

# Yalta and potsdam



The Yalta and Potsdam conferences stay as one of the key sources when studying about Cold War and the alliance of the “ Big 3.” The focus question of the essay asks, “ To what degree did the Yalta and Potsdam conferences contribute to the advancement of Cold War in Europe?” The 2 conferences have considerable relevance when trying to come to the conclusion regarding why did the Cold War emerge?

To precisely understand the significance of the conferences, the individual interaction of the leaders, the choices that were made and what was stated is carefully examined.

Yalta marked the peak for the Big 3 in the sense that the 3 were together in the belief that they were choosing the fate of the world. While Potsdam was more of a high decrease, marking the collapse of the Big 3. The modification of Roosevelt to Truman in the second conference also considerably impacted the alliance because Truman had different technique towards Stalin than Roosevelt did. The conferences that were expect to decide the post-war world and guarantee no future war just worsened the scenario as the various visions for that post-war world hit currently increased misconceptions.

The Yalta and Potsdam Conferences were not the factor for Cold War however were what kick-started the brand-new sort of war that lasted for forty-six years. Indeed, its necessary to study the two conferences as they played an essential function in choosing the future of the world during that period.

On April 25, 1945, the Red Army, 58th Guards Department were commemorating their triumph over Nazi Germany with U. S Army, 69th

Infantry Department on German Land<sup>1</sup>. Five days later on Adolf Hitler shot himself and a week later on Germany surrendered. The “ Big Three” who originally met — in expect a much better world- in Tehran in 1943 and Yalta in February, 1945, fulfilled as soon as again at Potsdam in July, 1945.

Churchill was thanking Stalin for his ‘ hospitality and friendship’ at the Yalta Conference<sup>2</sup>.

Then how come, despite these friendly gestures, did the Soviet Authorities tried to break up pro-American demonstrations that erupted in Moscow? Why did American Authorities suspend shipments of aid for the USSR and then resume them? Why did Truman turn cold towards Stalin and decided to keep the knowledge of the atomic bomb a secret from the Soviets? The answer lies in the fact that the war was won by the Grand Alliance and its member who were already at war – ideologically and geopolitically – with each other<sup>3</sup>.

Near the end of World War II, global politics were at peak level and after 1945; a series of clashes and misunderstandings widened the gap between the Americans and Soviets even more and eventually lead to open hostility. The United States believed that a country should be run on a capitalist system – that is all industry, business and agriculture should be owned privately or by firms. In contrast, the Soviets believed in socialism, meaning that everything should be owned by the state and should be run by the government. These two – very different ideologies – were conflicting to each other and believed that the alternative ideology was a threat to their own way of living.

In 1945, two conferences, Yalta and Potsdam were held with the top political leaders of Russia, America and Britain, otherwise known as the 'Big Three'. These conferences were meant to decide the future of the world after the war and what to do with Germany. America and Russia's different beliefs and post-war aims and the increasing tension between the two sides became apparent at the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences. Therefore, it is significant to closely examine what was said and decided during these conferences that drove both sides.

The focus question of this essay deals with what was discussed and agreed upon during the Yalta and Potsdam conferences and will answer: To what extent did the Yalta and Potsdam conferences contribute to the development of the Cold War in Europe?

The two great powers, even though they had united to fight against the Nazis, were completely different in everything else. Ideology was very important for the Soviet Union, since it was built around it and the west viewed the USSR as a growing threat and distrusted them. The Soviet Union was a communist country, which was ruled by a dictator and put the needs of the state ahead of human rights, while America was a capitalist democracy which valued freedom and feared communism. Although the ideological differences between the two great powers were immense and important in creating a tense atmosphere between them, ideology alone does not offer an explanation for the cold war.

A capitalist economy is based on private ownership, private profit and free competition. It encourages private individuals to own businesses and make

profits. A communist economy on the other hand, is quite different. The economy is controlled by the government. A country's wealth and resources are owned by the state or government. The state controls and plans all economic activity so that everybody benefits. Thus, it can be seen how different these ideologies were and how conflict could arise from these differences.

Going into the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences, Soviet Union wanted to ensure security, establish control over Eastern Europe, and get reparation from Germany. On the other hand, Britain and America wanted to help Germany recover to avoid any future turmoil from Germany and wanted to prevent large areas of Europe from coming under Communist control.

In recent history, the USSR had been invaded a total of three times, once in WWI, once in the Russian civil war and once in WWII. As a result, there were many Russian casualties and as a way of making sure that the USSR would be secure from any future attack or aggression along the western border, Stalin decided to surround Russia with a buffer of “friendly” countries which later came to be known as the Iron Curtain. During the World War, as the Russians pushed the Germans out of their border, they also pushed inwards into Eastern Europe, occupying many countries, making it easier for them to establish control. As they established controls in these areas, they gave the local Communist parties a lot of support and thus, widened their influence in their countries. Also, as they pushed back, they brought along Moscow-trained Communist leaders who had gone to the USSR during the war.

These leaders took over the reins of the governments in some parts of Eastern Europe, spreading the influence of Communism. After the Soviets had pushed the Germans out of Poland, it fell under communism and remained so until Stalin's death. Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia are some of other countries that fell under Communism. Stalin then proceeded to establish one-party governments in these countries by first establishing coalition governments, then removing the partners in these governments. The coalitions were needed as the Communist Parties in the different countries were not strong enough on their own to gain the support of the people and govern the country. In this way, the USSR could then proceed to tighten its control over Eastern Europe, successfully forming the satellite states or the Iron Curtain.

The west was afraid that the Communist ideology would spread as its nature was expansionist. Thus, when the USSR attempted to improve security by having satellite states, the West saw this as an attempt to spread the influence of Communism. This especially affected USA as it needed new markets and Europe could provide them. As more and more markets were dominated by USSR, USA lost these potential markets. There was mutual suspicion and mistrust between the east and the west because of this. As well, there were still suspicious from WWII's atomic bomb incident and the second front. The second front was not opened till 3 years after Stalin started demanding it and few days before it was dropped, the US informed the other allies except Russia that the atomic bomb was about to be dropped on to Japan. This severely discredited the West and spoiled the relations between the East and the West.

This meant that the 'Big Three' found it very difficult to agree upon anything at the Conferences (Yalta, Potsdam) and if anything achieved more misunderstandings. Although ideology made some degree of conflict likely between the Capitalist West and Communist East, in actual the struggle was largely fought over issues such as global power and prestige which became obvious at the two conferences, Yalta and Potsdam.

The Yalta conference was held on February 4, 1945. The Americans arrived with the long-term goal of gaining final Soviet approval to the formation of a peace organization, a structure to ensure peace, the United Nations<sup>5</sup>. The Allies also made it necessary to discuss European political and military problems. Their major goal was to fix a date for the USSR to attack Japan, which the Soviets decided would be three months after Germany surrendered. Stalin kept this promise, in return for territorial concessions in Asia<sup>6</sup>.

The future role of France was also discussed. Britain wanted France to play a full role in postwar Germany but the Soviets felt that France had not played much of a role in the war and should not have any say now. At the conference the Big Three agreed that France would have a zone of occupation in Germany out of US and Britain's share – this sat well with the Soviets as they didn't lose anything. France was to also have membership in the Allied control council for Germany. However, French leader Charles DeGaulle was not invited to the conference.

The three leaders also discussed German reparations, which required the Germans to pay for some of the damage done by them during the war.

Churchill pointed out that Germany was so damaged by the war that the Allies could not hope to extract any money from Germany. German reparations after World War I had been paid with the help of loans from the United States. The official State Department minutes of the meeting noted that “. . . there had been only two billion pounds extracted from Germany in the form of reparations by the Allies after the last war and that even this would not have been possible had not the United States given Germany credit.”<sup>7</sup> Roosevelt responded to this, “that he remembered very vividly that the United States had lost a great deal of money. He said that we had lent over ten billion dollars to Germany and that this time we would not repeat our past mistakes.”<sup>8</sup> Roosevelt never anticipated how strong the United States would emerge from the war, and added that the United States could not afford to aid the Germans economically.

Winston Churchill was strongest in raising the issue of the dangers of starving Germany if too many reparations were demanded and taken. He focused on the fact that the Germans must be left enough resources to pay reparations. A starving Germany would benefit no one. Churchill was thinking of the way reparations were handled after World War I. Even though Germany paid reparations with loans from the United States, Germany was economically devastated. Poor economic conditions created resentment, and laid the groundwork for Hitler. Realism at Yalta put limits on reparations. Churchill was well advised to use the arguments he used, that Germany needed to keep enough resources and to produce enough to pay what reparations were demanded. The leaders decided to leave the details to a commission. Reparations did not prove to be a major practical issue.



8 U. S State Department, 621.

Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov later complained “ We collected reparations after the war, but they amounted to a pittance.”<sup>9</sup> However, the Soviets took enough from their occupation zone in Germany to make it harder when they tried to create the German Democratic Republic, East Germany. Molotov later commented on this dilemma, “ Quietly, bit by bit, we had been creating the GDR, our own Germany. What would those people think of us if we had taken everything from their country? After all, we were taking from the Germans who wanted to work with us.”<sup>10</sup>

The most controversial decision to emerge from Yalta dealt with the postwar Polish government. Poland had been divided between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, and invaded by both that September. However, the Soviets were accurate when they told Churchill that the Nazi-Soviet pact of that year was made obsolete by the German invasion of the Soviet Union. By August 1944, the Soviet army had pushed the German back almost to Warsaw. On August 1, 1944, the Polish Home Army, the chief non-communist resistance force, heard the sounds of German-Soviet combat not far to the east<sup>11</sup>. They began an uprising against the Nazis, partly to liberate themselves before the Soviets arrived. Stalin stopped his army in the area for several weeks as the Germans defeated the uprising, wiped out the Home Army, and almost obliterated Warsaw.

Just before leaving for Yalta, Churchill told his private secretary, “ Make no mistake, all the Balkans, except Greece, are going to be Bolshevised, and

there is nothing I can do to prevent it. There is nothing I can do for Poland either.” 12

9

Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshkov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev*

(Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996) 31.

10Zubok 49.

11Bruce L. Brager, *The Iron Curtain: The Cold War in Europe* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004) 32. Churchill was a realist, in October 1944, for example, Churchill and Stalin had come to the “percentages” agreement on how much influence each nation would have in the Balkans. The Big Three, at Yalta, eventually agreed that, until elections would be held, the Soviet-supported government of Poland would be the government, but with added non-Communist members. Before World War Two, Poland was basically a landlocked country between the main body of Germany and East Prussia. A small corridor gave Poland an outlet to the Balkan Sea. Recreated in 1945, Poland moved west, giving up territory to the Soviet Union in the East in exchange for German territory in the west. 13

At Yalta, Churchill and Roosevelt were dealing at Yalta with a man, Stalin, more complex than he is normally credited with being, combining balance of power, Communist ideology, a fair amount of personal paranoia, and the overwhelming desire not to allow any further invasions of Soviet territory. 14 He had shown himself in the past willing to use extreme brutality, but this

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was not the only method he had available. “ By 1945 one could find some rudiments of the revolutionary imperial paradigm in Stalin’s foreign policy, but he was fully prepared to shelve ideology, at least for a time, and adhere only to the concept of a balance of power.”<sup>15</sup> This meant that Stalin was willing to put aside ideology and focus only on gaining power.

The Yalta Conference issued a statement declaring that all countries had the right to choose their own form of government. Stalin made it clear what was his first priority. In discussing Poland’s post war future, Stalin at one point said, Mr. Churchill had said that for Great Britain the Polish question was one of honor and that he understood, but for the Russians it was a question both of honor and security. Throughout history, Poland had been the corridor for attack on Russia. . . . It was not only a question of honor for Russia, but one of life and death.

Roosevelt remained the most idealistic of the three leaders at Yalta.

He wanted a post war world based on mutual cooperation, not on power and spheres of influence. The last time he spoke to the American Congress, on March 1, 1945, Roosevelt summarized what he thought he had achieved at Yalta by stating that “ The Crimea Conference ought to spell the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power all the expedients that have been tried for centuries – and have always failed.”

After the conference, Churchill and Roosevelt were criticized for giving away too much to the Soviets. Political commentators and historians have also complained that the Soviets broke their word. Historian Isaac Deutscher

writes, “ It is useless to try to discover who made the first move to break the alliance. It is impossible to trace the first ‘ broken promise’ ... In this ‘ marriage of convenience’; the thought that a divorce was inevitable had been in the mind of each partner from the beginning“. 18 However the Soviet Army already had control of most of Eastern Europe, or would have this control before the war ended.

At Yalta, the negotiations went very much in Stalin’s favour, but this was because Roosevelt needed Russian help in the Pacific and was ready to agree to almost anything as long as Stalin agreed to go to war with Japan. Although the conference appeared successful, behind the scenes tension was growing, particularly about reparation and Poland. Two years later James F. Byrnes, who became American Secretary of State two months after Yalta, wrote about the conference that “ There is no doubt that the tide of Anglo-Soviet-American friendship had reached a new high. But President Roosevelt had barely returned to American soil when the tide began to ebb.”

## POTSDAM

The Potsdam Conference was the last of the wartime summits among the Big Three allied leaders. On July 17, 1945, the leaders met in Potsdam, Germany to finalize the principles of the post-war peace – Potsdam was the Versailles of World War II. Although still allies, much had changed since the three countries’ last major conference just five months before: the Yalta Conference on February 4-11, 1945. Perhaps most significantly, U. S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had died on April 12, taking with him the

relationships he had built with Churchill and Stalin and his ability to smooth over differences.

His vice president, Truman, was now president, and Potsdam was his first international conference. The only constant figure in the conference was Stalin, the leader of one of the most controversial nations in the world. Two capitalist nations allied with a communist – who already poses communication problems – and the change from Roosevelt to Truman between the conferences only added to the discrepancies between Yalta and Potsdam. Churchill, too, was soon replaced. After the Potsdam Conference was underway the results of the U. K.'s general election were announced on July 26, Clement Attlee replaced Churchill as prime minister.

At the conference, the leaders agreed on setting up the four “ zones of occupation” in Germany. The Nazi Party, government and laws were to be destroyed, and German education was to be controlled to completely eliminate Nazi and militarist doctrines and to make successful development of democratic ideas in peoples mind. They also decided to bring Nazi-war criminals to trial and to recognize the Polish Provisional Government of National Unity and hold free elections as soon as possible. This is significant because soon the Western-Allies recognized Poland as a communist dominated government. Russia was allowed to take reparations from the Soviet Zone, and also 10% of the industrial equipment of the western zones as reparations. America and Britain could take reparations from their zones if they wished.

The atmosphere at Potsdam was often bitter, presaging the imminent Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West<sup>20</sup>. In the months leading up to Potsdam, Stalin took an increasingly hard line on issues regarding Soviet control in Eastern Europe, provoking the new American president and the British prime minister to harden their own stance toward the Soviet leader. This is what Truman had to say about the Soviets, “ The Russians only understand one language – ‘ how many armies have you got?’ I’m tired of babying the Soviets.” <sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Joseph L. Noguee, “ Potsdam Conference“, Encyclopedia, 2004 2012

<sup>21</sup>Harry S. Truman, “ Letter to James F. Byrnes“, BBC, 2012 2012

During World War II, Roosevelt followed a policy of “ the Grand Alliance” with the determination to get along with the Soviet Union. He was determined to follow this policy after the war and believed the United Nations, one of his pet projects, would maintain the postwar peace. This policy continued throughout the war although there is some evidence Roosevelt began to have some apprehensions at Yalta over Soviet policy in Poland and the other eastern European countries, but Roosevelt maintained he that could handle Stalin. With Roosevelt’s death in April 1945, Truman attempted to maintain Roosevelt’s policy in getting along with the Soviet Union. However, at the Potsdam Conference in July-August 1945, Truman was exposed to the high-demands of Stalin.

Soon after arriving at the conference Truman learned (on 21 July) that America had tested the first atomic bomb. It gave the Americans a huge military advantage over everyone else. It also meant that Truman didn’t

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need Stalin's help in Japan. Instead, Truman's main aim at the conference was to find out from Stalin what date the Russians intended to enter the war in the Pacific – something which (unlike Roosevelt) he did not want. “ On July 24 I casually mentioned to Stalin that we had a new weapon of unusual destructive force. The Russian Premier showed no special interest. All he said was he was glad to hear it and hoped we would make good use of it against the Japanese,” 22 was said by Truman to Stalin.

Truman actually never told the Soviets what their `new weapon` was and when, a week after the Potsdam conference ended, the atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and this further added to the Soviet distrust of United States. This is important because after learning about the atomic bombs, Truman's attitude at the conference became more aggressive and developed an attitude of confrontation. Stalin saw the dropping of the bomb as directed more at Russia than Japan. Many historians believe that Truman caused the Cold War when he dropped the bomb.

After the Potsdam conference ended and the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, Stalin had lost any trust in the west. They became under the impression that the west preparing to attack them and felt threatened.

## CONCLUSION

Yalta and Potsdam were two major peace conferences in World War II which were suppose to ensure no future war. They were both intended to achieve a state of post-war peace, and yet somehow changed into a cold war. If anything the conferences achieved a great heightening of tension among the leaders and further widened the gap between the capitalist west and

communist Soviet. During World War II, a very unusual alliance was made between America, Britain and the Soviet Union. Usually not on the friendliest terms, the Americans and the Russians saw each other as allies to defeat their common enemy – Nazi Germany. But as soon as war ended, the difference amongst the Big Three started to become noticeable. Stalin who wanted to ensure the safety of the Soviet territory and wanted more power set his post-world war demands accordingly. This did not sit well with the Americans and the British.

Very soon the politicians in Moscow started to believe that United States had no intentions of supporting the USSR any more than they had to. The American vision of the postwar world conflicted with the goals of Stalin, who was also motivated to shape postwar Europe and with Truman vastly different approach towards the Soviet that Roosevelt, prompted the two powers to become hostile towards each other. These two conferences were what set the standards for life after World War II, and were the preludes to the events of the Cold War.

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