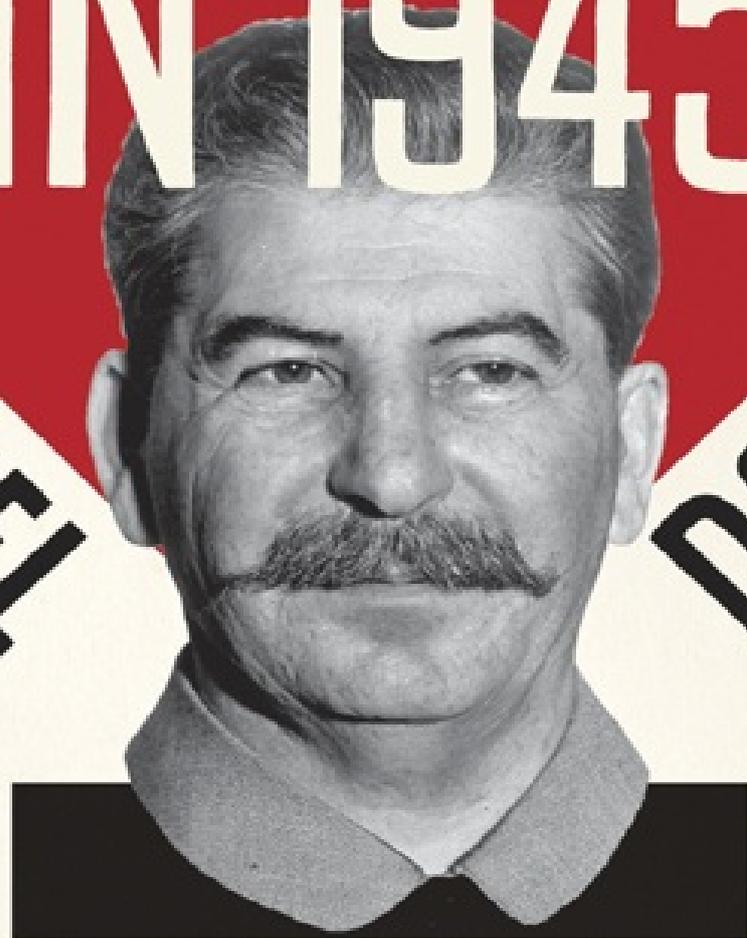
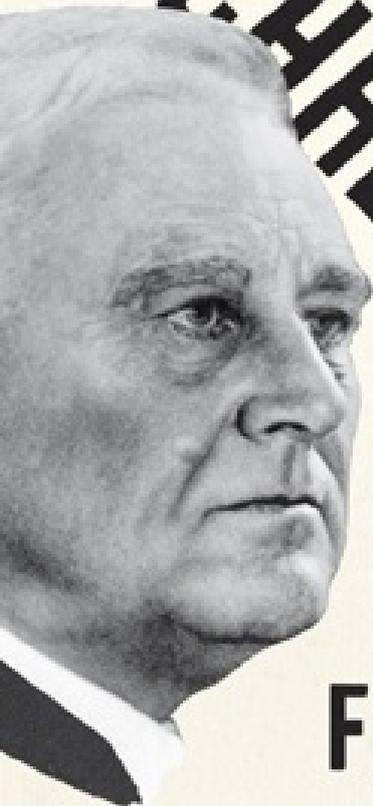


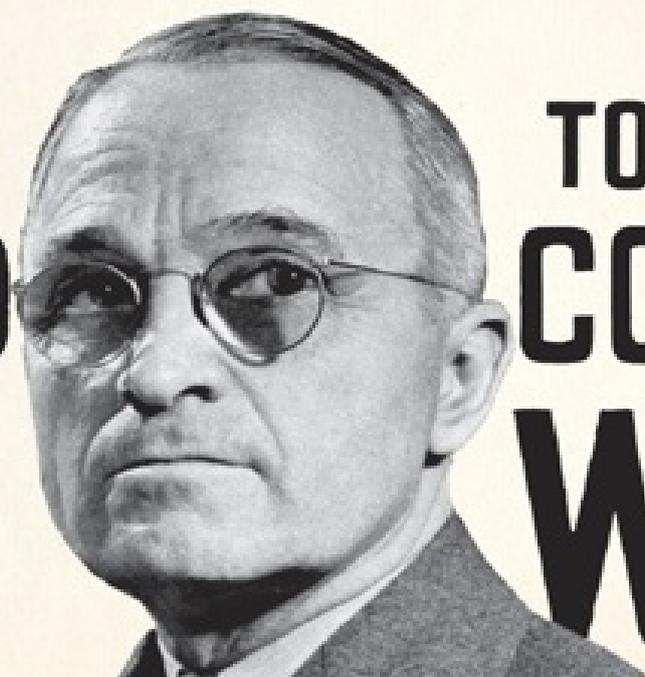
SIX MONTHS IN 1945

MICHAEL

DORRIS



FROM
WORLD
WAR



TO
COLD
WAR

Six Months in 1945

FDR, STALIN, CHURCHILL, AND TRUMAN—
FROM WORLD WAR TO COLD WAR

Michael Dobbs



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v3.1

*For the grandson
of Joseph
And the great-grandson of
Samuel*

Few historical turning points are as rich in drama as the six months between February and August 1945, a period bookended by the Big Three conference in Yalta and the bombing of Hiroshima. America and Russia emerged as the two most powerful nations in the world; Nazi Germany and imperial Japan were vanquished; the British Empire teetered on the verge of economic collapse. A president died; a führer committed suicide; a prime minister who had rallied his people through the darkest days of their history was defeated in a free election. Coups and revolutions became commonplace; millions of people were buried in unmarked graves; ancient cities were reduced to piles of ruins. A Red tsar redrew the map of Europe, erecting a metaphorical “iron curtain” between East and West. Meeting in the capital of the defeated Third Reich, the victors squabbled over the spoils of victory. The end of World War II led inexorably to the start of the Cold War.

The six months from Yalta to Hiroshima form a hinge between two very different wars—and two very different worlds. They connect the age of artillery with the age of the atomic bomb, the death throes of empire with the birth pangs of superpowers. They also mark the fateful encounter in the heart of Europe between the armies of two great nations, ostensibly allied but guided by opposite ideological principles. More than a century earlier, Alexis de Tocqueville had predicted that Americans and Russians would sweep all other nations aside. “The principal instrument of the former is freedom; of the latter, servitude,” the French seer wrote in 1835. “Their starting point is different and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe.” This is the story of the people—presidents and commissars, generals and foot soldiers, victors and vanquished—who fulfilled “the will of Heaven.”

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

List of Maps

Chronology

Note on Names

Part One “THE BEST I COULD DO”

1 Roosevelt · *February 3*

2 Stalin · *February 4*

3 Churchill · *February 5*

4 Poland · *February 6*

5 Grand Design · *February 10*

6 Euphoria · *February 13*

Part Two “AN IRON CURTAIN IS DRAWN DOWN”

7 Comrade Vyshinsky · *February 27*

8 “An Impenetrable Veil” · *March 7*

9 Death of a President · *April 12*

10 The Neophyte and the Commissar · *April 23*

11 Linkup · *April 25*

12 Victory · *May 8*

13 “The Salvation of the World” · *May 26*

14 Atomic Poker · *June 1*

15 Red Empire · *June 24*

Part Three “A PEACE THAT IS NO PEACE”

- 16 Berlin · *July 4*
- 17 Terminal · *July 16*
- 18 Loot · *July 23*
- 19 “FINIS” · *July 26*
- 20 Hiroshima · *August 6*
- 21 After the Bomb

Acknowledgments

Notes

Bibliography

Index

A Note About the Author

Illustrations

Other Books by This Author

Maps

FDR in the Crimea

Into the Reich (January–February 1945)

Poland Border Changes

Linkup (Journeys to the Elbe)

“An Iron Curtain Is Drawn Down” (May 1945)

Stalin and the Middle East

Berlin (July 1945)

Stalin and the Far East

Chronology

February 4

Yalta conference opens (to February 11).

February 13–15

Dresden bombed.

February 27

Vyshinsky organizes Communist coup in Romania.

March 7

U.S. Army crosses the Rhine at Remagen.

April 12

Roosevelt dies, succeeded by Truman.

April 23

Truman warns Molotov to keep promises on Poland.

April 25

Founding conference of United Nations; Americans and Russians link up on the Elbe.

April 30

Hitler commits suicide.

May 2

Fall of Berlin to the Red Army.

May 8

Germany surrenders.

May 26

Truman envoys meet with Churchill and Stalin.

June 1

Truman decides to use atomic bomb against Japan.

June 18

Polish opposition leaders go on trial in Moscow.

June 24

Victory parade in Moscow.

July 4

U.S. forces occupy west Berlin.

July 16

Potsdam conference opens (to August 2); first atomic test.

July 26

Churchill resigns.

August 6

Atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Note on Names

The end of World War II produced numerous boundary changes and accompanying name changes in both Europe and Asia. The end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union resulted in yet more name changes. Adopting the latest, politically correct (or incorrect, depending on your point of view) names for towns and villages is a recipe for confusion.

To simplify matters, I have used Anglicized names for cities and towns when they are widely familiar to English-speaking readers. Thus I write about Moscow and Warsaw, not Moskva and Warszawa. In cases where political upheavals or boundary revisions have resulted in name changes, I have used the names employed by Roosevelt, Truman, and Churchill in 1945, e.g., Breslau not Wrocław, Stalingrad not Volgograd, Port Arthur not Lushun.

For the convenience of readers, here is a list of geographic names used in the book with modern-day alternatives.

Baerwalde	Mieszkowice
Breslau	Wrocław
Dairen	Dalian
Danzig	Gdańsk
Eastern Neisse	Glatzer Neisse (Polish: Nysa Kłodzka)
Kiev	Kyiv
Königsberg	Kaliningrad
Leningrad	St. Petersburg
Lwów	Lviv
Oppeln	Opole
Port Arthur	Lushun
Stalingrad	Volgograd
Stettin	Szczecin
Western Neisse	Lusatian Neisse
Wilno	Vilnius

Transliterating Russian personal names into English presents a different problem for authors. The academic systems of transliteration involve complicated diacritics, which can be off-putting to contemporary readers. I have therefore adopted a simplified system, avoiding diacritical marks and apostrophes. I have used the letter “y” to denote the two Russian letters *ий* frequently found at the end of proper names, such as Georgy and Vyshinsky.

While I have tried to be consistent, I have used the Library of Congress system of transliteration for the bibliography (excluding diacritics), to make it easier for readers to locate references. Names used in the bibliography and notes are therefore not always identical to names in the main text.

Part One

The Best I Could Do

—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

FEBRUARY 1945

Roosevelt

February 3

The big four-engine airplane with the gleaming white star stood on the tarmac of the little airfield in Malta, ready to take Franklin Delano Roosevelt on a final mission. The new Douglas C-54 Skymaster had been specially fitted with all the latest conveniences, including an elevator that could lift the president and his wheelchair off the ground and deposit him in the belly of the plane. FDR voiced his displeasure to the Secret Service agents who wheeled him up to the tiny elevator cage. “I never authorized that,” he muttered. “It’s quite unnecessary.” The embarrassed agents insisted that the device was required for security reasons. The alternative was a long ramp, a signal to enemy spies that the polio-stricken president of the United States was about to arrive or depart. Roosevelt, who disliked needless fuss and expense, was unconvinced.

The departure schedule had been planned with choreographic precision. Thirty military planes were lined up next to the small control tower, waiting for permission to take off. At ten-minute intervals, the lead plane moved to the head of the darkened runway, shades drawn, exterior lights extinguished. As each plane roared into the Mediterranean sky, the next plane moved into position behind. The night was filled with the roar of Skymaster and York transports warming their engines for takeoff and the high-pitched whine of fighter planes circling the airfield.

Few people were aware of the existence of a presidential aircraft. Code-named Project 51, its construction was such a closely guarded secret that those in the know referred to the plane as the *Sacred Cow*. Roosevelt had become the first U.S. president to travel by airplane two years earlier, in February 1943, when he took a Pan American flying boat to Casablanca for a conference with Winston Churchill. But commercial air travel was obviously impractical for a wartime president—particularly one paralyzed from the waist down. The flying White House was ready for its inaugural trip.

Roosevelt boarded the *Sacred Cow* at 11:15 on the evening of February 2, 1945. The plane was not scheduled to depart until 3:30 a.m., but his doctors had decided this was the best way for him to get a decent night’s rest. He was rolled straight to his stateroom, just aft of the wing. His black valet, Arthur Prettyman, helped him off with his clothes and made sure that he was lying

comfortably on the plush three-seat couch emblazoned with the presidential seal. Other amenities included a swivel chair, a conference table, several closets, a private toilet, and a panoramic bulletproof window twice the width of regular portholes that was framed by blue curtains. A console next to the window provided communication with the cockpit and other parts of the plane. The interior wall opposite contained a set of maps on rollers that could be pulled down for in-flight briefings. A painting of a nineteenth-century clipper tossing in the waves filled the wall above the couch, evoking Roosevelt's love of the sea.

The president was chronically tired. He had whiled away the twelve-day crossing of the Atlantic on a U.S. Navy cruiser with endless rounds of gin rummy, deck games, and movies in the evening. He frequently slept twelve hours a night—but however much rest he got, it never seemed enough. Much of his remaining energy had been spent on his last election campaign, riding in open limousines and braving a torrential downpour in New York in a desperate attempt to show he was fit enough to serve a fourth term. The campaign appearances were designed to remind the voters of the FDR of popular imagination—strong, indomitable, optimistic—but they concealed his rapidly deteriorating state of health. He had lost some forty pounds over the last few months and looked like a skeleton. His blood pressure was out of control, sometimes as high as 260 over 150. The man he had chosen as vice president, Harry S. Truman, was alarmed when they met for a symbolic photo-taking session at the White House. “I had no idea he was in such a feeble condition,” Truman confided to an aide. “In pouring cream in his tea, he got more cream in the saucer than he did in the cup. There doesn't seem to be any mental lapse, but physically he is going to pieces.”

Roosevelt's heart specialist, Howard Bruenn, slipped into the cabin shortly before takeoff. The president was already snoozing. The young navy lieutenant commander wanted to make sure his patient did not roll off the couch as the *Sacred Cow* accelerated down the runway. Knowing that Roosevelt would not have the strength to prevent himself from falling deadweight to the floor, Bruenn turned the swivel chair so that its back was against the couch. He would sleep sitting down, alert to the noises behind him.

Bruenn was worried about FDR. When he first examined the president, at Bethesda Naval Hospital in March 1944, he knew at once there was something “terribly wrong” and gave him no more than a year to live. His patient was having trouble breathing, and was suffering from bronchitis. His heart was greatly enlarged, no longer able to pump blood efficiently. The cardiologist prescribed digitalis to control the heartbeat, an easily digestible diet, greatly increased rest, and a sharp cutback in the number of official visitors and duties. Roosevelt's chief physician, Vice Admiral Ross McIntire, had resisted Bruenn's recommendations because he did not want to disrupt the president's routine, but eventually agreed to a scaled-down version. On McIntire's insistence, nobody outside a small circle of trusted White House

doctors would know the facts about the boss's medical condition. Even Roosevelt was kept in the dark. Averse to unpleasant news, he displayed little interest in finding out the truth.

The roar of the engines and the shuddering of the aircraft frame as the *Sacred Cow* rose from the ground awoke the president from his fitful sleep. His nose and throat were stuffed up. Bruenn could hear FDR toss around on the couch behind him. His clinical notes recorded that Roosevelt "slept rather poorly" on the plane because of "noise and vibration" and was frequently woken by "a paroxysmal cough which was moderately productive." Apart from that, "the patient" was doing better than expected. He had "thoroughly enjoyed" his two weeks of travel away from the United States—"via train, ship, aeroplane and motor car"—and had "rested beautifully" on the trip across the Atlantic, "sleeping late in the morning, resting in the afternoon, and retiring fairly early at night despite fairly rough seas."

After taking off from Malta, in the center of the Mediterranean, the *Sacred Cow* headed due east, cruising at a speed of two hundred miles per hour. The doctors had insisted that the unpressurized plane stick to an altitude of six thousand feet to minimize the president's breathing problems. The plane danced in and out of the clouds. About an hour out of Malta, it hit bumpy weather. The head of the Secret Service contingent heard a noise in the president's bedroom and went to investigate, but it was just a door slamming back and forth. The pilots shifted course northeast to avoid Crete, parts of which were still held by the Germans.

Dawn broke as the *Sacred Cow* passed over Athens, clearly visible on the port side of the aircraft. Six P-38 fighter planes appeared out of the clouds to escort the president's plane onward across the Aegean Sea to the snow-covered plains of northern Greece and Turkey, and finally the Black Sea. Roosevelt's daughter, Anna, was already up to watch the "beautiful sunrise" and the "outlines of tiny villages" in the otherwise barren Greek islands. Everyone had been instructed to put their watches and clocks forward two hours overnight. The president was dressed and served his usual breakfast of ham and eggs an hour before landing.

The Allied planes had been instructed to execute a ninety-degree turn as they entered Soviet airspace, to identify themselves as friendly and avoid being shot down by anti-aircraft defenses. The *Sacred Cow* followed the agreed routing along the railway track from the town of Eupatoria on the western edge of the Crimean Peninsula to the airfield at Saki. The landscape was flat and uninteresting, a seemingly endless expanse of snow. The president's plane, now accompanied by five fighters (one had turned back because of engine trouble), circled the airstrip once and landed on schedule at 12:10 Moscow time, "bumping the full length of the short concrete-block runway."

During twelve years as president, Franklin Roosevelt had helped rescue the United States from the depths of the Great Depression, persuaded a reluctant nation to support Great Britain in its hour of need, and assembled the mightiest military coalition in history to resist the assaults of Nazi Germany

and imperial Japan. Victory in both wars was within sight. Allied troops had reached the frontiers of Germany and were rolling back Japanese gains in Asia. The dying commander in chief had decided to make a dangerous, potentially suicidal, voyage across the ocean just two days after his fourth inaugural because he was obsessed by two final goals. He wanted to make sure that victory was secured at the lowest possible cost in American lives. And he had promised Americans, exhausted by more than three years of war, “a lasting peace.”

Prior to FDR’s arrival in the Crimea on Saturday, February 3, 1945, no serving U.S. president had set foot in Russia, much less the Soviet Union. None would do so again for nearly three decades.

American attitudes toward Russia had veered wildly since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. U.S. troops had intervened on the side of the Whites in the Russian civil war, battling the Reds in the snows of northern Russia before eventually retreating in disarray from Arkhangelsk with more than two thousand casualties. Americans were shocked by Stalin’s agreement with Hitler in 1939, the carving up of Poland, and the Soviet invasions of Finland and the Baltic states. But the pendulum swung back sharply when the German armies invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, reaching the gates of Leningrad and Moscow within a few months. When the United States entered the war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, Communist Russia became its most important military ally. Hollywood movies began portraying the Soviet Union as a land of brave soldiers, contented workers, and smiling commissars, a one-hundred-eighty-degree turnaround from the thuggish buffoons depicted in the 1939 smash hit *Ninotchka*. The image of a mighty, trustworthy nation, under a strong yet benevolent leader, grew with every Red Army victory, with the active encouragement of the Roosevelt administration.

There were some dissenting voices, particularly among the handful of American diplomats with firsthand experience of life in Russia. The U.S. ambassador to Moscow, Averell Harriman, complained that the Russian bear was turning into the “world bully.” He feared that Stalin would use “strong-arm methods” to establish a “sphere of influence” in eastern Europe under his exclusive control. Harriman’s deputy, George Kennan, agreed that a division of Europe was inevitable. America and Russia had little in common—other than a shared enemy. In a letter to his friend Charles E. Bohlen on the eve of the Yalta conference, Kennan urged the U.S. government to make the best of geopolitical realities: “Why should we not make a decent and definite compromise with [Moscow]—divide Europe frankly into spheres of influence—keep ourselves out of the Russian sphere and keep the Russians out of ours?”

Dividing Europe with Russia was not at all what FDR had in mind when he risked his life to meet with Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill in the Crimea in the waning days of World War II. Like most Americans, he was repulsed by anything that smacked of “empires,” “balance of power,” and “spheres of

influence.” In the grand Rooseveltian scheme, a new world organization would assume primary responsibility for ensuring the “lasting peace” under the benign supervision of the victorious allies. The president wanted American soldiers to come home from Europe and Asia as quickly as possible.

Stalin was not at Saki airport to greet Roosevelt. Instead, he had sent his foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, who was pacing up and down on the tarmac in a heavy overcoat and fur hat, surrounded by Allied officials. Through the window of the president’s cabin, FDR and Anna could see knots of Russian women sweeping snow from the runway with brooms made out of birch twigs. They waited inside the warm plane until Churchill’s C-54 Skymaster, a gift from the United States, landed twenty minutes later, accompanied by its own escort of six P-38 fighters.

Originally, Roosevelt and Churchill had planned to take only modest entourages with them to Yalta, consisting of thirty to thirty-five key aides. But the delegations grew in size as more and more officials deemed themselves “indispensable” to either the president or the prime minister, until they reached a combined total of some seven hundred people, support staff included. The Russians had erected large army tents, heated with wood-fired stoves, to provide hospitality to the throng of field marshals, ministers, generals, ambassadors, and assorted aides-de-camp. New arrivals were invited inside for their first Russian breakfast, consisting of giant dollops of caviar, assorted garlic-heavy cold cuts, smoked salmon, eggs, curd cake with a sour cream sauce, sweet champagne, Georgian white wine, vodka, and Crimean brandy, all washed down by tumblers of boiling tea.

Eventually, everybody shuffled into place for the arrival ceremony. After lowering the president to the ground in his elevator, Secret Service agents lifted him into an open lend-lease jeep covered with rugs. A Red Army band played “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “God Save the King,” and the new Soviet national anthem (“The Great Lenin lit our way / Stalin brought us up to serve the people”). Seated in the jeep in his dark navy cape, Roosevelt reviewed a goose-stepping honor guard, flanked by Churchill and Molotov on foot. FDR seemed “frail and ill” to the prime minister. “He was a tragic figure.” His face was the color of parchment, waxlike and drained of energy. His right arm rested on the side of the jeep, the hand hanging limply downward. Churchill’s doctor, Charles Moran, described the scene:

The PM walked by the side of the President, as in her old age an Indian attendant accompanied Queen Victoria’s phaeton. They were preceded by a crowd of camera-men, walking backwards as they took snapshots. The President looked old and thin and drawn; he had a cape or shawl over his shoulders and appeared shrunken; he sat looking straight ahead with his mouth open, as if he were not taking things in. Everyone was shocked by his appearance and gabbed about it afterwards.

Anna Roosevelt felt “a bit worried” about her father, knowing that he was “tired after his hard day yesterday and a short night’s sleep on the plane.” She decided to ride alone with him to Yalta so that “he could sleep as much as he wanted and would not have to make conversation.” If they were to reach Yalta by nightfall, they had to get going immediately. Declining the offer of refreshments, they climbed into one of Stalin’s Packard limousines, accompanied only by an American bodyguard and a Russian driver, and set off across “a desolate steppe.” Carloads of Secret Service agents and “armed Russians” drove ahead, with the rest of the American and British delegations strung out in a long convoy.

Crossing the Atlantic, FDR had been bombarded by alarming messages on conditions in the Crimea. His aide, Harry Hopkins, reported that Churchill was predicting great discomfort. “He says that if we had spent ten years on research we could not have found a worse place in the world than Yalta, but he feels he can survive it by bringing an adequate supply of whiskey. He claims it is good for typhus and deadly on lice which thrive in those parts.” Two days later, a telegram arrived from the prime minister describing the roads between Saki and Yalta as impassable because of blizzards. British and American advance men were said to have “endured most terrifying experience” negotiating a “mountainous track” en route to the summit venue.

No other traffic was permitted on the road, which was guarded by thousands of Interior Ministry troops, stationed at two-hundred-yard intervals along the entire eighty-mile route. Many of the soldiers were women dressed, like the men, in long heavy greatcoats, with leather belts and tommy guns slung across their backs and shoulder boards similar to “those worn by an American admiral.” The Russian women were “immense, tough, and had the largest legs I have *ever* seen,” marveled one of Churchill’s female assistants in a letter home. “You at once realized why the Huns did not spare them.” The soldiers presented arms as the president passed, looking him straight in the eye, repeating the procedure with all the cars that followed.

The road was lined with the debris of the thirty-month German occupation of the Crimea: gutted buildings, burnt-out tanks, overturned freight trains, abandoned villages, and wounded soldiers, particularly in the towns. Roosevelt had read reports about the aerial bombardment of Coventry and Rotterdam and the leveling of Warsaw and Lidice, but this was the first time he had seen the Nazi destruction up close. It made a profound impression. He told Anna that the gruesome sights along the road made him want “to get even” with the Germans more than ever.

A few cars behind FDR, Churchill was complaining loudly about the “endless and very boring” drive. He wanted to know “how long have we been going?”

“About an hour,” replied his daughter Sarah.

“Christ! Five more hours of this!”

Sarah described her father’s mood in a letter to her mother the following day. “On, on through bleak country peopled by a few grim-faced peasants....

On, on, bearing all with fortitude, patience and a bottle of very good brandy!” To amuse himself, Churchill recited Byron’s epic poem *Don Juan* to his companions.

After passing through Simferopol, “another dingy town with wide, straight streets,” the Allied convoy began to climb into the mountains. The countryside became more interesting but was still very barren. Looking out the window in between catnaps, Roosevelt noticed scrub oaks “but almost no evergreens.” His thoughts turned to the three hundred thousand trees he had planted at Hyde Park, his home in the lush Hudson River valley in upstate New York. He made a mental note to tell Stalin that “this part of the country needs reforesting.”

It was now past 3:00 p.m., and father and daughter were getting hungry. They stopped by the side of the road to munch on some day-old sandwiches prepared on the *Quincy*, the warship that had brought them across the Atlantic to Malta. Ambassador Harriman drove up to inform them that Molotov had invited the entire party to lunch at a rest house forty-five minutes farther on, near the seaside town of Alushta. The tables were “groaning with food and wine”; the Russians had even built a special ramp covered with decorative rugs for the president’s wheelchair. The thought of two hours’ eating and drinking was too much for FDR, who wanted to press on to Yalta before it got dark. Churchill (“that tough old bird” in Anna’s description) fell upon the feast with his usual Rabelaisian gusto.

After Alushta, the road swung inland, along the “Romanov route” built by the last tsar to connect his summer palace at Yalta with his hunting estate and completed the year before the Great War that sealed his fate. Here the scenery became dramatic, even romantic: mountains rising to five thousand feet, sweeping views of crags and rushing streams, thick beech woods and pine forests, numerous switchbacks carved into the hillside. It was fortunate that the road was closed to all nonofficial cars: this was the narrow “mountainous track” the advance men had warned about. The president’s naval aide, Vice Admiral Wilson Brown, noted that “the curves were short and sharp, without retaining walls, [along the] edge of a continuous precipice. Passengers were thrown about in the constant change of direction; one escape from the edge was quickly followed by another hairbreadth escape; the bumping and banging on an unsurfaced road was continuous.”

And then suddenly, one last mountain pass, and the presidential party reached “another country,” a land of cypresses and vineyards and houses with red tiled roofs set against a dark blue sea. The climate was balmy, almost Mediterranean, with the sweet-smelling fragrance of olive trees and orange groves. The mountains protected this short stretch of coastline from the harsh north winds that swept down from Russia. There was no snow: winter had given way to spring. Everyone’s spirits rose.