

■ Potsdam 1945

The conclusions of the Potsdam Conference had a fundamental impact on Polish-German relations post 1945. The Conference reached two decisions that were of vital importance for both nations: one concerning Poland's western border, the other on the displacement of the German population from areas east of the Odra (Oder) and Nysa Łużycka (Western Neisse) rivers. Another essential issue was that of the German reparations for Poland.

The third meeting of the Big Three took place during the last conference of the Grand Coalition's leaders. Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill met together during the two conferences before it (in Tehran in November/December 1943 and in Yalta in February 1945). Franklin D. Roosevelt, who passed away in April 1945, was replaced by Harry S. Truman who had until then served as Vice President. Great Britain was represented by Winston S. Churchill. Until the country's election results were announced, Churchill was accompanied by Socialist Labor Party leader Clement Attlee. As the new British Prime Minister, Attlee replaced Churchill in the second part of the Conference, on July 25, following the electoral defeat of the Conservatives.

The Conference turned out to be the longest meeting of the Big Three, lasting from July 17 to August 2, 1945, totaling 17 days of talks. The event comprised plenary sessions attended by the three heads of government, working meetings of foreign ministers and the meetings of subcommittees which sorted out a range of technical details. In addition, a number of bilateral meetings were held. Parallel talks also took place between members of the American and British staff.

Potsdam was a deliberate choice for the Conference's venue. At the heart of the deliberations among the three heads of government in the Cecilienhof Palace in Potsdam (today's museum) was the future of Germany. A great deal of attention was also given to the second World-War-II theater of operations, i.e. the Pacific zone. The USSR renewed its Yalta promise to join the war in the Far East no later than three months after the end of hostilities in Europe (and thus to ignore the Soviet-Japanese non-aggression pact of April 1941). In a declaration of July 26, the United States, Great Britain and China reiterated their expectation to have Japan surrender unconditionally (the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek accepted the document even though he did not attend the Conference). During the Conference, considerable tensions arose between the USSR and the Anglo-Saxons who rejected some Soviet demands (such as calls for recognition for the communist governments of Bulgaria and Romania, the Turkish Straits, and the former Italian colonies in North Africa).

Matters involving Poland again turned out to be among the most challenging to resolve. After - in Tehran - Stalin obtained the consent of the Anglo-Saxons to strip Poland of its



Eastern Borderlands, and - in Yalta - the withdrawal of recognition for the Polish authorities in exile, Potsdam saw the Soviet dictator become an advocate for placing the border of the new Polish state along the Odra-Nysa Łużycka. As envisioned at previous Conferences, Poland was to be compensated for the loss of territories in the East with acquisitions in the West at the expense of the defeated German Reich. The dispute centered on how far west the Polish-German border was to be shifted. Ultimately, Stalin prevailed in having his wishes granted.

The Conference established the Council of Foreign Affairs Ministers made up of five powers (including France and China) and tasked it with preparing peace treaties with the defeated states. It also formulated political and economic rules for the treatment of Germany in the initial period in which control was established over its territory.

After deliberations came to a close on August 2, the Conference announced its conclusions, signed by Stalin, Truman and Attlee. Its communiqué on that matter, which is often referred to as the Potsdam Agreement, stated that the German people would be punished for the crimes committed with their approval by the German regime, and that militarism and Nazism would be stamped out. One form of such punishment would be to have Germany pay reparations, although their specific amount was yet to be determined. It was also noted that the goal of the Allies was to enable Germany to abide by democratic principles and live in peace. Earlier plans to dissolve the German state were abandoned, although a temporary measure of preventing the formation of a central German government was put in place.

The Potsdam Agreement stated that in a future “peace settlement”, the northern part of East Prussia, including the City of Königsberg, would be incorporated into the USSR, but that, pending the final determination of the Polish-German frontier, the remaining territories of the former German Empire east of the Odra-Nysa Łużycka, together with the former free city of Gdańsk (Danzig), would be placed under the administration of the Polish State and would not be treated as part of the Soviet occupation zone. As it soon turned out, the wording “the final delimitation of the western frontier of Poland should await the peace settlement” had disastrous consequences for Poland. As is commonly known, the conference was never convened due to deteriorating relations between the USSR and the Western powers and growing Cold War tensions.

The other provision of the Potsdam Agreement of critical importance for Poland was the decision to resettle the German inhabitants of areas east of the Odra and Nysa Łużycka rivers to the occupied parts of Germany. Made with the involvement of the heads of governments of two democratic Western powers, the decision did not spark much opposition, which did not come as a surprise given the realities of 1945 and especially the talk of punishing the German people for the war crimes. President Roosevelt had already supported the idea of displacing the Germans. The Potsdam Agreement additionally called for Germans to be displaced from Czechoslovakia and Hungary, which actually did



happen. In any case, applying today's standards to the circumstances and decisions of 1945 is a glaringly ahistorical approach.

A third Potsdam provision granted Poland the right to reparations from Germany regardless of the placement of land east of the Odra and Nysa Łużycka under Polish administration. It was also agreed that Poland's reparation claims would be satisfied from the funding pool assigned to the Soviet Union. Unfortunately for Poland, it was the only country to receive reparations through the USSR: other smaller countries were paid from a pool assigned to the Western powers. Poland lost out on the deal as a Polish-Soviet agreement concluded in Moscow two weeks later tied the transfer of German reparations to Poland to Poland's supply of coal to the Soviet Union at a preferential price that was many times below the world market rate. While Poland was to receive 15 percent from the Soviet reparations fund, it was impossible to determine what amount that 15 percent was of.

However, the single most important provision for Poland was the stipulation that a part of the former Reich territory would be placed solely under the administration of the Polish state. As a result, the successive governments of the Federal Republic of Germany, which was established in 1949, were of the opinion that the issue of Poland's western border remained open and could only be resolved by the peace conference announced in the Potsdam communiqué and a peace treaty negotiated within its framework. Much political power in Germany was wielded by the country's expellees and refugees and their organizations, the so-called Landsmanschaften. By and large, West German political parties and all Germans unanimously declined to recognize the Odra-Nysa Łużycka border. Their position did not change until the 1960s (and the adoption of the so-called new Ostpolitik pursued by social democrats and liberals). Revisionist sentiments remained very much alive in West Germany well into the 1980s. Speeches contesting the location of the border were delivered by Christian Democrat ministers in Helmut Kohl's administration. Even as late as the autumn of 1989, Kohl raised the need for a peace treaty. It was not until 1990 that he changed his position on the matter for fear of having reparations and compensations placed back on the table.

On the other hand, Poland was of the opinion that undermining the Potsdam Agreement was not an option as a possible peace conference would only formally recognize the frontier. In Poland's view, the fact that no subsequent modifications of the Odra and Nysa Łużycka frontier was intended was confirmed by the Big Three in the summer of 1945 by their decision to evict the German dwellers of these territories. However, the matter was even more complex, as noted by James Byrnes in his famous speech in Stuttgart on September 6, 1946. This US Secretary of State unexpectedly announced that the land east of the Odra and Nysa Łużycka had not been given to Poland definitively and that it was not at all certain that the Western powers would support Poland's position at the peace conference.



The international legal doctrine of West Germany, which questioned the Potsdam arrangements, was modified by the Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland concerning the basis for normalizing their mutual relations, signed on December 7, 1970, which spoke of the inviolability of Poland's western frontier. However, the provisions of this treaty were not to be binding upon the reunified Germany. As a result, the problem of the final recognition of this border became the main point of contention in relations between Warsaw and Bonn during the negotiation of the external conditions of German reunification in 1990. The row was ultimately resolved by the Polish-German Treaty on the confirmation of the frontier between them, signed on November 14, 1990, a few weeks ahead of the reunification of Germany.

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