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## ‘War and Peace’ Review: FDR’s Final Act

In Franklin Roosevelt’s last months it was clear to his doctors and family—but never to the world—that death might come at any moment.



Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta, February 1945. PHOTO:HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

By *Edward Kosner*

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Awrath stares out from the dust jacket of the final volume of Nigel Hamilton’s trilogy on Franklin Roosevelt at war. FDR is wrapped in his navy cape at Yalta in February 1945, where he met with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin to settle the postwar world just two months before his death. Roosevelt must have suspected what the future held, and his dead eyes tell the story.

Mr. Hamilton’s “War and Peace” covers the momentous last year and a half of the president’s life. It runs from the late-1943 Tehran conference with Churchill and Stalin through the triumph of D-Day in June 1944, Yalta, and the cerebral hemorrhage that killed FDR at age 63 on April 12, 1945, as he sat posing for a portrait at his Warm Springs, Ga., retreat.

“War and Peace” is narrative history dense with illuminating detail that puts the reader in the room with Roosevelt as he mixes his vermouth-heavy Martinis for dinner guests, leads fractious strategy meetings, and spends his final hours with his early and late love, Lucy Mercer Rutherford. But Mr. Hamilton has a larger purpose than merely rehearsing the epic of World War II: He is drafting a revisionist brief to counter the version offered by Churchill in his six-volume “The Second World War” and to give FDR due credit for his sly, masterful leadership.

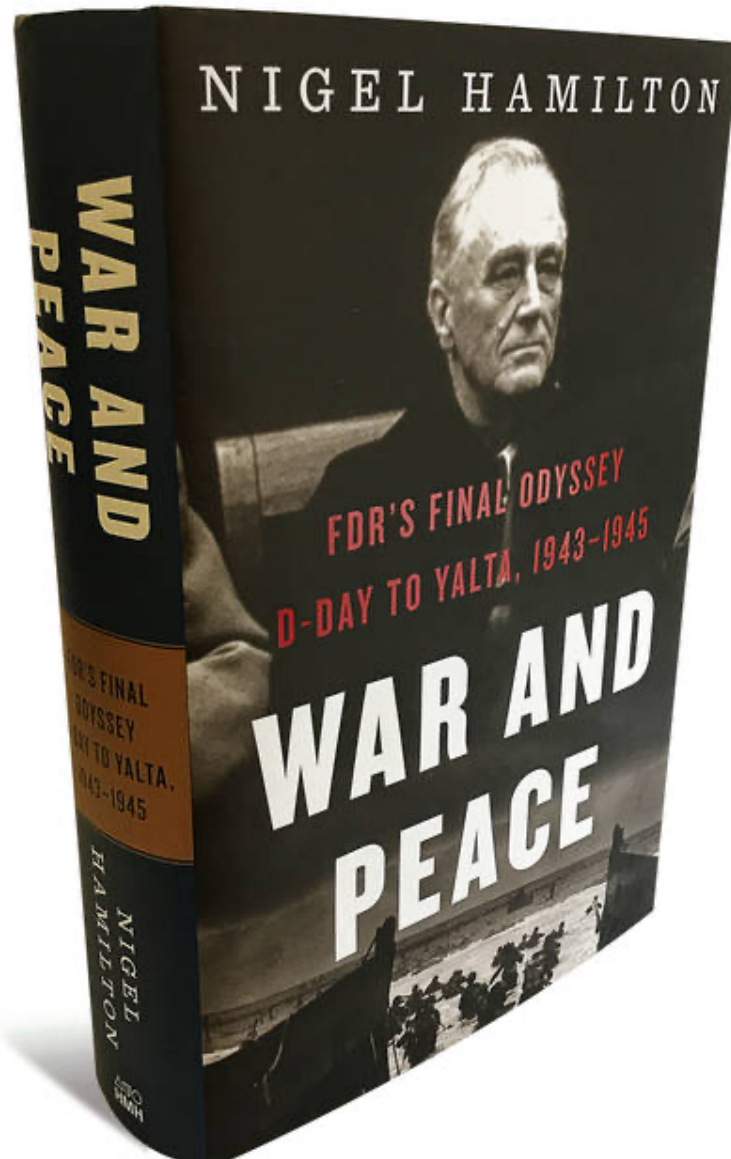


PHOTO: WSJ

### WAR AND PEACE

By Nigel Hamilton  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 578 pages, \$30

“Whitewashed by generations of subsequent historians,” Mr. Hamilton writes, “this was the great tragedy of the war in late 1943: that at a moment when Hitler and Goebbels had no idea how they could win the war in Europe beyond stoicism and the use of *Vergeltungswaffen*”—“revenge” rocket weapons—“and recognized the only way they could lose the war was if the Allies launched a Second Front, the Allied coalition faced the danger of being split apart by Winston Churchill and the British.”

The book is a catalog of Churchill’s relentless resistance and Roosevelt’s intensifying infirmity—a race with death to preserve Allied unity in order to end the war and secure the peace, including realizing FDR’s vision of the United Nations. Students of the era may be familiar with the evidence Mr. Hamilton marshals over 500 pages, but much of it will come as revelation to general readers. Using notes taken by translators at secret meetings, and journals and diaries kept by key figures and peripheral staffers (including Hitler’s inner circle), the author offers a persuasive chronicle

of the turning point of the war in Europe.

Stalin, facing the brunt of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, had been clamoring for the Americans and British to launch a western front in France to split the Axis forces. Roosevelt had always wanted a massive invasion across the English Channel. But Churchill wanted to keep the emphasis on the Mediterranean and attack what he liked to call Hitler’s “soft underbelly” from the south.

Churchill resisted what became Operation Overlord for three reasons, Mr. Hamilton writes. After the disasters of Gallipoli in World War I and the 1942 Dieppe raid, he feared that an amphibious attack would be a British bloodbath; he wanted his forces active in the Mediterranean to help resurrect the British Empire after the war; and he hoped that Allied troops working up through the Balkans could help block Soviet encroachment from the east. Still, at a war council in Quebec in the summer of 1943, Roosevelt extracted a commitment from Churchill for a cross-Channel attack the following spring.

But even his top generals couldn’t keep the British prime minister from trying to scuttle the invasion. He was obsessed, Mr. Hamilton notes, with a scheme to recapture the isle of Rhodes off the coast of Turkey and the tiny Dodecanese islands and use them as a base to invade Greece and thrust up through the Balkans, all the while battling in Italy to take Rome. In the fall of 1943, Churchill ordered his general staff to stop planning for Overlord. Then he directed his foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, to leak to Stalin a pessimistic report on the war in Italy—hoping that the Russian dictator would agree with him that D-Day must be postponed or canceled to shore up the Italian campaign. Eden was to omit an evaluation from Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, the American commander, flatly contradicting the British view.

Roosevelt got wind of Churchill’s ploy and thwarted him. In Tehran a few months later, FDR enlisted Stalin to quash Churchill and set the course to victory over Hitler. At a conference dinner, the president suddenly took ill, sweating heavily and turning green. He recovered quickly the next day, but his 16-month slide toward death had begun.

The bittersweet second half of “War and Peace” mingles Roosevelt’s military and diplomatic triumphs with his physical disintegration. It was soon clear to his doctors and family—but never to the world—that the president was suffering from such severe heart failure that death might come at any moment. He was pumped full of digitalis and ordered to rest. But he insisted on grueling wartime travel—to Hawaii and Alaska, to far-off Yalta—and on running for a fourth term in 1944. On nearly every page, a general, cabinet officer or Allied leader records shock at Roosevelt’s shrunken figure, trembling hands and sallow face. More than the digitalis, it was the now-open companionship of Lucy Mercer that kept him alive until the end.

Roosevelt lived long enough to see the development of the atomic bomb that ended the war with Japan barely four months after his death; the founding of the United Nations came just two months after the bomb was dropped. There has long been criticism that a faltering FDR was mastered by Stalin at Yalta, giving the Soviets postwar domination of Eastern and Central Europe. Mr. Hamilton will have none of it. He portrays a keen but surprisingly genial Stalin throughout as Roosevelt’s ally, whose creation of the Soviet bloc could not realistically be denied. If history belongs to the best and latest writer, Nigel Hamilton has won the war for Roosevelt’s legacy from Churchill—as if FDR needed any help.

*Mr. Kosner is the onetime editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.*

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