

What was the impact of the Yalta and Potsdam conferences on the balance of power in Europe?

Introduction:

There are few diplomatic events in the twentieth century more impactful than the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. Understanding the nature, reasoning, and results of these meetings are key to viewing not just the end of the Second World War, but the creation of the new systems of superpower and Cold War dynamics. The main examples this essay will attempt to display have their roots in the Yalta conference, but as with everything discussed at that conference, were hammered out in the later Potsdam conference. The importance of both the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in the context of the Second World War and the Cold War is hard to understate: it was the last time a US president would visit the USSR for decades, and was the last time that the three most famous Allied leaders, Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Iosif Stalin, were united. After Yalta, Roosevelt died, Churchill failed to win reelection, and the resulting Potsdam conference differed in many ways. This assignment will attempt to cover the monumental decisions made at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, and examine the effects they had on creating the post-war order and the world that would come to be defined by the Cold War.

Poland:

When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, the British and French governments went to war over the infringement of Polish sovereignty by German forces. The spurring to war of the two great Western powers so soon after the Great War displayed their strong desire to protect Poland and her territorial integrity. However, the splitting of Poland between the German Reich and the Soviet Union, as stipulated in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, signed in August 1939, left the situation in an unexpected position. With most of Eastern Poland occupied by the Soviet Union until the German invasion in 1941, the Soviet government wanted recognition of its control of the land, and to determine the level of control that the Soviet Union would have over all of Eastern Europe. As Michael Dobbs notes in his work *Six Months in 1945*, "Poland was key to the future of the entire region" (Dobbs 2013, Pg. 57), and the levels of control that the USSR would be entitled to in the rest of Eastern Europe would be defined by their liberty in Poland. As the situation at the time of the Yalta conference stood, the two Polish governments, the government in exile which had been based in London since the fall of Poland in 1939, and the Lublin government, based out of the Soviet controlled city of Lublin, were totally opposed to one another. Neither recognised the sovereignty of the other, and both claimed control over the entire population of Poland, as well as the nation itself (Dobbs 2013). These two opposing governments, both acting in their own interests, were supported by the Western Allies, Britain, the USA and the Allies, whereas the Lublin government was supported by the USSR. Thus, the best way for the Soviet

government to ensure its control over Poland would be to have the Western Allies recognise the Lublin government, a much more malleable and cooperative force when compared with the London government, who had begun to view "Russia - not Germany - as their principal enemy" (Dobbs 2013, Pg. 62), and with the popular support of the government which had made no deals with the Nazis, as the USSR had, the people were more inclined to support the London government.

Thus, one of the strongest desires of the Soviet Union headed into the Yalta conference was the recognition of the Lublin government as the legitimate government of Poland, and the discrediting of the London government in the eyes of the Western powers. There were a great many practical reasons for this, but as previously alluded to, ensuring control of Poland would provide the best environment towards controlling all of Eastern Europe. Poland was one of the only areas that the Allied powers had no real authority over, and was the one subject that Stalin was loath to compromise on. Other matters, such as the splitting of Germany, war reparations and spheres of influence in Eastern Europe after the end of the war, were much easier to negotiate on, as the Allied powers held greater sway in the regions being negotiated on. For example, the Allied control and influence in the affairs of Greece were afforded much greater levels of importance than in other countries, such as Poland, and as such Greece remained outside of the Eastern Bloc throughout the Cold War. The rest of Eastern Europe had been granted to the Soviet Union in the "percentages agreement", an informal agreement between Churchill and Stalin, signed in October of 1944 (Dobbs 2013). Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe was assured, also, by the vast numbers of Soviet troops in the region, a fact which could not be disputed by the Allied forces, despite their best efforts to break through the German lines in the West. At the time of the Yalta conference though, the situation was still volatile enough that Stalin would be forced to take breaks from the official proceedings to meet with his generals, and Churchill, in the palace assigned to him and his entourage, created his "map room", to ensure that he was up to date with the movements of all Allied forces in Europe, and could bargain accordingly. Despite his unwillingness to capitulate to a Soviet dominated Poland, as was expressed through his desire for a "strong, free, and independent Poland" (Dobbs 2013, Pg. 58), the failure of the Western powers to ensure this result left Poland as a Soviet satellite, and one of the most important members of the Eastern bloc throughout the rest of the Cold War.

The borders of Poland changed, just as the government of Poland changed. With Soviet demands for recognition of their control in Eastern Poland, as stipulated by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the desire for a weak Germany, Stalin pushed for the annexation of regions of Western Germany into Poland and the Soviet Union directly. This included land such as Silesia, which was a major source of coal, steel, iron and other resources for the German state since the time of the German Empire. All in attendance at the conference agreed that Poland should be compensated for the loss of land in the East with land in the West, but the concerns over the future

independence of the Polish government were more immediately pressing than the matters of borders, as was covered in the previous subject. Despite what most would assume about the Western powers at Yalta, especially with the explosive presence of Churchill and calm-headed Roosevelt, Poland was allowed to fall into the sphere of the Soviet Union, and the crackdowns on anti-Communist forces, including those in the Polish Home Army, were brutal. S. M. Plokhy notes in his work *Yalta: The Price of Peace* “the price they were forced to pay for the postwar peace was high not only in geopolitical terms but in moral and human ones” (Serhii Plokhy 2011, Pg. 403). The Home Army, the main resistance force in Poland throughout the Second World War, was opposed to both the USSR and the German Reich, but as the war drew to a close, as has been detailed before, began to view the Soviet Union as its main threat. One of its chief commanders, Leopold Okulicki, along with 15 others, was arrested and tried in the Trial of the 16, a successor trial to the previous Stalinist show trials of the 1930’s, targeted this time against those who had worked against the Soviet occupation of Poland. The Soviet Union had succeeded in showing that it would “permit no serious challenge to the Russian domination of Poland” (Dobbs 2013, Pg. 259).

Germany:

The matter of Germany was one almost entirely different to that of Poland. While Poland had been the trigger for the Second World War, Germany had been the aggressor. The actions of Germany in the Western European sphere, and especially in the Soviet Union, during the war had condemned the nation to harsh treatment. An almost total lack of the sympathy shown to the German cause in the wake of the Great War, which had lessened the effects of the Treaty of Versailles, had taken root in the minds of the delegates at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. Willingness to give Eastern Germany, including some of the most historically and economically important regions, to Poland and the Soviet Union. All of the former lands of Prussia, including the city of Königsberg, were removed from Germany, and with them, “the biggest single episode of organised ethnic cleansing” (Dobbs 2013, Pg. 64), outweighing the Holocaust by over double. This removal of ethnic Germans was meant to secure the area for the Polish and Soviet occupation, and to limit the scale of Prussian militarism and its influence over any future German state. Most of the German officer corps had been Prussian in origin, and the creation of the Prussian model of military organisation had been the basis for the Imperial German military and the Nazi military throughout the entire existence of both states. By removing the Prussian state as a concept, the militaristic traditions and tendencies would also be gone, and would, hopefully, allow for a more peaceful version of Germany to form in the wake of the Second World War.

As such, the territorial punishments on Germany were decided. Poland's border would move 200 miles to the West, providing the best physical example of the shifting balance of power in Europe. Germany was forced to give up the Silesian

lands, rich in coal and natural resources, along with the historical seat of the Kaisers in Königsberg, as well as any claim to the “Polish Corridor” which had sparked the Second World War in Europe. The biggest issue, in relation to Germany, was what to do with the rest of the nation. It was a general agreement that first the Great War, and then the Second World War, had been, partially and wholly respectively, the fault of Germany. As such, the nation had to suffer a real punishment, which amounted to the forced occupation of much of the country, and the denazification of the population, to remove the influence that the ideology had over the people, and allow for the reconstruction of a democratic, peaceful nation. The results of this decision would go on to define the internal and external policies of Germany to the modern day, with the economic disparity between East and West Germany, even after 3 decades of reunification, remaining massive (Gramlich 2019). The Western aligned West German, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Eastern aligned German Democratic Republic, being under different economic and political systems, bore witness to different degrees of economic and financial development. The effects that this had on the balance of power in Europe is extreme, with the economic strength of West Germany allowing for its participation in the creation of the EEC, and later the EU, as well as a lynchpin member of NATO. East Germany did enjoy its own economic development, but not to the extent of West Germany, and absolutely not in as impactful a way in terms of the balance of power.

Conclusion:

There is no denying, however, that the Soviet Union got what it wanted from the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, in regard to both Poland and Germany. A weaker Germany, split between and occupied by the Allied powers ensured that it would be decades until Germany could mount a serious threat against Russia again, and in that time, the Eastern Bloc would be built up and turned into a fortress against any potential future invasion by Germany. The relocation of Poland 200 miles to the West, and the acquisition of land integral to the German economy, especially in terms of coal, steel, iron and natural resource production, would ensure that Poland would be able to develop a much greater economy than before the Second World War. Russian gains, now recognised by the Western powers, in Eastern Poland would provide a much greater buffer zone in case of another invasion, and was a sign that the West would acknowledge Russian claims, if enough pressure was placed onto them. The effects on the balance of power in Europe are much harder to immediately ascertain however, but can be explored in the shifting of borders in Europe, as well as the economically powerful regions that nations acquired. According to the European Commission's report on the Polish state of Silesia, the region is both an “important mining and industrial hub” (Commission 2020, Pg. 2) and an “important urban centre”. While areas such as the Ruhr and the Rhineland became part of the Western aligned Federal Republic, the total breaking off of Silesia into Poland and the resulting lack of economic freedom in East Germany is very telling, as can be seen in the work of John Gramlich and the Pew Research Center.

On average, the East German population earns less, spends less, and has a much smaller amount of disposable income available to them. While factors following the reunification of Germany in the 1990's are as much in play as well, there is little evidence suggesting that the decisions made at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences had no effects on the outcome.

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