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POTSDAM AND ITS LEGENDS

Robert Cecil

N popular estimation Potsdam is not tainted with the obloquy attaching to the Yalta conference, which took place some five months earlier. Yalta, in the eyes of some critics on both sides of the Atlantic, has associations with betrayal and dishonour similar to those evoked by the 1938 Munich agreement; Potsdam is regarded as no more than another unsuccessful East-West confrontation.

It is not, at first sight, apparent why this should be so. It is true that Yalta marked a decisive stage in the process by which Europe east of a line drawn from the Baltic to the Adriatic passed into the Communist sphere. On the other hand, it was clear to some observers then—and must now be clear to nearly all—that, as J. L. Snell puts it, 'the power vacuum in Eastern Europe was already being filled by the Red Army '.1 It would have been unthinkable for the Western Powers to have turned against their Soviet ally before the war in Europe was ended, to say nothing of the war in the Far East. However, if we conclude that Eastern Europe was lost at Yalta, we need not also assume that at Potsdam the unity of Germany could no longer be saved. The partial loss of Germany was, indeed, far more serious than that of Eastern Europe, since Germany was the only country capable of acting as a barrier to Soviet expansion westward. With the unity of Germany was lost the chance to re-establish the balance of power in Europe; instead there is East-West polarity, based on the partition of Germany. In default of European security, we have only the modalities of co-existence.

* * *

The reasons why the verdict on Yalta has been harsher than on Potsdam are to be found in Washington and Paris. Even before his death, President Roosevelt had been the object of a persistent vendetta on the part of right-wing Republicans, who were out to destroy the Roosevelt myth, described as follows by Professor W. H. McNeill: 'The myth was an optimistic one. Roosevelt repeatedly said, and apparently fully believed, that when once victory had been won . . . an era of international peace, prosperity, freedom and justice could be inaugurated, and surely would be, if men of goodwill strove manfully to that end'. 2 Striving

J. L. Snell, Dilemma over Germany (New Orleans: Hauser, 1959), p. 157.
 W. H. McNeill, Survey of International Affairs (1941-46)—America, Britain and Russia (London: Oxford University Press for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1953), p. 760.

manfully to keep on good terms with Stalin began, as soon as the cold war got under way, to look very like appeasement. Harry Hopkins had said after the Yalta conference, 'We really believed in our hearts that this was the dawn of a new day '.3 When the new day failed to dawn, the American public began to look around for scapegoats; it was scarcely possible to accuse Roosevelt of treason, but it was possible to achieve much the same object by accusing Alger Hiss, who had been a member of the Yalta delegation. Much of the hysteria that characterised the cold war, when it was better to be dead than Red, and Dulles equated neutrality with immorality, has evaporated; but the miasma surrounding Yalta remains.

General de Gaulle's motives for execrating the memory of Yalta are different and in some ways simpler: he was not there. Although he was also absent from Potsdam, this seems to rankle less. At Potsdam, he tells us in his War Memoirs, 'it was a matter of concluding with Stalin what had been proposed at Teheran and decided at Yalta in regard to Germany, Poland, Central Europe and the Balkans. The Americans and British hoped to recover in practice what they had conceded in principle...'. Yalta may, indeed, have decided the fate of Eastern Europe; but the fate of Germany remained open. I shall examine later what degree of responsibility for the end result can be assigned to the General. For his part, he has continued to wash his hands in public. According to the statement made at his press conference in September 1968, even the recent Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia can be traced back to Yalta.

If, with apologies to General de Gaulle and the late Senator Joseph McCarthy, one may nevertheless consider Yalta as having done little more than register the conclusions from certain unpalatable facts, the question arises whether the same should not be said about Potsdam. In respect of the frontier with Poland, this would probably be a fair judgment. Sir Winston Churchill in the final pages of Triumph and Tragedy has tried to convince us that, on the contrary, but for his rude rejection by the electorate, he might yet have accomplished something better. He refers to the 'ideas and plans I had in view, namely, to have a showdown at the end of the Conference and, if necessary, to have a public break rather than allow anything beyond the Oder and the Eastern Neisse to be ceded to Poland '.5 It is magnificent, but it is not history. Poland was already in occupation of Germany east of the Oder and Western Neisse; what was done at Potsdam was to register this fact and to defer legal recognition of it until a peace settlement. An open break

don: Cassell paperback. 1964), p. 303.

³ R. E. Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins (New York: Harper. 1948), p. 870.
⁴ Charles de Gaulle, War Memoirs—Vol. 3, Salvation (1944-46) (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 1960), p. 199.

Winston S. Churchill, The Second World War-Vol. 6, Triumph and Tragedy (Lon-

would have changed nothing; it would merely have accelerated the onrush of the cold war. No one knew better than Churchill that the only remaining bargaining counters had been given away before the Western Powers ever got to the conference table; Truman and Eisenhower had decided to withdraw American troops from their advanced positions deep in the Russian Occupied Zone and in Czechoslovakia. Even recognition of the new Polish government—a card of some importance at a time when the UN was being constituted—had been discarded ten days before the conference began.

There is also a psychological reason which makes it unlikely that Churchill, even if he had been re-elected, would have pushed his opposition to Stalin to the limit. In the summer of 1945 a dangerous gap, as is only too likely to occur in a democracy, had opened between authoritative political judgment and public opinion, which was far from seeing in what direction events were moving, or at what speed. The same was true in the United States. Mr. Byrnes has written, 'If one can recall the attitude of the people of the U.S. toward the Soviet in the days immediately following the German surrender, he will agree that . . . the U.S.S.R. then had in the U.S. a deposit of goodwill, as great, if not greater, than that of any other country'.6 President Truman, who by no means always agreed with his Secretary of State, backed his judgment on this. It was not until January 1946 that he told Byrnes in his own expressive way, 'I'm tired of babying the Soviets'. The chasm between official and public opinion could have been narrowed by a series of speeches on the lines of that delivered in March 1946 at Fulton, Missouri, by Churchill; but to have made such speeches in England in the summer of 1945 would not only have resulted in an even more resounding victory for the Labour Party, but would have precipitated the intensification of East-West friction that the Western Powers hoped to avoid. The great experiment of trying to live with the Russians had to be made.

Besides achieving nothing to the purpose, an open break between Churchill and Stalin in the summer of 1945 would very probably have impaired—at least temporarily—the fundament on which the former hoped that the post-war world would be constructed, namely on a continuing Anglo-American alliance, as firm in peace as it had been in war. Churchill, unlike Roosevelt and Hull, placed no exaggerated hopes on the UN; it was the solidarity of the Anglo-Saxons that counted. Today it does not look as if he had much to worry about; we have become accustomed to America's predominant role in resisting the menace implicit in the preponderance of Soviet power. It is easy to forget that

⁶ James F. Byrnes, Speaking Frankly (London: Heinemann. 1947), p. 71.

⁷ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs-Vol. 1, Year of Decisions* (New York: Doubleday. 1955), p. 552.

in the war-time 'Big Three' conferences Roosevelt's position was, as often as not, mid-way between Britain and Russia. It was not only Soviet intransigence that put the 'Roosevelt myth' at risk; nor did suspicion of the 'unreconstructed' British die with the President in April 1945. In May, James Forrestal recorded a conversation with Harry Hopkins, shortly before the latter's departure to see Stalin, in which Hopkins expressed the view that, 'it was of vital importance that we not be manoeuvred into a position where Great Britain had us lined up with them as a bloc against Russia to implement England's European policy'.8

Truman learnt fast, but in the period immediately before Potsdam he was still very much under Roosevelt's influence. He opposed a preliminary meeting with Churchill on the ground that Stalin would regard this as 'ganging up on him', and he further tried Churchill's patience by sending to see him the egregious Joseph E. Davies to expound American policy and to explain why Truman thought a preliminary meeting with Stalin would be more profitable. Truman explains in his memoirs that it would have been a social meeting and it was his 'intent to discuss no business with either him or with Stalin separately'.9 Churchill succeeded in dissuading Truman, who found out at Potsdam how difficult it was to stop Soviet leaders from talking business, if they wanted to. Truman recounts how on July 29, after Churchill had left the conference, Molotov came to see Byrnes and himself to explain that Stalin had a cold and would not be able to attend the scheduled plenary meeting; but conversation did not stop there, and before long Byrnes had tried out on Molotov his proposal that the U.S.S.R. should receive as reparations 25 per cent. 'of the total equipment considered available from the Ruhr'. Truman adds, 'We informed the British of the talk when Prime Minister Attlee, Mr. Bevin and Sir Alexander Cadogan called . . . later that day '.10 Nonetheless, it was unusual to have made in a two-sided conversation outside the Three-Power conference a radical proposal concerning one of the most contentious issues, especially as the Ruhr was located in the British zone of occupation.

* * *

Reparations was, indeed, one of the two rocks on which at Potsdam the frail craft of German unity was wrecked; the other, which I shall deal with shortly, was the exclusion of France from the conference. Although the discussion of reparations at Yalta had dissatisfied Stalin, he must have continued to believe that the Western Powers would not

⁸ Forrestal Diaries (New York: Viking. 1951), 20.v.45.

⁹ Truman, op. cit., p. 262.

¹⁰ Truman, op. cit., p. 402.

indefinitely resist his demand for something approaching 50 per cent. of the total. American cancellation of Lend-Lease and failure to reply to the Soviet enquiry about a post-war loan no doubt hardened his determination. In any case, his decision in May to abandon his earlier insistence on dismemberment of Germany must have been predicated largely on his hope of receiving reparations from the whole of Germany, and of sharing in Four-Power control of the Ruhr. Here, again, the July 'Big Three' meeting disappointed him, without finally demolishing his expectations. The British and Americans refused to discuss control of the Ruhr on the ground that the French were not present. They also refused to agree to a specific amount of reparations, such as Stalin had requested, and eventually arrived at a percentage formula based on that put by Byrnes to Molotov on July 29. Of the surplus industrial equipment of the Western zones 25 per cent. was to be transferred to the U.S.S.R., of which 15 per cent. was to be bartered against food and raw materials from the Russian zone. The balance of 10 per cent. was intended to meet the Soviet demand for 50 per cent. of the whole, since it was assumed that 40 per cent. of German industrial equipment was already located in the Russian zone.

There were two jokers in this pack which, as can be seen in retrospect, were fatal to German unity. The first was the provision that each occupying Power would take its reparations (or in the Soviet case the bulk of its reparations) from its own zone. The second was that the percentages were meaningless until the Four-Power Allied Control Council had decided what was to be the permitted level of German industry and therefore how much surplus plant was available for delivery as reparations. It took until March 1946 for the Control Council to make up its mind; the cold war was by that date casting its long shadow, and in May General Clay suspended delivery of reparations from the U.S. zone in despair at the refusal of the Russians to allow westward movement of the produce of their zone, or to give any account of eastward removals. For neither the Russians nor the French had awaited the decision of the Control Council before beginning to take reparations from their zones. Indeed, the Russians had begun to remove 'war booty' long before the Potsdam conference met.

Disparity in the economic treatment of the different zones of occupation was inherent in the Potsdam decision on reparations. It was aggravated, but not caused, by the subsequent refusal of the Russians and French to permit inter-zonal movement of Germans and of goods. It is fruitless to speculate whether unity could have been maintained if the Western Powers had agreed to a specific figure for reparations, instead of percentages of an indeterminate whole, and if the Americans had continued Lend-Lease to the U.S.S.R. and had granted the large, low-

interest loan recommended by Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau. All that can be said with some assurance is that, in the long run, the bill paid by the American tax payer would have been less than the cost of the European Recovery Programme, not to mention that of maintaining troops in Germany for a quarter of a century. But, as Truman wrote in his memoirs, 'There was one pitfall I intended to avoid. We did not intend to pay . . . the reparations bill for Europe'. American insistence on this point and Soviet persistence in demanding the extravagant amount of \$10 billion made the division of Germany inevitable.

* * *

These flaws in the Potsdam agreement did not become immediately apparent. On the other side of the ledger were provisions to encourage advocates of German unity; it was agreed to treat Germany as 'a single economic unit' and to set up 'certain essential central German administrative departments . . . particularly in the fields of finance, transport, communications, foreign trade and industry '.12 It was for the Allied Control Council to put flesh on these dry bones; but it was in the Control Council that de Gaulle was able to avenge his exclusion from Yalta and Potsdam. The French consistently vetoed all proposals designed to treat Germany as one unit, political or economic, and, in particular, they refused to agree to the establishment of central departments, without which uniform administration could not have been achieved. Stalin seems to have had a premonition of this, when he told Churchill and Roosevelt at Yalta that de Gaulle should be content with the grant of a French occupation zone and should not be given equal authority in the Allied Control Council. But, in Hopkins' words, 'Winston and Anthony fought like tigers for France'. 13 Their victory was short-lived. It is conceivable that, if he had been at Potsdam, de Gaulle could have been brought, by coercion of conciliation, to agree to economic unity in some form. A firm offer of the Saar, for example, might have tempted him. Nor were means of coercion lacking; that was certainly the Soviet view. General Clay recounts how, 'On several occasions my Soviet colleague suggested to me that France was receiving too much financial assistance from the U.S. to maintain such strong opposition unless it was with our acquiescence '.14 French intransigence thus had the further ill effect of contributing to worsening relations between the Americans and the Russians, who mistakenly believed they knew a satellite when they saw one.

¹¹ Truman, op. cit., p. 323.

¹² Selected Documents on Germany (London: H.M.S.O. Cmnd. 1552 of 1961), p. 52.

¹³ Sherwood, op. cit., p. 858.

¹⁴ L. D. Clay, Decision in Germany (London: Heinemann. 1950), p. 39.

No less an authority than Charles Bohlen is credited by Clay with the comment that 'the French saved us by their early veto actions'. There is, of course, no doubt that, if central administrative departments had been set up in Berlin in 1945, as envisaged by the Potsdam agreement, the Russians would have exploited them in their attempt to create a Communist Germany. It does not follow, however, that they would have succeeded. All that can be said with certainty is that, without such departments, unity could not in practice have been maintained, even if all four Powers had wished it. That France did not wish it was made so plain in French reservations immediately after the conference that some legal authorities express doubt whether France can be regarded as a party to the agreement; but to have renounced it in toto might have brought into question the propriety of acceptance by France of her zone of occupation. In practice, the French took possession of their zone, whilst rejecting the basis on which the other three occupying Powers had agreed—at least on paper—to operate. In his War Memoirs de Gaulle observes that at Potsdam 'Stalin had agreed to no compromises of any kind '.16 He fails to add that in the Allied Control Council France also declined to compromise, with results that extinguished the last faint hope of German unity, even before the full blast of the cold war had developed. This defiant policy continued for some time after de Gaulle's retirement from the scene in January 1946.

* * *

Potsdam, like Yalta, soon began to acquire its aura of legend. The Western legend gradually took the form of ignoring early French intransigence and concentrating on the Soviet refusal to pool the resources of their zone, and adopt a common export-import policy. It is of some interest to follow the development of this line as the West, including France, drew closer together in the blizzards of the cold war. On May 15, 1947, Mr. Bevin was prepared to be frank with the House of Commons: 'We agreed at Potsdam to central administrations in certain fields, and we have been anxious to operate this agreement ever since. . . . France, who was not present at Potsdam, could not agree . . . '. 17 On June 30, 1948, with the European Recovery Programme under way and the blockade of Berlin beginning, this became: 'The Potsdam Agreement was reached on the assumption that there would be economic and political unity in Germany, but this was never operated by the Soviet Union'.18 By 1952 this negative assessment became a positive one on the lips of Anthony Eden, introducing the Bonn Conventions to the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁶ De Gaulle, op. cit., p. 200.

¹⁷ Selected Documents, op. cit., p. 85.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 110.

House: 'The Potsdam Agreement as a whole was never carried out. They (the Russians) made the economic unity of Germany impossible by their actions in the Eastern Zone'.19 Afterwards, public and official references to Potsdam in the West became rare; it was better to allow the legend to take over. Indeed, little remained of Potsdam on either side of the Iron Curtain, except the 'common responsibility for settlement of the German question and the reunification of Germany', as it was expressed in the directive of the four Heads of Government to their Foreign Ministers after the 1955 Summit Conference at Geneva.²⁰

Legends soon acquired currency on the Soviet side also. Some of these have been examined in a recent book by Jens Hacker,²¹ which is particularly useful in that it provides, in German, examples of Soviet, East German and, in certain instances, Polish comment. One of the earliest and most persistent legends east of the Elbe was to the effect that the Polish-German frontier had been finally determined at Potsdam; a statement to this effect found its way into the preamble of the 1950 Treaty between Poland and the German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.). That the Poles have never really believed it is illustrated by the fact that they are currently pursuing Oder-Neisse talks with Bonn. Another myth was that Potsdam had authorised collection of reparations from current German production. At some point during 1946 it was realised in the Kremlin that the occupation of Germany would be a long one, and that it was in any case more efficient to produce in Germany goods for reparations, instead of dismantling plant in the hope of being able to re-erect it and operate it in the U.S.S.R. The new policy, sometimes associated with Mikoyan as Minister of Foreign Trade, found expression in Molotov's demand at the Paris Council of Foreign Ministers in May 1946 that the permitted level of German industry should be raised. More tangibly, it led in October 1946 to the establishment in the Russian Zone of Soviet-German joint companies (SAG). Reparations continued to be exacted at least until the end of 1953, when the burden was officially lifted. Estimates of the value of deliveries up to that date vary widely. Ulbricht, for one, has declared himself in no doubt that the total includes deliveries on which the Western zones defaulted; he therefore regards the G.D.R. as having footed the bill for all Germany, and as having a corresponding claim against the Federal German Republic. This rich vein of controversy will presumably be exploited at some appropriate time in the future.

At Geneva in 1955, as we have seen, Khrushchev recommitted himself to the principle of Four-Power settlement of the German question;

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 165.

 ²⁰ Ibid., p. 221.
 21 Jens Hacker, Sowjetunion und DDR zum Potsdamer Abkommen. (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik. 1969. 176 pp. Bibliog. Index. DM 26.)

but in subsequent years he moved further and further away from the reality of the Potsdam agreement, whilst frequently invoking it. He began to separate the signature of a peace treaty, which he continued to regard as a Four-Power responsibility, from reunification, which had become, in his view, a matter for the two Germanies. It is clear, however, that at Potsdam none of the Powers envisaged signing treaties with two German states; on the contrary, the agreement foresaw acceptance of the final treaty by a single German 'when a Government adequate for the purpose is established'.22 Undeterred by this discrepancy, Khrushchev proceeded to base himself on the Potsdam agreement in confronting the West with the most serious German crisis since the end of the Berlin blockade. In a major speech on November 10, 1958, he accused the Western Powers of having violated practically every clause of the agreement and concluded: 'What then is left of the Potsdam agreement? One thing, in effect: the so-called Four-Power status of Berlin'. 23 Later that month, in Notes to the Western allies, he denounced the agreements of 1944 and 1945, on which occupation of the Berlin sectors was founded, and threatened to confer upon the G.D.R. the obligations inherited under these agreements unless within six months the Four Powers could reach a solution of the Berlin question on his terms. To follow the Berlin dispute further would lead us too far from the Potsdam agreement; it is enough to point out that it makes no mention of Berlin, except as the seat of the Allied Control Council and other Four-Power organs.

* * *

Setting legend aside, what has survived of the Potsdam agreement, which purported to lay down guide-lines for the administration of Germany and, through the Council of Foreign Ministers, for the conclusion of a treaty of peace? The answer is: virtually nothing, except certain limitations on the sovereignty of the German states set up on either side of the border between them. The Western Powers, in ending their occupation régime in the Federal German Republic, reserved their 'rights and responsibilities' in relation to 'the reunification of Germany and a peace settlement'. In addition, the Federal Republic has solemnly undertaken not to seek by force the reunification of Germany or the alteration of its de facto frontiers. On the G.D.R. side there is also a restraining hand. In spite of Khrushchev's threats, when he finally signed a treaty with the G.D.R. in 1964, he explicitly reserved Soviet rights under the Potsdam agreement. Otherwise there remains only the search for European security, to which the 1945 agreement found no answer. But the search has, since 1945, changed significantly, as compared with

²² Selected Documents, op. cit., p. 49.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

that which occupied the years 1919 to 1939. For in 1945, as Ludwig Dehio has pointed out, 'Events in Europe ceased to be the centre of world events: on the contrary, the latter began to determine the former'.²⁴ The threat to Europe lies along the Mekong and the Suez Canal as much as on the Elbe.

One episode at Potsdam, which found no place in the agreement, nonetheless deserves to be mentioned here, if only for its relevance to the polarisation of the world since 1945. Shortly after Truman's arrival there he learned of the successful explosion in New Mexico of the first atomic bomb. This foreshadowed, among many other things, a swift end to the war in the Far East, so relieving Truman of the need to bargain for Soviet participation, which had weighed on Roosevelt at Yalta. Independent confirmation that the Japanese were in any case close to collapse was forthcoming during the conference from Stalin, who had been asked by the Japanese Ambassador in Moscow if he would mediate. This information, already available to Truman and Churchill from another source, did not influence their decision to use the new weapon, with all its terrifying power, in order to shorten the war by a few weeks. Meanwhile they issued from Potsdam a demand for the immediate and unconditional surrender of the Japanese armed forces.

The imminent unleashing of the atom bomb raised in an acute form the question what should be said about it to the Soviet ally. The question had, of course, been raised before, when an answer was less urgent. Nils Bohr, for example, had sought meetings with Churchill and Roosevelt in 1944 in the hope of persuading them that agreement with Stalin on postwar co-operation would remove suspicion. As he put it in his memorandum, '. . . an initiative, aiming at forestalling a fateful competition, should serve to uproot any cause of distrust between the powers on whose harmonious collaboration the fate of coming generations will depend '.25 It should not, of course, be assumed that a concession to Stalin on this point—or indeed on any other—would necessarily have altered the sorry course of East-West relations after the war. Nonetheless, the clear intention of the Western Powers in 1945 to retain their monopoly of this new instrument of mass destruction became known in the Kremlin at a time when it must have seemed to opaque Soviet minds that various forms of financial pressure (cancellation of Lend-Lease, delay on reparations and refusal of a dollar loan) were also being applied. In the event, the communication which Truman had braced himself to make seemed to fall flat. 'On July 24 I casually mentioned to Stalin that we had a new weapon of unusual destructive force. The Russian Premier showed no

L. Dehio, Germany and World Politics (London: Chatto & Windus. 1959), p. 128.
 R. Jungk, Brighter than 1000 Suns (London: Gollancz. 1958), Appendix A.

special interest.' ²⁶ There was no reason for Stalin to give his informant the satisfaction of showing any excitement; Klaus Fuchs had been keeping him *au fait* since February 1945 with all that was going on at Los Alamos.

The explosion over Hiroshima, four days after the end of the Potsdam conference, was the culmination of the final, technological phase of the war, which had also been marked by the V. 1 and V. 2 attacks on London. Political leaders did not yet realise it, but something very disturbing to them, both as statesmen and as human beings, had happened; technology, which they had thought of as their servant, had taken over. Great Power war had become useless for the purpose defined by Clausewitz, namely, the continuation of politics by other means; but it did not follow that war would not occur. Man, the would-be master, was in permanent and inescapable danger of becoming the victim of his own ruthless ingenuity. No one is better fitted than Albert Speer to write what may yet become an epitaph for the era of technology: 'The catastrophe of the war showed how sensitive is the system of modern civilisation built up over the centuries. We know now that we inhabit a building which is not proof against earthquakes. The complicated mechanism of the modern world can irreversibly destroy itself through the escalation of reciprocal impulsions of a negative kind. No exertion of human will could arrest this process if progressive automatisation should carry us a stage further in depersonalising man and depriving him in ever growing measure of responsibility for himself. During the decisive years of my life I was the servant of technology, dazzled by its potentialities. At the end there is left-mistrust.' 27 It is a word to the wise, which we would do well to ponder next time we watch a moonlanding, or listen to a Chinese satellite, emitting the shrill message: 'The East is Red'.

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²⁶ Truman, op. cit., p. 416.

²⁷ A. Speer, Erinnerungen (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag. 1969), p. 525.