



BookNotes

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Susan Butler, ed. *My Dear Mr. Stalin: The Complete Correspondence Between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph V. Stalin*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. xix + 361 pp. Introduction by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., appendix, notes, bibliography, index.

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“No Context At All”

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What a good idea! Republish the World War Two correspondence between Joseph Stalin and Franklin Roosevelt, along with some messages passed on by third-parties; add a commentary to put it in historical context; incorporate those Soviet archival materials that have become available since the correspondence was first published in 1957.¹ Well, two – or rather 1½ – out of three ain’t bad.

Even the paperback edition of Stalin’s *Correspondence with Roosevelt and Truman*, compiled and published in 1965 by the Soviet Union’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has long been out of print, so the editor and publisher have done a favor to countless graduate students and researchers by making this available. Still, scholars will still have to go to the library to locate the equally important other half – *Stalin’s Correspondence with Churchill and Attlee*.²

¹ In 1957, the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs published, in Russian and English language versions, *Correspondence between the Chair of the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R. and the President’s of the U.S.A. and the Prime Ministers of Great Britain during the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945* (2 vols.; Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR/Progress Publishers, 1957). The English language edition was republished in paperback in two volumes with the short titles *Stalin’s Correspondence with Roosevelt and Truman, 1941-1945* and *Stalin’s Correspondence with Churchill and Attlee, 1941-1945* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965).

² According to a report by Soviet Ambassador to the U.S., Konstantin Umansky, Stalin sent a message to Roosevelt in November 1939 “expressing the hope that ‘peace can be restored through joint efforts.’” That message has not been located in either Soviet or American files; Oleg A. Rzheshkevsky, ed., *War and Diplomacy: The Making of the Grand Alliance: Documents from Stalin’s Archives* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), 164. It seems that there were no other *direct* Stalin-Roosevelt exchanges before the Soviet Union went to war with Germany. Even after U.S. recognition of the Soviet government, highest-level Soviet-US exchanges were between the official heads of state – Roosevelt and the titular head of the USSR, Mikhail Kalinin.

Beyond convenient accessibility, which is not unimportant, what does this compilation offer? It is a complete, well-edited collection of the wartime correspondence between FDR and Stalin – a total of 304 exchanges. Butler’s commentaries are conventional, but offer no new insights or interpretations. Nor are they *au courant* with current historical debates, though that is hardly a critical flaw in this kind of work. Take, for instance, the Polish question. Scholars have come to recognize that the Teheran Conference foreshadowed and often established political positions that became assumptions on the part of the Big Three. The angst supposedly evidenced at Yalta and immediately afterwards by Churchill and Roosevelt about the Polish government cannot be understood or analyzed without understanding what happened at Teheran. Yet there is no mention by the editor of Stalin and Churchill performing the “left close” maneuver with matchsticks that indicated the westward movement of the Soviet-Polish border – an “agreement” that FDR learned of but did not object to. Nor does Butler point out that Stalin had told Hull in autumn 1943 that the Soviet Union would attack Japan once Germany was defeated, a commitment he repeated during the Teheran meeting – and a commitment that has a bearing on subsequent debates over the controversial Far Eastern protocol agreed on at Yalta.³

The commentaries are quite strictly the view from Washington. I found no indication that Butler made use of Churchill’s war history, which casts considerable light on FDR’s exchanges with Stalin. Anthony Eden’s memoir suffers the same fate. She has collected some useful second-hand exchanges (messages, usually oral, relayed by third-parties – apparently all published previously), though I found no references to the huge collection of Averell Harriman’s papers at the Library of Congress, certainly a broader and better source than his carefully constructed memoir.

More serious, Butler neither cites nor seems to know of invaluable Soviet sources about that side of the Stalin-Roosevelt correspondence, books like Molotov Remembers – Felix Chuev’s interviews with the wartime Soviet foreign minister, and Oleg Rzheshesky’s documentary collection *War and Diplomacy*, both of which offer unique insights into Stalin’s and Molotov’s reactions to Anglo-American strategies and to FDR’s comments. Andrei Gromyko describes in his memoir the “special channel” used to ensure speedy, personal delivery of Stalin’s messages to FDR. Moreover, recently available Soviet documents suggest some adjustments to conventional interpretations of Soviet reactions to Anglo-American policies. Some examples: According to Molotov’s reports, FDR requested him to tell Stalin, in spring 1942, “that we are *hoping* to open a second front in 1942.” That is hardly the unambiguous “promise” routinely described in American studies. Then, during Molotov’s talks with Churchill and then Roosevelt in spring 1942, when the Soviet diplomat could not get agreement on the Soviet-Polish boundary, Stalin told him to drop the matter since lack of an agreement gives the Soviet Union “a free

³ Had the editor consulted Martin Gilbert’s official biography of Churchill, she would have learned that Churchill’s dismissal of the agreement on the Far East was disingenuous, since he had proposed a similar arrangement when he met with Stalin in October 1944; Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, v. VII, *Road to Victory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 1038-39.

hand. . . . [It] will be decided by force.”⁴ That may have been Stalin making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, but it may also tell us something about his long-range thinking.

The Soviet sources mentioned above are all available in English, but historians with Russian are finding even more examples. The following is from minutes taken by the Russian interpreter at the Teheran Conference:

Comrade Stalin said to Roosevelt that the demand for the unconditional surrender on the part of the Allies stimulates the people in the enemy’s armies to fight with bitterness because they see the unconditional surrender as an insult. That’s why he, comrade Stalin, would like to know what is Roosevelt’s point of view of the possibility to work out what “the unconditional surrender” means, that is to define how many arms, transport means the enemy should give and then announce these conditions not calling them unconditional surrender.

Roosevelt didn’t give the definite answer to this question passing to the story how he studied and lived in Germany during youth years. Eden sitting not far from comrade Stalin attentively listened to the question put by comrade Stalin.⁵

That seems to conflict with the editor’s comments that Stalin was pleased by the unconditional surrender announcement (p. 111), and puts a different spin on her simple statement that, during the Moscow Foreign Ministers conference in October 1943, the USSR agreed formally for the first time to the unconditional surrender policy (p. 176).

The language issue is troubling. A lack of Russian limits the editor’s ability to do extensive research in the Soviet files, and also makes it impossible to determine the effect of both translation and nuance as exchanges got changed and packaged. (There is a Russian language edition of Stalin’s Correspondence.) Messages sent by wireless to Stalin from FDR were routinely decrypted by U.S. embassy personnel in Moscow and then retyped for delivery to Soviet officials. Security procedures called for such retyped messages to paraphrase the original text to protect the ciphers needed for information security. That accounts for all the differences that I found between the U.S. text (Butler edition and *FRUS*) of FDR-to-Stalin messages and the decrypted/deciphered English language version used by Soviet compilers of Stalin’s Correspondence with Roosevelt and Truman, 1941-1945. The few exceptions are discussed in the Foreword and Publisher’s Note to that collection. Stalin’s messages to Roosevelt were handled in similar fashion. The English language version printed in *Stalin’s Correspondence* is

⁴ Felix Chuev and Albert Resis, eds., *Molotov Remembers* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1993). Andrei Gromyko, *Memories* (transl. Harold Shukman; London: Hutchinson, 1989). Rzheshhevsky, *War and Diplomacy*, pp. 163-230, specifically pp. 186-87 (italics added) and 221. *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵ Minutes by V. Pavlov of discussions between Stalin and Roosevelt during supper, November 28, 1943. Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (Moscow, Russia) Ф. 06 (Secretariat of V.M. Molotov), Оп. 5в, П. 42, Д. 8, Л.23. (Courtesy of Mikhail Myagkov, Institute of World History, Russian Academy of Science.)

apparently a translation done by the editors. Again, any differences I could find were insubstantial and obviously due to translation – not a disinformation campaign.⁶

Butler has added notations indicating FDR's deletions and handwritten additions to his messages, all very useful material. But there are indications that some similar information may be available for Stalin's messages. The Russian historian, Oleg Rzheshesky, points out, for example, that Stalin's use of the first person singular in some messages sent to Molotov, indicated that Stalin himself wrote them. Might not that and similar clues be available in Soviet-era archives and materials taken from those archives?⁷

This raises a question – where are we with unearthing the forbidden treasures of the Kremlin archives? The Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), which has done yeoman work in that regard, seems largely to have abandoned that search for the period of the Second World War, ironically just when CWIHP's early initiator, John Gaddis, has apparently concluded that the Cold War began with Franklin Roosevelt.⁸ The bits and pieces we have from what seems to be the most valuable collection, the so-called Presidential Archive, offer tantalizing evidence of documents that reveal what Stalin and others around him actually thought when confronted with Anglo-American policies. If so, that would close the largest single gap in what we know about wartime Soviet foreign policy. Unhappily, it seems that what Geoffrey Roberts of University College, Cork, wrote recently about his research since 1996 in Soviet era archives in Moscow – “The Presidential Archive, the most important archive for materials on high-level politics during the Soviet era, remained firmly closed to foreign scholars” -- is still the case.⁹ One Russian historian I contacted to ask about access for Russian scholars replied that if anything remains closed, only the archivists know about it – a classic “catch 22.”

The Soviet source issue aside, how important is this compilation beyond (again) convenience? Arthur Schlesinger's introduction begins by noting that “it is a curiosity of scholarship that the full correspondence between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph V. Stalin was never published during the Cold War.” (p. ix) The editor/compiler, Susan

⁶ This perhaps answers the unstated implication raised in the 2003 edition of the SHAFR Guide (and elsewhere) by an opaque final comment about the Soviet compilation: “Differences will be found between some messages in these volumes and versions published elsewhere.” *American Foreign Relations since 1600: A Guide to the Literature* (2nd ed.; 2 vols.; Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford: ABC/Clio for The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, 2003), I, 940. I recall the late Wm. F. Franklin, who taught us in the Georgetown University graduate program in addition to his full-time position as The Historian at the State Department, stating in the early 1960s that his office had carefully checked the Soviet documentary publications and failed to find any conscious distortion of the printed records. The Russians used ellipses and omitted documents (as does the Foreign Relations series), but nothing was forged. I presume that report can be found, if it is declassified, somewhere in the archive of the Historical Office.

⁷ Rzheshesky, *War and Diplomacy*, 123.

⁸ John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 6.

⁹ Geoffrey Roberts, “Inside the Russian Archives,” *Newsletter of the British International History Group*, No. 12 (March 2006), 8.

Butler, quickly seconded the motion. The Stalin-Roosevelt wartime correspondence has, she wrote, “languished in obscurity” for sixty years. “No accurate and complete record of this correspondence has ever been published.” (p. 1) “It might have been expected that the complete communications of these two world leaders would have been published before now, but following Roosevelt’s death the Cold War was upon the world, and the last thing anyone wanted to read about was how Roosevelt had helped the Soviet Union beat Germany.” (p. 3) That flight of hyperbole will surprise the compilers of *Stalin’s Correspondence* as well as the historians who put together the *Foreign Relations* volumes for the Second World War. The former collection, published at the height of the Cold War in 1957, *is* complete if one assumes that correspondence means written, formal exchanges. The latter collection, published beginning with the Yalta conference volume in 1955, contains only the meat of those exchanges, but those messages make crystal clear “how Roosevelt helped the Soviet Union beat Germany.” In fact, five of the exchanges printed in this new edition, could be found only in the published Soviet collection. And, of course, historians have routinely cited *Stalin’s Correspondence* for the past fifty years.

So what’s new? Nowhere could I find any editorial indication of which “key Roosevelt messages are missing” from the Soviet collection, though it appears that claim refers primarily, perhaps exclusively, to written and oral messages conveyed by third parties (e.g., Harry Hopkins). Again, convenience is the word, since all those third-party exchanges that I found were previously published. I recognize that marketing is part of publishing, but this is a bit over the top.

As a straightforward compilation of what FDR either approved, wrote, or saw in his exchanges with Stalin, it is a convenient and useful collection. Nothing more.

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