

Waging Peace; Churchill requested plans for a British-American attack on Russia code-named "Operation Unthinkable."

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Abstract

Michael Neiberg, a professor of strategy at the Army War College, tackles those questions in "Potsdam: The End of World War II and the Remaking of Europe" by tracing American policy from the moment when Roosevelt died. After the election he told the new vice president nothing about public affairs. [...] as Roosevelt's congestive heart failure worsened, he lacked the energy to forge a consensus among his feuding subordinates.

Full Text

The leaders of the Allied powers met three times during World War II, at Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam. The last conference stretched over 17 days in July and August 1945, longer than the first two put together. Harry Truman had replaced Franklin Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill was booted out of office by British voters in the middle of the proceedings. Of the original principals, only Joseph Stalin remained.

Although some observers consider Potsdam the opening salvo in the Cold War, the Russians and Americans got along tolerably well. The assembled statesmen had to address hot spots all over Europe, but three issues stood out. Would Stalin keep the promise he had made at Yalta to enter the war against Japan? Would Truman tolerate the Soviet dominance of Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe, as Roosevelt had intimated he would? And on what basis would the powers govern their respective zones in Germany and coordinate policies in the Allied Control Council? Michael Neiberg, a professor of strategy at the Army War College, tackles those questions in "Potsdam: The End of World War II and the Remaking of Europe" by tracing American policy from the moment when Roosevelt died. The story of Potsdam is more than a twice-told tale. Marc Trachtenberg and Wilson Miscamble, among other historians, have already exploited the American sources. But Mr. Neiberg adds some striking anecdotes (alas, not always accurate) to produce an easily digestible page-turner.

The confusion in American foreign policy on V-E day, when Germany surrendered, makes for high drama. Roosevelt knew enough medicine to realize in 1944 that he would never survive a fourth term. Nevertheless, in order to keep the Dixiecrat and Northern liberal wings of his party together, he passed over the obvious claimants to choose an obscure border-state senator with a good civil-rights record as his running mate. Roosevelt barely knew Truman. After the election he told the new vice president nothing about public affairs. Moreover, as Roosevelt's congestive heart failure worsened, he lacked the energy to forge a consensus among his feuding subordinates. When he died in April 1945, the State, War and Treasury departments had each formulated postwar plans, yet the government as a whole had agreed on none. Truman felt obliged to appear decisive but initially had no idea how to bring order out of chaos.

Like contenders for the soul of Faust, both accommodationists and proponents of a tougher stance toward Russia claimed to know what Roosevelt would have wanted. At first Truman inclined to heed Ambassador Averell Harriman and the State Department professionals who pushed for confrontation. The hard-liners fretted particularly about the post-liberation Polish regime, whose makeup the Yalta Protocol had left deliberately ambiguous. Churchill also harassed the novice president with daily thunderbolts, proposing that American troops take Prague and even Berlin and later that they not withdraw to predetermined zonal boundaries in the Reich. After one month in office, however, Truman reversed field. He fell increasingly under the sway of Joseph Davies, a Democratic Party rainmaker who had served as ambassador to Moscow in the 1930s and who often entertained Soviet bigwigs on his yacht. Ultimately, Truman decided to dispatch Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's fixer, to patch things up with Moscow and to send Davies to London to remind Churchill who called the tune.

Mr. Neiberg covers these subjects, although not with the thoroughness he might have had he cast a wider research net. Truman instructed Hopkins to assure Stalin that the U.S. had no interest in Eastern Europe except insofar as it bore upon world peace. Nevertheless, "Uncle Joe should make some sort of gesture" toward free elections, precisely as a "smart political boss" like Tom Pendergast of Kansas City would do. On this basis Hopkins restored good relations with Stalin. A coalition government of sorts took office in Warsaw.

Meanwhile, Davies raged at Churchill, wondering openly whether the British leader felt he had "bet on the wrong horse" by allying with the Kremlin instead of Hitler. Unbeknownst to Davies (and evidently even to Mr. Neiberg), Churchill had just directed his chiefs of staff to draw up contingency plans ("Operation Unthinkable") for a British-American attack on Russia, possibly enlisting reconstituted German divisions. Field Marshal Alan Brooke advised that, given the balance of forces, the operation was indeed unthinkable. This incident, kept secret for half a century, illustrates how close the exhausted prime minister had come to a nervous breakdown at war's end. By the time Churchill delivered his "iron curtain" speech in 1946, a revived Anglo-American alliance had reached calmer waters. At Potsdam, however, Truman cast himself as a mediator between Stalin and Churchill and declined to serve as cats-paw for the faltering British Empire.

By the time the Potsdam conference convened, some problems had solved themselves. Stalin eagerly prepared to enter the Far Eastern conflict, in order to regain the territory lost by his country in the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese war. Mindful of the heavy casualties that would result from invading Japan, President Truman nonetheless deemed Russian intervention desirable. As the conference began, the U.S. Army detonated the first atomic device in New Mexico. At this juncture, however, the atomic bomb did not greatly influence the balance of power. Churchill enthused that the West could "just blot out" Moscow or Kiev unless the Soviets came to heel. More sober analysts understood that employing the bomb as a diplomatic weapon presupposed the creation of a stockpile and a delivery system. Mr. Neiberg attributes to Stalin the assertion, following the Hiroshima bombing, that a third world war had become inevitable. That quotation is surely apocryphal. Elsewhere the Soviet dictator maintained realistically that boots on the ground mattered most.

Talk of dismembering Germany had in the meantime evaporated. How to restore coal production and transport facilities essential for the Continent's economic survival emerged as the salient European issue. Soviet forces had created a *fait accompli* in Poland, bolstering a sympathetic Warsaw government, extending the country's western boundary to the Oder and Western Neisse, and sending millions of ethnic Germans fleeing. The British expressed measured dismay at this unilateral land grab, but the Comintern apparatchiki who spoke for Poland at Potsdam

proved quite as chauvinistic as the exile grandees whom they replaced.

Secretary of State James Byrnes, the commanding presence of the conference, conjured an imaginative arrangement for governance of Germany. The American public was eager to wind down the country's European commitments; Truman and Byrnes wished above all to avoid funneling American supplies into Germany at one end while the Russians hauled off assets from the other. Hence Byrnes proposed a package deal to limit potential conflict. Each power would exercise predominance and take reparations from its own zone; the Western allies would deliver 10% of dismantled industrial equipment to the Soviet zone gratis and an additional 15% in return for food. Wrangles over subsidizing the German economy did much to exacerbate the Cold War, once it began in 1946-47. Still, for the moment, all subscribed to the theoretical principle of administering Germany as an economic whole.

Unfortunately, Mr. Neiberg overlooks recently released Russian documents, many available in translation. The Russians at Potsdam remain shadows on the wall. Mr. Neiberg rehearses the familiar Cold War dictum that Stalin came to Potsdam "not to make deals, but to settle scores." Yet it now appears that Stalin may not have intended to initially Sovietize the countries in Moscow's orbit but rather hoped to install multi-party systems, albeit with the Communist Party transmitting friendly guidance from above. The Soviet apparatus was far from monolithic, although few Westerners perceived this in real time. Some Moscow ideologues took a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary line; more practical officials sought to maximize the resources for domestic reconstruction, which in turn required tactical compromise abroad. Soviet decision-making proved almost as convoluted as the parallel process in the West. Kremlinologists would spend the next two generations trying to figure it out.

Mr. Schuker is a professor of history at the University of Virginia.

Corrections & Amplifications

The pre-World War II political boss Tom Pendergast was based in Kansas City, Mo. In an earlier version of this article he was mistakenly placed in St. Louis.

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Details

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