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BOOKSHELF

'The Daughters of Yalta' Review: Big Three, Little Three

In the high-stakes negotiations on the Black Sea, these women played a hidden role.



Winston Churchill with his daughter Sarah, leaving the memorial service for Franklin D Roosevelt at St. Paul's cathedral.

PHOTO: DAVE BAGNALL COLLECTION/ALAMY

By Moira Hodgson

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Much has been written about the historic Yalta Conference in February 1945, when Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt met to decide the future of the postwar world. Little, however, is known about the role played behind the scenes by three young women. In "The Daughters of Yalta," Catherine Grace Katz tells the story through the eyes of Sarah Churchill, Anna Roosevelt and Kathleen Harriman, the daughter of W. Averell Harriman, the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union. Skillfully written and meticulously researched, it's an extraordinary work that reveals the human side underlying the politics.

"The continued success of the alliance of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin," Ms. Katz writes, "was precariously balanced on the strong personal relationship among the three

men.” They came to Yalta with very different agendas. Stalin was planning a Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe but Roosevelt, less concerned about Europe, wanted to enlist his help against Japan. Churchill thought Roosevelt was naive about Stalin, especially when it came to the Soviet leader’s designs on Poland.

THE DAUGHTERS OF YALTA

By Catherine Grace Katz

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\$28*

To get to Yalta the delegates made a hazardous daylong drive from Saki airfield through barren country and razed villages. “Nearly all the buildings lay in scorched ruins,” Ms. Katz reports, “alongside charred remains of trains, tanks, and other instruments of war, as if General Sherman had risen from the dead for an encore march to the sea halfway across the world.” The destruction was not only the work of the Nazis but of Stalin, too, a vestige of the state-sponsored famine that killed millions long before the Germans arrived.

Conference guests were housed in majestic but ransacked palaces by the Black Sea, once a summer resort for the czar and members of the aristocracy. “Everywhere the delegates turned,” Ms. Katz tells us, “they found opulence and primitiveness in stark juxtaposition.” Lavatories were scarce, but there was enough caviar to feed a small town and so much vodka that diners would empty their glasses into the potted ferns. Luxurious bed linens were supplied by a grand Moscow hotel, but the mattresses were thin, hard and riddled with bedbugs. There was no stinting on food: The U.S. delegation began the day with two hearty breakfasts—a Russian platter of cold cuts, goat cheese and curd cakes, followed by a second, “American-style” breakfast of Wheatena cereal and Cream of Wheat, served with melted butter and garlic.

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PREVIEW

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Kathleen Harriman, a former war correspondent who had been stationed in Moscow and spoke Russian, helped set things up, acting as a protocol officer and mapping out the bedroom assignments and the seating arrangements for formal dinners. Much of Ms. Katz's information is gleaned from Kathleen's correspondence with her close friend and confidante Pamela Churchill, Winston's daughter-in-law (who, Kathleen already knew, was having an affair with her father, Averell, one of the richest men in America. Nearly three decades later, Pamela married him).

FDR and the U.S. delegation were housed in the czar's former palace of Livadia. Little remained of its former glory; it had been occupied and plundered by the Nazis, but the ballroom was large enough for conferences so the wheelchair-bound president would not have to travel. Churchill was nearby at the Vorontsov Palace. "The architecture was bizarre. It was as if a mosque had swallowed a Swiss chalet, which had already consumed a Scottish baronial hall," Ms. Katz writes. "On the walls on either side of the dining room fireplace hung the portraits of some familiar faces. Count Semyon Vorontsov, an eighteenth-century Russian ambassador to Britain, had a daughter who had married George Herbert, the 11th Earl of Pembroke. The Herberts' portraits made the prime minister feel oddly at home."

Stalin and his retinue lodged at the Koreiz Villa, also known as the Yusupov Palace. Ms. Katz describes it as having a "certain uncomfortable aura" since Prince Yusupov had participated in the assassination of Rasputin, the self-proclaimed holy man "whose unsavory influence over the Romanovs had hastened their decline."

Anna Roosevelt's main task was to prevent Churchill and Stalin from finding out how gravely ill her father was. FDR had been diagnosed with congestive heart failure; Anna ensured that he ate meals prepared by his own chefs, avoiding the rich, salty dishes

served at the 20-course banquets laid on by the Russians. Sarah Churchill noticed FDR's decline. "It seemed he had aged a 'million years' over the fourteen months since she had last seen him," Ms. Katz recounts, "and his conversation, once sparkling and witty, wandered and meandered."

Sarah was Churchill's "all-around protector, supporter, and confidant." She had a "deep connection" with her father who, in order to relax, built hundreds of yards of brick wall in his garden at Chartwell, helped by his daughter. "During the quiet hours spent laying bricks at her father's side," we learn, "Sarah studied him as a naturalist studies a species."

The man responsible for transforming Yalta into a site fit for a summit was Lavrentiy Beria, the notorious head of the NKVD, the Soviet Union's secret police. Beria sent thousands of people to their deaths, often after show trials, and had "raped women with the fury of an addict." A squat, balding figure with pince-nez, yellow teeth, thick lips and bulging eyes, he leered at Sarah over dinner, making salacious remarks, and tried to get Anna drunk. FDR was visibly disturbed when Stalin told him, referring to the head of Hitler's SS with gleeful malevolence, "That's our Himmler."

As for Stalin, despite his apparent bonhomie, Sarah found him to be "a frightening figure" with "bear eyes," in which the reflected light made her think of "cold sunshine on dark waters." Kathleen had met Stalin in Moscow, where she'd noticed the limpness of his handshake, his pockmarked face and walrus mustache chopped off at the sides to cover up terrible teeth.

At the Koreiz Villa, Stalin was the genial host of an exclusive banquet for 30 people where he toasted the alliance. Kathleen, Sarah and Anna were there. "No three women in recent history had acquired such a seat at the table alongside the most powerful leaders in the world at a major international summit," writes Ms. Katz. "Now Stalin walked around the table and touched glasses with each of the three women in turn, recognizing each of them and the place they had earned."

"The Daughters of Yalta" is a thoroughly engrossing book, as acute about the contentious politics of the day as it is about the remarkable daughters who participated.

—Ms. Hodgson is the author of *"It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: My Adventures in Life and Food."*

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