

# A Different Take on FDR at Teheran

## *Raising Questions*

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Gary Kern's piece, "How 'Uncle Joe' Bugged FDR"—published in *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2003)—nicely summarizes what we know about electronic eavesdropping done by Soviet intelligence at the Teheran and Yalta conferences. The story Kern tells is well known, although he has dug up some excellent atmospherics from recent memoirs and Russian literature. There is no question that Roosevelt was bugged at Teheran and Yalta, as the sources published over the years that I cite below indicate. Kern concludes that FDR's failure to react stemmed from a combination of "profound ignorance of the Bolshevik dictatorship ... and wishful thinking," a resuscitation of the hoary FDR-as-naif argument that has been around since the Second World War.

One of the traps inherent in secret intelligence gathering is the they-know-that-we-know phenomenon. Intelligence libraries are filled with tales of double-, triple-, and quadruple-crosses. During meetings with Stalin, both the British and the American delegations knew their quarters were bugged. Anna Roosevelt, the president's daughter, recalled the secret service agents finding listening devices at Yalta. Stalin was correct to wonder, as noted by Kern, if the Anglo-Americans "know we are listening to them" and, presumably, misleading their Soviet eavesdroppers. Mike Reilly, chief of the Secret Service detail that guarded Roosevelt, waited to debug Livadia Palace, FDR's residence during the Yalta conference, until it would be too late for the Russians to replace the devices. At the same

time, he warned that no matter how many they found, they would fail to find them all.[1]

According to Kern's references, Sergo Beria, who was one of the "listeners" at the Teheran Conference, said Stalin had him listen to Roosevelt's conversations to determine the president's attitude regarding opening a second front, since Churchill "was against it." But what are Beria's recollections of what FDR had to say? "During his conversations with his collaborators [advisors] Roosevelt always expressed a high opinion of Stalin ...." They know we are listening, commented Stalin, "yet they speak openly!" When Beria claimed that the microphones were too well hidden to be spotted, Stalin marveled: "It's bizarre. They say everything in fullest detail ...."[2] One can read that as FDR-the-naive or as FDR-the-shrewd, who knew full well that his words were heard and used the opportunity to try to convince the Soviet leader that the West was not dedicated to the overthrow of his government.

Few accuse Winston Churchill of naiveté, especially about the Soviet Union, yet his quarters, at Yalta and during previous meetings with Stalin, were also wired by the Soviets. In August 1942, during the prime minister's first stay in Moscow for meetings with Stalin, Churchill received warnings that his rooms were bugged. He was skeptical, but he played to the secret listeners by calling the Russians "lower in the scale of nature than the orang-outang," intending that they-know-that-he-knew.[3] I have found no record of the British telling the Americans of the eavesdropping that took place in Moscow in 1942, but a nation that shared the ULTRA secret would certainly have shared its knowledge of Soviet electronic eavesdropping. Since the so-called servants at Teheran were clearly carrying sidearms under their uniforms, as Kern points out, it was obvious to all that service was not their primary task.

At the Yalta conference, Churchill wrote in his memoirs that his Russian hosts gave "kindly attention" to "every chance remark." When a British official commented that a large fish tank had no fish in it, goldfish quickly appeared. When another complained that they had no lemon peel to use in their drinks, "a lemon tree loaded with fruit" materialized the next day.[4] Perhaps this was eavesdropping by nearby "servants," but the more likely listener was a microphone with a tape recorder, and British officials were well aware of what had happened in the past.

I am dubious about Kern's material gathered in interviews and correspondence with Valentin Berezhev, who was an unabashed self-

promoter. Kern accepts Berezchkov's claim of being Stalin's translator at the Teheran and Yalta conferences. Berezchkov was at Teheran, and may have done some translating for Stalin in both German and English (German being his better language). But Berezchkov was not Stalin's translator at Yalta, nor can I find any evidence that he was even there. His wartime memoir neither claims nor indicates that he was at Yalta. Vladimir Pavlov was the primary English language translator for Stalin at both meetings. The official records of meetings at Yalta invariably list "Mr. Pavlov," but make no mention of Berezchkov. Berezchkov is not mentioned in Sergo Beria's memoir even though Beria was one of the "listeners" at Teheran. But then neither is Pavlov. One historian has commented that Berezchkov "peddled his story about being Stalin's interpreter assiduously in the 1980s, while Pavlov was seriously ill and therefore silent." But that does not change the fact that, as a matter of course, Soviet listening devices were installed, and understood by the Anglo-Americans to be installed, when they came to meet with Stalin and, presumably, with other Soviet leaders.[5]

Perhaps, as Kern asserts, the eavesdropping permitted Stalin to learn of "moods" and "attitudes of his diplomatic counterparts," although the value of such psychological intelligence is questionable, especially with Churchill's volatile mood swings. Perhaps it provided key information about Anglo-American strategies for such later litmus-test issues as the postwar political fate of eastern Europe. But there is no evidence that such was the case, and what happened in 1945 had already been decided by prior political arrangements and military events (read that as Churchill and Roosevelt recognizing the need to have the Soviet Union as an ally in order to defeat Hitler and his Nazis, followed by the reality, as of summer 1944, of the Red Army's rapid advance across the central European plains). Historians need to be careful about "reading backward" interpretations by the new perfectionists who insist that Churchill and Roosevelt should have become Cold Warriors even before the Grand Alliance defeated Hitler.[6]

The fact is that, probably at Teheran and definitely at Yalta, both Churchill and Roosevelt and their advisers *assumed* that the Russians had bugged their quarters.[7] That makes it persuasive, based on evidence and actions, to argue that neither Churchill nor Roosevelt said (or intended to say) anything that Stalin could not hear. One historian of the Teheran Conference has argued that "Roosevelt would probably not have been unduly concerned" about having his conversations overheard. After all, one reason FDR had come to Teheran was to demonstrate to the Russians that he could be trusted.[8] The same attitude characterized both Churchill and

Roosevelt at Yalta. The private strategies of Churchill and Roosevelt were their public positions, at least to Stalin. Neither was plotting to overthrow the Stalinist regime or to “cheat” the Soviet Union of the fruits of victory. As for the postwar political structure, both Churchill and Stalin had observed that, in the Russian leader’s oft-quoted phrase, “whoever occupies a territory imposes on it his own social system.”[9] The Anglo-Americans had their secrets, particularly about the atomic bomb project, but there is not a shred of evidence or even rumor that Churchill and Roosevelt discussed the Manhattan project, privately or at the conference table, with each other or anyone else, when they met with the Soviet leader.[10]

Most American and British leaders and officials believed Germany, not the Soviet Union, was the enemy. Criticize both Roosevelt and Churchill, if you wish, for adopting negotiating and long-term strategies regarding Stalin and the Soviet Union that, after the Cold War experience, seem to many to have been misguided. Condemn them both for thinking they could trust Stalin. “Poor Neville Chamberlain believed he could trust Hitler. He was wrong,” said Churchill. “But I don't think I'm wrong about Stalin.”[11] But understand that while Roosevelt (and Churchill) may have twice walked “willingly” and knowingly into a surveillance trap, as Kern states, neither of the Anglo-American leaders failed to understand that the so-called trap could serve their own purposes.

So where does this leave us? Either Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, the two men who led their nations to victory in the Second World War, were stupidly careless and cavalier, or they just did not care if conversations in their quarters were overheard and passed on to Stalin and his cohorts. Readers’ choice.[12]

### **Footnotes:**

[1]Jim Bishop, *FDR's Last Year: April 1944–April 1945* (New York: Pocket Books, 1975), 346.

[2]Sergo Beria, *Beria, My Father: Inside Stalin's Kremlin*, Françoise Thom, ed., Brian Pearce, transl. (London: Duckworth, 2001), 92–93. Beria’s recollections are, to say the least, suspect. As the editor of the volume points out, Beria was raised “in a world of lies and half-truths, lies that were all the more inextricable because the truth was unbearable” (viii). The editor makes no mention of notes or records used by Sergo Beria to write

his memoirs, making specific quotations attributed to Stalin dubious at best. That said, Beria's depiction of Stalin's reaction to the product of Soviet eavesdropping at Teheran and Yalta contradicts no other evidence and, in the context of that era, is plausible.

[3]David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 326. Reynolds and others speculate that Churchill was too naive throughout the war about the dangers of Soviet listeners during conferences. Perhaps, but that assumes he said things privately that were greatly different from what he was telling Stalin—a difficult case to prove. See Reynolds, note 12, 611.

[4]Winston S. Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), 347. See also Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, David Dilks, ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), 471.

[5]Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 175–76, mentions Soviet eavesdropping of Churchill and Roosevelt at Teheran. They provide no details and imply that such intelligence was not used by Stalin. I have seen no allegation of such “bugs” of the quarters of British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and US Secretary of State Cordell Hull during the meeting of foreign ministers in Moscow a few weeks prior to the Teheran talks, but it seems reasonable to assume that such was the case. It seems equally reasonable to assume that both men were warned of such espionage, given the British experience a year earlier. The official records of the Yalta Conference are found in US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1955).

[6]See Warren F. Kimball, “The Incredible Shrinking War: The Second World War, Not (Just) the Origins of the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 25:3 (summer 2001): 351. Kern is revealingly presentist, when he corrects FDR for referring to Russia [*sic*] rather than Kern's preferred “Soviet Union.” Common usage during the Second World War was Russia, although Churchill referred to the Russians when talking about geopolitics, and the Bolsheviks when speaking of ideology.

[7]Beria also refers to planting bugs in gifts presented to Averell Harriman, presumably when he was US ambassador in Moscow during the war. Beria, 100.

[8]Keith Eubank, *Summit at Teheran* (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 196–

97. See also *Cadogan Diaries*, 579.

[9]Churchill used a more flowery phrase—"the right to guide the course of history is the noblest prize of victory"—but the meaning was the same as Stalin's. Warren F. Kimball, *Forged in War* (New York: Morrow, 1997), 209.

[10]The atomic bomb project is again an example of the we-know-that-they-know (and perhaps they-know-that-we-know-that-they-know) syndrome. FDR knew about Soviet espionage at the Manhattan Project no later than September 1943. Given reports of Soviet intelligence collection, is it not likely that Stalin knew that the Americans knew that he knew? Ah, the web we weave. For a discussion of this, see *Forged in War*, 220–21, 279–80, 329–30.

[11]Quoted from the diary of Hugh Dalton by David Reynolds, *In Command of History*, 469. Christopher Andrew, the dean of British intelligence historians, depicts Roosevelt as disinterested when confronted with reports of Soviet spying in the United States. Andrew and Mitrokhin, 107.

[12]I am reminded of the claim in the 1950s and early 1960s made by Democratic-leaning pundits that Dwight Eisenhower was little more than a bland grandfather figure who was not very bright. It seems not to have occurred to the critics that this kindly dolt had, with great skill and success, managed the Anglo-American victory against Hitler.

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