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Jean-François Rosset (1703/1706-1786), Buste de Montesquieu, Collection Adolphe Thiers. Musée du Louvre, Aile Richelieu. Photo Siren-Com, 2009, CC BY SA 3.0 Unported. Wikimedia Commons.

Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) represents the first instance of "philosophical history" applied to international relations—a work in which history is no longer merely a reconstruction of military and diplomatic episodes, but an interpretation of social factors and long-term historical processes. This book, which has recently been brought to the attention of scholars in the field of strategic studies by Jakub Grygiel (Orbis, 63:4, Fall 2019: 582–607) and John Stone (*Journal of Strategic Studies,* 46:6–7, 2023: 1460–1481), can also be considered the first modern example of "strategic history."

Roberto Motta Sosa,

Il mito di Jalta

Churchill e la divisione dell'Europa

Prefazione di Fabio L. Grassi

Anteo Edizioni, Cavriago (RE), 120 pp.



Il mito di Jalta, Churchill e la divisione dell'Europa (The myth of Yalta, Churchill and the division of Europe) by Roberto Motta Sosa, in retracing the stages that led from the Great Anti-Fascist Alliance to the Cold War, through an updated use of sources and a vast literature, aims to show how the Yalta Conference of February 1945 was an attempt to find an alternative solution to the logic of spheres of influence, rather than a step forward in that direction.

The study aims to counter the "false myth of Yalta", described as the epochal

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event in which the three world leaders allegedly divided Europe into spheres of influence, which imposed itself on the collective imagination starting the day after Yalta, and was consolidated through interested political interpretations, a simplistic journalistic language, and "a certain historiography".

Moreover, but Motta Sosa does not mention this aspect, the most solid historiography had reached his same conclusions over half a century earlier. It is enough to mention, for all, J.B. Duroselle, *Histoire diplomatique de 1919 à nos jours*, Paris 1966 (the first edition was in 1953), who highlighted the climate of cooperation at the conference, the granting to France of an occupation zone in Germany, the agreement on the borders and government of Poland, the Russian commitment to intervene in the war against Japan, and, above all, the "Declaration on Liberated Europe", which provided for democratic governments through free elections. This is the so-called "spirit of Yalta" (cooperative), as opposed to the overwhelming "myth of Yalta" (partitioning) that Motta Sosa strives to demolish.

The author recalls the conclusion reached by Italian diplomacy on February 15, 1945, regarding the talks of the Big Three allied leaders in Crimea. The Ambassador in Moscow, Pietro Quaroni, writing to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alcide De Gasperi, illustrated how the initial impression regarding the results of the conference suggested that no victory of one side or the other could be recorded, since: "the main contracting parties made each other significant concessions to put cooperation on a solid footing […] at least in the immediate postwar period." Quaroni added: "While the tendency that prevailed until now seemed to divide Europe into two zones of exclusive influence, one Soviet and the other Anglo-American, the principle of cooperation now seems to have prevailed." And this was, in fact, the sense that the Yalta Conference was meant to convey to public opinion from the conclusion of the proceedings.

On February 12, the final communiqué signed by the Big Three was released to the press, affirming, among other points, the will to pursue unity in (future) peace, as well as in war.

The author recalls that according to Sergio Romano, former Italian Ambassador to Moscow, in Crimea there was no "partition because the war was not yet over and many issues, out of necessity or cunning, were addressed in very general terms [...] the three leaders had different ambitions and [...] Stalin, in particular, was determined to politically control all the territories that the Red Army would



seize before the end of the conflict. But in those days [...] there was no division of Europe into spheres of influence that many attribute to the tripartite meeting of February 1945".

At the beginning of the "false myth of Yalta", according to various sources, it was de Gaulle, irritated by France's exclusion from the conference, who argued that that meeting had been the cause of the international situation as it had unfolded in the post-war period.

Another component of the myth came from the American Republican Party, by vocation anti-Rooseveltian, which emphasized the weakness of the President, already tired and ill, who would have been deluded by Stalin into giving him half of Europe.

The third component of the false myth would be the easy inclination towards conspiracy theories, that is, the tendency to find a single fact that explains everything, a single cause of events, when instead "historical events are the result of a multitude of factors that almost always escape their control".

During the period in which the myth of Yalta was born, took shape, and consolidated in the collective imagination (roughly the early postwar years), Motta Sosa observes, "Soviet diplomacy – curiously – attributed to the Anglo-Saxons (the United States and the United Kingdom) the desire to reach secret agreements for the partition of the world into reciprocal spheres of interest".

Moreover, this view was consistent with the *necessary Soviet imperialism* which, by the way, showed a curious resemblance to the *manifest destiny* that gilded the massive territorial acquisitions of the United States following the war with Mexico of 1846-48.

The concept of *necessary Soviet imperialism*, confirmed in hindsight by various political scientists, stems from a memorandum of September 1944, in which the US Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow, Kennan, suggested the idea that drove Soviet geopolitics: "If Russia could not rely on the Western nations to save her, it then seemed to Russian minds that the alternative lay not only in the utmost development of Russian military power within the 1938 borders, but also in new territorial acquisitions designed to strengthen Russia's strategic and political position, and in the creation of a sphere of influence even beyond these limits. In drawing up this expansionist program, Soviet planners leaned heavily on the latter-day traditions of tsarist diplomacy".

That is to say, as outlined by Cesare La Mantia at the Conference *Sixty Years After the Warsaw Pact*, Gorizia 2015, "that strategic imperative which over time has pushed modern Russia – whatever its system of government – to pursue a (geo)politics capable of keeping as far as possible from its western borders the line of a hypothetical military confrontation with any European power".

The author also cites Geoffrey Roberts, who states that "the extension of Soviet influence beyond its western borders can be seen as an intentional and coherent model of expansionist territorial policy [...] Stalin indeed feared the formation, as a reaction, of an anti-Soviet bloc (as actually partly happened later, especially with the creation of NATO). Churchill, for his part, feared that such a scenario could leave the United Kingdom alone to confront the Soviet giant on the Old Continent or, worse, that London would end up being crushed between the United States and the Soviet Union, losing what had been the greatness of its *empire*." […]

For Roberts, the failure of the vast and heterogeneous programmatic framework of the Big Three would have generated a geopolitical and hence historical paradox. According to this thesis, the Cold War would have had two causes, one of which was primary. Certainly relevant was the level of perception of the communist threat in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, from which the confrontation would emerge that would later involve the two superpowers, following the intuition/

prophecy of Tocqueville, who in his famous essay on *Democracy in America* (1840) depicted the United States as the power of freedom, social equality, and democratic energy, whereas Russia was the power of authority, discipline, and centralized power. The other cause was the erroneous Soviet calculation regarding the possibility of establishing a strategic security belt in Eastern Europe, while at the same time maintaining good relations with the United Kingdom and above all with the United States.

And therefore, the outcome in the system based "on the coexistence of two great opposing spaces, one led by the United States and the other by the Soviet Union, roughly included, the first, in NATO and, the second, in the Warsaw Pact".

However, the author conveniently clarifies that the construction of the Yalta myth rests on the precedents of the Yalta Conference, in particular the so-called Anglo-Russian Percentage Agreements, especially the second one, signed in Moscow on October 9, 1944, between Churchill and Stalin. Harriman, the US Ambassador to Moscow, had been theoretically invited to the talks, but was kept aside. Indeed, "Roosevelt believed that a possible division into opposing blocs would shatter his ideal of a global world (*One World*), while at the same time compromising the *Open Door* policy, advocated by Americans since the late 19th century, which Washington deemed essential for America's prosperity (also) in the postwar scenario."

The original source for this agreement is Churchill's work *The Second World War* and Sir Martin Gilbert's biography of the statesman, which describes the circumstances that gave rise to the pact between the two leaders: "Churchill produced what he called an *indecent document*, listing the *percentage interests* of Russia and Great Britain [...] For Romania, his figure was 90 percent Russian interest and 10 percent British; for Greece, he proposed 90 percent for Britain *together with the USA* and 10 percent for Russia. Yugoslavia and Hungary were divided 50/50, and Bulgaria 75 percent for Russia and 25 percent for *the others*. Stalin [...], Churchill would later write, took a blue pencil, drew [...] a large check and [...] returned [...] [the] pencil-marked sheet.

Even though those agreements, especially to take into account Washington's opposition to the doctrine of spheres of influence, were formally referred to the conduct of the war and not to the post-war situation, as Motta Sosa highlights, "Already on 10 October 1944, after a conversation with the British Prime

Minister, Harriman wrote to Roosevelt that Churchill and Eden, together with the Soviets, would try to create in the Balkans what appeared to be defined as spheres of influence".

Moreover, Motta Sosa emphasizes, "the *appeasement* he [Churchill] pursued with Eden towards Moscow […] was intrinsically destined to bear bad fruit".

London's primary goal was to "secure the British Empire's positions in the southern reaches of the Balkan Peninsula and thus in the Eastern Mediterranean, whose main strategic pivot continued to be the Suez Canal. This ambitious plan would also have fulfilled the task of preserving the *balance of power* on the continent, a (European) prerequisite for averting the *inclinatio imperii*".

In truth, the agreement, says Motta Sosa, "which can be classified as *secret diplomacy*, [...] proposed by Churchill and signed by Stalin, had a legal-diplomatic value inversely proportional to its secrecy. In fact, beyond its duration, it did not even specify the rationale for the listed percentages". However, this very agreement "can be said to have constituted the cause of the geopolitical involution into opposing blocs in post-war Europe".

Moreover, I personally note that in the aforementioned *indecent document*, there is a detail that fits perfectly with one of the post-war developments, the equal division of the *percentage interests* of Russia and Great Britain, which, as far as Yugoslavia was concerned, came true in 1948 with the split between Stalin and Tito: Yugoslavia was not the prerogative of either of them, but in some respects it looked to the East, in others to the West.

"On March 12, 1947, the Truman Doctrine was proclaimed, by which Washington announced its support for Greece and Turkey, both threatened by Soviet assertiveness", with the Byrnes corollary, enunciated by the US Secretary of State in Stuttgart on September 6, 1947: "We intend to continue our interest in the affairs of Europe and the world".

Motta Sosa's conclusion is that "The weakness of the geopolitical framework conceived [by the British], colliding, on the one hand, with the *necessary Soviet imperia*lism and, on the other, with Washington's aversion (now close to the *translatio imperii ad Americam*) to London's policy regarding spheres of influence in the Old Continent, determined, by contrast, the Sovietization of Eastern Europe and thus the beginning of the bloc-based opposition that would characterize the post-World War II period. The Cold War was therefore not the

result of the implementation of what was agreed in Crimea regarding Europe, but, on the contrary, of the failure to implement the decisions taken by the Big Three during that conference".

Personally, I observe that the geopolitical developments of the post-war period, up to the present day, with the dizzying acceleration of history and the international disorder that accompanies it, are consistent with the division into blocs wrongly attributed to Yalta. The division into blocs can be linked mainly to two myths, to remain within the realm of geopolitical mythology, which are more relevant today than ever: on the American side, the *Monroe Doctrine* of 1823 (exclusion of European interference in Latin America, but also USA self-restraint), the subsequent ideology of *Manifest Destiny* (enormous territorial acquisitions in the mid-19th century), the *Roosevelt Corollary* of 1904 (*big stick*: US right of intervention in Latin America), and finally, in December 2025, with President Trump's new USA national security strategy, which states that "the United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine to restore American pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere […] Our goals for the Western Hemisphere can be summarized as Enlist and Expand". The operation in Venezuela in January 2026 is highly illustrative, accompanied by the strangulation of Cuba and strong pressure and threats to Mexico, Panama, and others. Conversely, the document states that "we cannot afford to be equally attentive to every region and every problem in the world", which, even in light of the scathing criticism of Europe, can be interpreted as a prospect of American disengagement in that area, which certainly does not displease Moscow, with all due respect to the Ukrainians and Europeans.

As for the *necessary Soviet imperialism* highlighted by Motta Sosa, in my opinion, it is also a myth. Many political scientists portray Russia as a militaristic power by necessity, forced to arm itself and threaten to avoid being threatened in turn. Russia's strategy requires it to acquire spatial depth to ward off the nightmare of invasion. Peter the Great reached the Baltic, Catherine acquired Belarus and Ukraine, Alexander I reached Warsaw and the Moldavian river Prut, Stalin all the way to Berlin. Russian strategic choices also reflect this condition: from the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, to the partition of Yalta (a historical fabrication), to the recent opposition to any NATO enlargement. It's not just a question of strategic depth. Territorial expansion allows the Russians to claim the rank of a great power with global ambitions, which national psychology self-assigns. The

Napoleonic War of 1812 is shrouded in legend, especially in the pages of *War and Peace*. Tolstoy described the campaign as "self-made", as neither side had full awareness and control of its actions; rather, it was the masses who drove history. I believe Tolstoy was right on this point, but Moscow continued to fuel that literary fascination with the narrative of a homeland attacked by enemies and defended by its citizens until victory (the myth of the Great Patriotic War).

History is not just a collection of facts, but also of narratives that societies construct to give meaning to their past. For example, in the historiography of the Roman Empire, with Titus Livius (Livy) being the most important example, myth is not a simple ornament, but a political, cultural, and identity-building tool: a founding myth of Roman identity, a myth of imperial legitimacy, and an edifying myth for citizens.

Some myths are not simply legends: they are true interpretative frameworks that influence our reading of historical events. Historical analysis, in considering myth, must not limit itself to considering it merely as a historical fake, but also as an interpretative lens, a narrative device that gives meaning to the past, or a symbolic code that reveals the values and fears of an era.

Moreover, it must be kept in mind that, today more than ever, there are narrative models deeply rooted in Western culture: the myth of inevitable progress and its opposite, decadence, the myth of the Golden Age and that of the hero who changes history, the myth of invasion or external threat. Contemporary historiography is called upon to recognize these myths, so as not to be dominated by them.

Thus, the "myth of Yalta", while unfounded in historical reality and divergent from the true "spirit of Yalta", was consistent with the antecedents of the Yalta Conference and the subsequent developments. It inevitably lent itself to labelling Yalta as the division between the Western and Eastern blocs, a label commonly used in political and journalistic language.

In this sense, Motta Sosa's book, highly intriguing and impeccable in its "philological" accuracy from a historiographical point of view, opens up further fascinating avenues for research.

Maurizio Lo Re



C. Eisen invenit. *De la Fosse sculpsit.*

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