of Europe. And secondly, to depict the reality of Yalta – its complex diplomatic dynamic, collaboration and conflicts, different interests and attempts to strengthen the unity of the Allies. Hence, the reader remains convinced that Yalta was not “the original sin” that led to the Cold War, but quite the opposite – an attempt to prevent it.

The book is divided into eight chapters, which not only thoroughly depict the discussions held at the Crimean resort, but also provide a historical introduction to each of the issues discussed, and an interpretation of the three powers’ policies on each. The first two chapters depict preparations for the conference, and the following six chapters analyse the most important issues discussed at Yalta: Poland; Germany; the United Nations; Europe; the Far East; and three less important issues – Iran, Yugoslavia and Turkey.

Some chapters deserve to be particularly highlighted, as they point out important factors that shaped the conference. The chapter about Poland shows that geostrategic security was the imperative of Soviet foreign policy. On the other hand, it also analyses how and to which extent the Western Allies were willing to accommodate such aspirations. The chapter that deals with the issue of the United Nations shows that it was the crux of Roosevelt’s diplomacy, as the American president was determined to promote this body and its central role in multilateral international relations in the future. The chapter on European affairs focuses on the Declaration of Liberated Europe. Riccardi clearly shows that, despite several realpolitik compromises with Stalin, Roosevelt (and Churchill) sought to promote the principle of democracy. This was devised not only as a means of containing Soviet influence, but also as a means of establishing multilateral cooperation and preventing the creation of spheres of influences. Finally, the chapter that deals with the Far East, i.e. the negotiations with the USSR about its participation in the war with Japan, demonstrates the importance of the Soviet contribution to

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the Allied war effort which crucially influenced Roosevelt to make compromises with Moscow.

The main protagonist of this book is American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Riccardi's focus on Roosevelt is justified, as he was the dominant figure at Yalta. The intention of the American president was to, echoing the Wilsonian principles and idealism, shape the future of international relations and give the world at least fifty years of peace. In order to do so, Roosevelt intended to transform the Alliance, created in response to German aggression, into a pillar of the post-war world based on unity and multilateral cooperation. But the book does not give a hagiographic portrayal of Roosevelt. The author underlines his limitations, illusions, mistakes and uncertainties, and also highlights the divisions within the US administration, demonstrating that Roosevelt's decision-making process was quite complex. Riccardi's portrait of Roosevelt is one of a complicated but dominant political figure, with a global political vision that set him apart from his interlocutors.

On the other hand, although the book is less centred on Stalin and Churchill, the author does not fail to take into account and analyse the policies and impact of these two figures. Stalin emerges as the most pragmatic of the three, with precise solutions and ideas. His policies revolved around security issues and the desire to prevent another international isolation of the USSR. The British prime minister is depicted as an old-fashioned statesman, who adhered to traditional diplomatic views and solutions, concentrated on preserving Britain's prestige and empire.

As Riccardi underlines in his conclusion, Yalta was an encounter of three different visions, based on the future, the present and the past respectively. Roosevelt's policies were focused on the future, as his main intention was to lay the foundations for an international multilateral order which would

bring peace, democracy and capitalist well-being, based on the American model. Stalin was focused on the present, i.e. on ensuring Soviet security and confirming the newly-acquired Soviet prestige and power. Finally, Churchill looked back to the past, aiming to preserve Britain's historical influence and importance that was withering away.

Yalta was an intertwining of these three different political visions, which makes it far more complex than the simplifying *topos* of a division of Europe. Such interpretations are more appropriate for the previous encounters between Churchill and Stalin, which Roosevelt sought to overcome. Challenging that *topos*, Riccardi particularly highlights two aspects. On the one hand, he convincingly demonstrates that the principles of multilateralism and democracy were crucial at Yalta. While some compromises were made, those principles were undoubtedly dominant in Roosevelt's policies. On the other hand, Riccardi underlines how the necessity of collaboration between the USA, the UK and the USSR led to the aforementioned compromises. Agreement among the Allies was not only a military imperative in times of war, but the best foundation for a functional international system in its aftermath.

Hence, Riccardi depicts Yalta as a series of fragile compromises whose purpose was to demonstrate the mutual respect of the three war victors and to preserve the Alliance. It was not Yalta but the abandonment of its principles that led to the Cold War. Yalta was, in fact, a failed attempt to prevent the inevitable international division and conflict that followed.

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