

Richard Foord

Liberal Democrat MP for Tiverton and Honiton and defence spokesperson

This timely new edition of Lord Owen's book advances our understanding of past British-Russian relations and the present conflict

Riddle, Mystery and Enigma

Two Hundred Years of British-Russian Relations

By **David Owen**
Publisher **Haus**
publishing

Professor Andrew Roberts referred to David Owen as "our finest living foreign secretary". My interest in David Owen's book *Riddle, Mystery and Enigma* was in pursuit of a practitioner's view of history. For me, David Owen came down on the right side of the divisions between the SDP and the Liberal Party in relation to defence and foreign policy, including in relation to nuclear deterrence, over which Owen was pragmatic and always mindful of the danger posed by the USSR.

This is a book written by one politician about other politicians. As such, it is very insightful in its comments on 200 years of British-Russian relations. His analysis of relations between Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin, for example, are made through the lens of a former cabinet minister who has seen diplomacy close-up. Owen writes

that Churchill was "correct" to insist that his messages to Stalin be delivered directly in a letter addressed from the British prime minister, rather than in a letter from the British ambassador to the USSR, as the then foreign secretary had proposed.

Rather than writing with

in the analysis of British-Russian relations where it is the contrast – rather than the parallels – with the present, that are notable. Owen reminds the reader that as leader of the Transport and General Workers' Union, Ernest Bevin prevented the sending of an arms shipment

and opposition parties over Ukraine. Owen captures the bearing that ideology had on relations between the two countries while communism was an over-riding factor in the minds of British politicians and the public.

Riddle, Mystery and Enigma was published originally in 2021, in advance of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The paperback edition has been revised to take account of the events of February 2022 and the intervening year. David Owen is frank on this point: "I did not foresee that Putin would take military action and invade Ukraine a second time... never underestimate a Russian leader's capacity to lie unchecked." Owen has found the subject of his book move in the last 18 months from being a fringe concern to being central to global security. It reminds us that we may not see current affairs through the lens of history, but if today's international affairs are seen through the lens of history by our adversaries – as we know is the case with Vladimir Putin – then history really does have a bearing on modern conflict. David Owen has advanced our understanding of past relations and the present conflict with this timely new edition. 📖

"It's the contrast – rather than the parallels – with the present, that are notable"

to Poland for use against the Red Army in May 1920. The strength of workers' opinion in support of Bolshevism in 1920 led to a subsequent decision by the British government to withhold arms. It contrasts with the present consensus between government



Yalta, February 1945
Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill

the dispassionate indifference of an historian, David Owen cannot help pass judgement. On occasion, there are moments in the book when Owen uses his platform to express opinions on matters that are not precisely within the remit of a book on British-Russian relations (for example, the "European Court of Justice was always going to be unacceptable to the UK"). These instances are limited though, and most of them are very relevant to the subject of British-Russian relations.

There are many points

