

The Potsdam Conference

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The Potsdam Conference

The last of the Allied conferences took place from 17 July to 2 August 1945 in Potsdam, near Berlin. Six months earlier, in the Crimea, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin had laid the preparations for the post-war period, but the promises made in Yalta were unable to stand up to the balance of power on the ground. The climate had changed significantly in the intervening period: Germany had surrendered on 8 May 1945 and the war in Europe had come to an end. Japan stubbornly resisted US bomb attacks but the United States had a final trump card: on 16 July, the first atomic bomb test explosion took place in the desert in New Mexico. At the Potsdam Conference, Harry Truman replaced Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had died on 12 April 1945, and Clement Attlee took over as head of the British delegation after Winston Churchill's defeat in the general elections of 26 July. Only Joseph Stalin was personally present at all the Allied conferences.

The atmosphere was much more tense than at Yalta. A few weeks before the surrender of the Reich, the Red Army had quickly occupied the eastern part of Germany, part of Austria and all of Central Europe. Stalin, aware of this territorial advantage, took the opportunity to install Communist governments in the countries liberated by the Soviets. With the Western powers protesting at their lack of control over the elections held in the countries occupied by the Red Army, Stalin completely redrew the map of Eastern Europe. Pending the conclusion of peace treaties, the British and Americans provisionally accepted the Soviet annexations and the new borders set at the Oder-Neisse line. The Potsdam Agreements also endorsed vast movements of population.

The three Heads of State did nonetheless agree on the practical arrangements for Germany's complete disarmament, the abolition of the National Socialist Party, the trial of war criminals and the amount that should be paid in reparations. Negotiations also confirmed the need to dismantle German industry and the sequestration of the powerful *Konzerns*, which were to be broken up into smaller independent companies. Previous agreements on the occupation regimes for Germany and Austria were confirmed.

At Potsdam, the three Great Powers were divided by their increasingly contradictory viewpoints. The overriding aim was no longer to unite to defeat Nazism, but rather to prepare for the post-war era and to divide up the 'spoils'. Just a few months after the Yalta communiqué that had promised so much, deep divisions were already beginning to form between the West and the Soviets.