

minute efforts to avoid divorce. After Potsdam, it was back to business as usual and back to the cold war.

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Geoffrey Roberts

Antipodes or Twins? The Myths of Yalta and Potsdam

Introduction

The Yalta and Potsdam conferences were milestones in the development of the wartime alliance between Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. Together with the Tehran summit of 1943, the two meetings symbolised the political and military unity that had defeated Hitler. At Yalta, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin declared their commitment to a peacetime grand alliance, as did Attlee, Stalin and Truman at Potsdam¹. Important decisions were taken about the conduct of the war and about the postwar world. Both conferences were huge public relations successes and Soviet-Western unity at both popular and elite level seemed assured.

The importance of Yalta and Potsdam summits should not be exaggerated. Symbolism aside, the two conferences were no more than moderately successful summits. Many of the tough choices and difficult decisions lay ahead, while the foundations of the projected postwar alliance had been laid by antecedent tripartite meetings. The idea of a peacetime grand alliance was formulated at the Moscow Foreign Ministers conference of October 1943 and was reaffirmed a few weeks later at the Tehran summit of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. The Yalta decision to establish the United Nations had been agreed in principle at the Moscow conference, while the practical details were hammered out at the Dumbarton Oaks conference in summer 1944. The agreement reached at Yalta on Soviet entry into the Far Eastern war after the defeat of Nazi Germany had been prefigured in many previous Soviet-American discussions. The same was broadly true of the Declaration on Liberated Europe, which reaffirmed numerous public and

¹ The "Grand Alliance" is a retrospective term that derives from Winston Churchill's multi-volume history of the Second World War published in the late 1940s and early 1950s. During the war the Soviets referred to the "anti-Hitler coalition", the British to "the allies" and the Americans to the "United Nations".

private commitments by the Big Three to restore an independent, democratic Europe of sovereign states.

One innovation of Yalta was the veto system for the UN Security Council, adopted in response to Stalin's insistence that great power collaboration should be based on the principle of unanimity. Important, too, was the formula devised to resolve the inter-allied dispute about the composition of the postwar Polish government, namely the reorganisation of the pro-Soviet government which controlled liberated Poland. There was also explicit recognition that the 'Curzon line' would demarcate Poland's border with the Soviet Union and that its territorial losses in the east would be compensated by transfers of German territory in the west.

At Yalta the principle of German reparations was agreed, as was a provisional figure of \$20 billion, with half going to the Soviet Union. But the mechanism of payment was not determined until Potsdam when it was decided the Soviets would receive the bulk of their reparations from the resources in the own zone of occupation.

The main theme at Tehran had been the coordination of military action against Germany while at Yalta the three leaders' talks were dominated by general perspectives on the postwar world. Potsdam, like the 1943 Moscow conference, focussed on the resolution of specific issues: the occupation of Germany; the procedure for negotiating postwar peace treaties; the revision of the Montreux Convention on access to the Black Sea; the formation of territorial trusteeships to govern Italy's former colonies; and the disposal of the German fleet. The most important discussions at Potsdam were about the allied occupation of Germany but many of the decisions taken were based on the detailed work during the war of the European Advisory Commission. Highly important to future Soviet-Western relations was the agreement to establish the Council of the Foreign Ministers (CFM) of Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States (with France and China as partial participants) to negotiate the postwar peace treaties for enemy states. Much of the postwar bickering about the postwar peace settlement took place at the CFM.²

2 In English the Soviet records of the three wartime summits may be found in *Conferences 1969*. This publication does not contain the reports of Stalin's bilateral meetings with Churchill and Roosevelt and its stenographic record of the trilateral discussions is deficient in a number of respects. Roberts 2007, pp. 6–40.

These modest achievements notwithstanding, in historical memory the meetings at Yalta and Potsdam have assumed importance of mythical, protean proportions.

The Yalta Myths

Among the more extravagant of the historical myths about the Yalta conference is Zbigniew Brzezinski's judgement in 1984 that the summit remained "of great geopolitical significance because it symbolises the unfinished struggle for the future of Europe". What Yalta showed, said Brzezinski, was Russia's enduring ambition to dominate Europe and to expel the United States from the continent³. Brzezinski, who was Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, was writing at the time of President Ronald Reagan's revival of the cold war in the early 1980s. A similar theme was evident in commentary on the 70th anniversary of Yalta in the February 2015, which coincided with the Russian-Western split in relation to the Ukrainian crisis. Once again, Yalta was presented as the harbinger of a divided Europe and as an object lesson in the dangers of appeasement.

Brzezinski's Yalta myth is a variant of the *myth of division*, the idea that Europe was divided into Soviet and Western spheres of influence at Yalta and that Churchill and more particularly Roosevelt conceded to Stalin what became the communist bloc in Eastern Europe. Brzezinski's spin on this idea is that Yalta marked both the end of an independent Eastern Europe and the beginning of a struggle with the Soviets over Central and Western Europe.

The idea that Yalta was all about spheres of influence had little or nothing to do with what happened at the conference – there were no such discussions, implicit or explicit. If anything, Yalta pointed to a united and integrated Europe, not a divided continent. This was the essential meaning of the Declaration on Liberated Europe.

The *myth of division* was encouraged in the early postwar period by two publications. Firstly, the secret protocol to the Nazi-Soviet pact, which revealed the Soviet-German spheres of influence arrangements of 1939–1940 and, secondly, the section in Winston Churchill's war memoirs in which he described the October 1944 percentages deal with Stalin which divided

3 Brzezinski 1984, p. 279.

Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia into Soviet and British spheres of influence. In reality the Churchill-Stalin discussion of percentages was meaningless except in relation to Greece – which the Soviets had long conceded to the British sphere of influence – but Churchill's flamboyant reporting of the deal provided the missing link between the Nazi-Soviet pact, Yalta and the postwar communist takeover in Eastern Europe⁴.

Related to the *myth of division* was the *myth of betrayal*. Socialist critics as well as conservatives assailed Yalta as the occasion of a cynical carve-up of Europe into Soviet and Western spheres of influence. The results of this exercise in power politics were seen by conservatives as the delivery of the peoples of Eastern Europe into tyranny, while radicals bemoaned Stalin's blocking of the revolutionary impulses of the masses in countries such as Greece, France, and Italy⁵.

There is an element of truth in the radical critique of Yalta in that Stalin did feel constrained by his percentages agreement with Churchill, which had allocated Greece to the British sphere of influence. At Yalta Stalin muted his criticism of Churchill's intervention into Greek affairs on behalf of the conservative opponents of the communist-led partisan movement that had strongly contested Nazi occupation of the country. By the time of the Potsdam conference, however, the Soviets had become more vocal in their opposition to British policy in Greece⁶.

Another myth is the *myth of appeasement*. When the cold war broke out in the mid-1940s many in west began to criticize Churchill, and especially Roosevelt, for conceding too much to Stalin and of encouraging the Soviet dictator's appetite for expansion. Yalta was represented as a second "Munich" and as a lost opportunity to stand up to Soviet totalitarianism. During the cold war the popularity of this view rose and fell depending on the state of Soviet-Western relations. During periods of détente appeasement at Yalta was seen as not such a bad thing, while during times of tension it was deemed by western cold warriors as an object lesson in the

4 On the percentages agreement cf. Roberts 2002. A recent Russian contribution to this much-discussed topic is Kalinin 2009.

5 See, for example, Claudin 1975.

6 Roberts 2011.

consequences of backing down in the face of Soviet power⁷. In the post-cold war era it was President George W. Bush who on the 60th anniversary of Yalta in 2005 revived the idea of continuity between western appeasement of Hitler at Munich, Soviet appeasement of Hitler during the Nazi-Soviet pact and Churchill and Roosevelt's appeasement of Stalin⁸.

The obverse of the appeasement myth is the *myth of western perfidy*. According to this narrative, it was the west that broke the Yalta agreements as part of an early shift towards the cold war. The problem was not western appeasement of Stalin but the failure to accommodate legitimate Soviet interests and concerns, which drove Moscow into a corner and entrenched historic ideological and political conflicts in Soviet-Western relations⁹.

A Yalta myth popular in Europe during the cold war, especially in France, was the *myth of exclusion*. This is the idea that Europeans themselves were excluded from Yalta and that the two superpowers carved the continent up between them as it suited their interests. As President François Mitterrand put it in 1981, Europe had to escape from Yalta and take its destiny into its own hands – a theme that he repeated in 1989 as cold war Europe crumbled¹⁰.

The French were excluded from participation in the Yalta conference but de Gaulle's Provisional Government was recognised by the Big Three and France did quite well out of the conference. It was given a permanent, veto-wielding seat on the UN Security Council and a zone of military occupation in Germany. France was also invited to co-sign the Declaration on Liberated Europe. After the war France became a full member of the CFM¹¹.

There are positive myths about Yalta as well as negative ones. Above all, there is the *myth of unity*. When the conference ended Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin issued a statement proclaiming their utmost commitment to peacetime unity and to the establishment of long-term security for all states. After the conference, there was much talk about the "spirit of Yalta", and

7 See Theoharis 1970.

8 See Plokhy 2009.

9 One of the founding texts of this myth is Marzani 1952.

10 See Harbutt 2010, chapter 1.

11 French studies of Yalta include Fontaine 1965; Conte 1982; Durand 1984; Laloy 1988.

the allied press lauded the meeting of the Big Three as an historic turning point in Soviet-Western relations. In subsequent years Yalta was seen by many historians as the golden moment of wartime unity, as a model of great power détente, and as representing an alternative to the cold war. One example of this historiography is Diane Shaver Clemens' classic study of the Yalta conference; another is Daniel Yergin's 1977 book on the origins of the cold war in which he wrote about "the Yalta axioms" and Roosevelt's grand design for postwar collaboration with the Soviet Union¹².

Elements of this perspective may also be found in more recent historiography. For example, in his book about Yalta published in 2010, Sergey Plokhy writes that "if diplomacy is that art of the possible, and if one were to judge the results of Yalta according to the geopolitical and military situation at the time, one would conclude that the Western leaders achieved considerably more than they were subsequently credited with."¹³

Closely related to the myth of unity is the *myth of the lost opportunity*. According to this view of Yalta, the conference's cooperative spirit was subverted by those hostile to a Soviet-Western détente. In this narrative, particular importance is ascribed to the death of Roosevelt in April 1945 and his replacement by Truman, who was more inclined than his predecessor to listen to the advice of those urging a hardening of policy towards the Soviet Union. The importance of Roosevelt's death to the fate of Yalta was reaffirmed by Frank Costigliola in his book *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances*¹⁴.

The myth of lost opportunities is also typical of Soviet and Russian historiography, which generally views Yalta in a much more positive light than the works of most western historians¹⁵.

Opposed to the Yalta myth of lost opportunities is the *myth of illusion*, a myth reflective of the realist perspective on international politics, which devalues the importance of human choices and decision-making. According to this view, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt might have imagined their discussions and decisions would determine the destinies of state and nations

¹² Clemens 1970; Yergin 1977.

¹³ Plokhy 2010, p. 392.

¹⁴ Costigliola 2012.

¹⁵ See, for example, the various official histories of postwar Soviet foreign policy, including Istorija 1973.

but the inevitable clash between Soviet and Western interests and ideologies pointed towards the inexorable collapse of the Grand Alliance and the onset of the cold war¹⁶.

Myths derive their power and persistence from the kernels of truth that their sometimes simplistic narratives contain. While each of the Yalta myths distorts the true meaning and significance of the conference they all contribute something to an appreciation of its complex and contradictory character. Yalta was not the historic meeting that it was proclaimed to be but neither was it an unimportant event. While Stalin was appeased by the western leaders, he was also the appeaser in his relations with Churchill and Roosevelt. An implicit division of Europe into spheres of influence did take place at Yalta but this reflected not deals made but the realities of the military course and outcome of the war. While both Soviets and westerners interpreted that Yalta agreements in ways which suited them the two sides continued to see the continent's future in pan-European terms and within the framework of a peacetime Grand Alliance.

Arguably, the cold war division of Europe did not begin at Yalta but was a function of its failure. The results of the Yalta conference pointed towards a number of different futures; the failure of the Grand Alliance and the onset of cold war was only one of these. The Big Three's aim of a peacetime Grand Alliance was not subverted by objective structures and dynamics but by subsequent misunderstandings and misperceptions and by other actors seeking to influence the course of events in a different political direction.

The Potsdam Myths

In 1924 Stalin famously said that social democracy and fascism were not antipodes but twins – a remark that provided the warrant for communist abuse of social democrats as "social fascists" in the late 1920s. Stalin's characterisation of social democracy was, to say the least, dubious, but his typology can be usefully applied to the historiography of the Potsdam conference¹⁷.

¹⁶ For example Kolko, 1968, chapter 23.

¹⁷ Compared to Yalta, the Potsdam conference is understudied but see Feis 1960; Edmonds 1986; Mee 1975; Neiberg 2015.

In Soviet and Russian historiography the predominant view has been that the Yalta and Potsdam conferences were birth twins, if not identical ones, with the two summits deemed to be the natural culmination of the wartime grand alliance between Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. The content and character of the two conferences were different but the perspective emanating from them was the same – a peacetime grand alliance. At Yalta the principle of postwar collaboration was proclaimed, while at Potsdam the practical details were worked out. During the cold war Soviet leaders argued that the policies agreed at Yalta and Potsdam constituted a sound basis for a peaceful and stable postwar settlement. Indeed, the need to return to the spirit and substance of Yalta and Potsdam was a major motif of postwar Soviet foreign policy – a theme that has been revived in contemporary Russian foreign policy.

More common in western historiography is the *antipodes myth* – the view that Yalta and Potsdam represent a sharp dividing line in the history of the wartime grand alliance. On the Yalta side of that dividing line is the wartime collaboration; on the Potsdam side is the cold war. In more politicised versions of this antipode Yalta is represented as the summit of spheres of influence and western appeasement of Stalin, while Potsdam is depicted as the beginning of the fightback and pushback against the Soviet encroachments in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁸

Between the Yalta and Potsdam conferences there were some sharp policy clashes between the Soviet Union and the West but by the time Truman, Stalin and Churchill arrived in Berlin in July 1945 these conflicts had been ironed out and there was relative harmony in inter-allied relations¹⁹. When the cold war broke out Churchill and Truman were keen to present themselves as precocious cold warriors but the records of the Potsdam conference do not bear out their post hoc claims. At Potsdam, as at Yalta, the three leaders of the Big Three got on very well with each other and a large measure of agreement was achieved. It was not until after Potsdam that Soviet-Western relations deteriorated sharply with the failure in London in September 1945 of the very first meeting of the

Council of Foreign Ministers²⁰. But when the American, British and Soviet foreign ministers reconvened in Moscow in December 1945 they resolved the differences that had precipitated the collapse of the London meeting. In March 1946 Churchill delivered a stinging criticism of the Soviets in his 'Iron Curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri but in the same speech he also spoke of the need for a long-term alliance with the USSR. When Truman declared to the American Congress in March 1947 that the policy of the United States should be to defend the free world against totalitarianism he did not specify the Soviet Union as constituting the said threat. Indeed, two days later his Secretary of State, George Marshall, was in Moscow to negotiate the terms of a German peace treaty with the Soviets. These negotiations proved fruitless but the grand alliance did not finally break down until summer 1947, when the Americans launched the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of postwar Europe and the Soviets responded by establishing the Cominform and declaring that postwar Europe had split into two camps – a socialist and democratic camp of peace and progress and a camp of imperialism and militarism²¹.

The two myths – twins and antipodes – share a common, third *myth of inevitability* – the assumption that Potsdam or some such gathering of the Big Three was an inevitable coda to the Yalta conference. However, the convening of the Potsdam conference was a highly contingent event. While it seemed clear there would be another Soviet-Western summit when the war in Europe ended, the post-Yalta difficulties in Soviet-Western relations created a series of situations in which there was a real danger that the next summit would be stillborn, or at the very least would experience such a difficult birth that its purpose would be undermined.

From the Soviet point of view the Yalta conference was a big success. Soviet evaluations of the conference both publicly and in private were highly positive. But Stalin had suffered a significant setback at Yalta: at the conference he pushed very hard on the issue of the dismemberment of Germany but failed to secure a firm commitment to such a project from Churchill and Roosevelt.

18 For a left-wing variation on this theme see Horowitz 1967 pp. 52–53.

19 On post-Yalta difference see Leffler 1986.

20 Davis 1974.

21 Roberts 1994.

During the war a punitive peace and the dismemberment of Germany had emerged as the key Soviet perspective on the long-term containment of German power. Stalin discussed this idea with Churchill and Roosevelt on several occasions and thought he had achieved a meeting of minds on the issue. However, at Yalta Churchill and Roosevelt insisted that the question of dismemberment be referred to a tripartite commission. The two western leaders were also lukewarm about Soviet proposals for reparations from Germany, agreeing to a figure of \$20 billion but only as a basis for further discussions²². To avoid being lumbered with an unviable policy Stalin abandoned the policy of dismemberment shortly after Yalta and embraced instead the perspective of reuniting Germany as a peaceful and democratic state²³.

The rebuff on dismemberment and the doubts about reparations led Stalin to reassess his military and political strategy in the closing months of the war. He became suspicious about western allied intentions towards postwar Germany. Stalin's disillusionment with western policy on Germany found expression in an extraordinary statement he made to a visiting Czechoslovak delegation at the end of March 1945:

"We are the new Slavophile-Leninists, Slavophile-Bolsheviks, communists who stand for the unity and alliance of the Slavic peoples ... all Slavs must ally with one another against the common enemy – the Germans ... Now we are beating the Germans ... We are fighting the Germans and will do so until the end. But we must bear in mind that our allies will try to save the Germans and come to an arrangement with them. We will be merciless towards the Germans but our allies will treat them with kid gloves."²⁴

This shift in Stalin's perspective made it all the more important that the Red Army occupy as much German territory as possible. During the war agreement had been reached with the British and Americans that Germany would be invaded, occupied and divided into Soviet and Western zones of military occupation. But Stalin knew from the experience of previous occupations of enemy states – Italy, for example – that it was military power on the ground that mattered most. As an insurance policy against western

22 See Roberts 2007.

23 On Stalin's postwar German policy see Loth 1998; 2007.

24 Diary of Malyshev 1997, p. 128.

perfidy Stalin was determined to capture and occupy all the German territory allocated to the USSR under the zonal agreements.

Stalin's attitude also fed into a rather sudden and unexpected decision in early April 1945 to launch a major operation to capture Berlin. The perspective hitherto had been to surround Berlin, with Soviet forces concentrating on capturing the rest of the German territory allocated to the Soviet Union under the zonal agreements. But Stalin changed his mind when he picked up rumours of western peace deal with Germany that would bring the war to a swift end and heard the western allies might be planning to capture Berlin themselves. In that context capturing Berlin became an urgent political goal as well as a military target. The Red Army's assault on Berlin began in mid-April and the city's capture three weeks later – at the costs of 80,000 Soviet soldiers' lives – precipitated Hitler's suicide and led to a rapid end to a war that had been expected to last until the summer²⁵.

Had the war in Europe dragged the Potsdam conference or its equivalent would have taken place in very different circumstances, perhaps after the conclusion of the war in the Far Eastern as well as in the European theatre. In that event, the final conference of the Big Three may well have been staged in Japan rather than Germany.

Stalin was not the only one who took a political view of the military occupation of German territory at the end of the war. The same was true of Churchill who urged Eisenhower, the allied supreme commander in Europe, to occupy and hold as much German territory as possible, irrespective of the zonal agreements. Such a policy could have led to some dangerous clashes between Soviet and western forces and derailed the grand alliance even before the end of the war. Eisenhower and the Americans – whose priority was to win the war as quickly and cheaply as possible – had a more measured view than Churchill and stuck to the agreements and a demarcation line that had been agreed with the Soviets.

The most overt and best-known Soviet-Western difficulty post-Yalta was in connection with the Polish question. At Yalta it was agreed the Soviet and communist-controlled Polish Provisional Government would be reorganised to include pro-Western politicians. The post-Yalta wrangling revolved

25 On Stalin's political and military policy at the end of the war see Glantz 2014.

around the extent of the reorganisation – did it mean a broadening of the existing government – as the Soviets insisted – or did it mean, in effect, a new government, which is what the west wanted?

It was the Polish dispute that led to the famously bruising encounter between the new American President Harry Truman and foreign commissar Vyacheslav Molotov in April 1945. Molotov met Truman in Washington DC on his way to the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco. The two men had some very sharp exchanges about which country had reneged on the Yalta agreement on Poland. According to Truman, Molotov was so taken aback by the conversation that he complained he had never been talked to like that in his life. To which Truman reportedly responded: "Carry out your agreements and you won't get talked to like that." Not surprisingly, the Polish dispute remained unresolved and in subsequent communications with Truman Stalin would not budge an inch. The significance of the Molotov-Truman encounter has been exaggerated – not least by Truman, who in his memoirs sought to depict himself as an early cold warrior that stood up the Soviets on important issues.

At the time, if not in retrospect, Stalin and Molotov's response to Truman's tough talking was quite restrained. They could have taken offense at the tone in which Truman addressed them about the Polish question and deduce that the Americans did not want to continue collaboration with them. They chose instead to focus of the positives in Soviet-American relations, above all Truman's statement to Molotov that he remained committed to Roosevelt's policy of collaboration with the Soviet Union – a perception of the new American President's predilections that was reinforced by reports from the Soviet embassy in Washington²⁶.

The Americans, too, might have chosen to take greater offense at Molotov and Stalin's obduracy on the Polish question. Instead Washington strove for a compromise with Moscow. The key move was Truman's decision to send Harry Hopkins to Moscow at the end of May 1945. Hopkins was Roosevelt's trusted confidant and a big favourite with the Soviets. The Stalin-Hopkins conversations were critical to restoring the equilibrium in Soviet-American relations. They gave both sides a chance to clear the air

26 Roberts 2004.

and signal future good intentions. As a result of these talks the Polish dispute was resolved by the inclusion of four pro-western politicians in the Polish provisional government, including Stanisław Mikołajczyk, a former leader of the anti-communist Polish exile government, who would serve as a deputy premier. Without this deal on Poland it is doubtful the Potsdam conference could have taken place²⁷.

Another important topic of conversation between Stalin and Hopkins was Soviet entry into the war in the Far East. Stalin had agreed at Yalta that the USSR would attack Japan in Manchuria two-three months after the end of the war in Europe. Soviet forces invaded Manchuria on 8 August 1945, exactly three months after the German surrender. It was the coincidence of the Soviet attack with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that shocked the Japanese into surrender on 15 August 1945²⁸.

The need to involve the Soviets in the war in the Far East was a big incentive for the Americans to keep the grand alliance intact until the very end of the war. Potsdam happened when it did because the Americans wanted to copper-fasten the Soviet commitment to join the war against Japan.

Churchill had begun agitating for a new summit in May and Stalin was agreeable to holding a meeting in June. Truman demurred, ostensibly because he wanted to stay in Washington until the budget was passed by Congress at the end of June. Truman's delaying of the Potsdam conference has provoked much speculation about his true motives, in particular whether or not this was an early example of atomic diplomacy.

When Truman became President following Roosevelt's death in April 1945 he learned about the Manhattan Project to develop the atomic bomb. The supposition of some historians is that he and his then Secretary of State, James F. Byrnes, delayed the Big Three meeting for as long as possible in order to give time for the new weapon to be tested. With a new and fearsome weapon at their disposal Truman and Byrnes would be in a

27 On Hopkins' visit to Moscow see Miscamble 2007, pp. 143–148; 154–162.

28 The dual shock hypothesis (with the emphasis on the Soviet factor) is argued most forcibly by Hasegawa 2005.

much stronger position to negotiate with the Soviets about the shape of the postwar world.²⁹

If this speculation is correct then the timing of the Potsdam conference was contingent on the timetable of the Manhattan project. The atomic test was scheduled for June but was delayed until 16 July – just in time for the Potsdam conference which opened the next day. An even longer postponement of the test might have led to a further delay of the Potsdam conference. A more radical counter-factual possibility is that a failed test in June or July might have led Truman – in the absence of the atomic card – to postpone the conference indefinitely. In that scenario it is unlikely the Soviet attack on the Kwantung army in Manchuria would on its own have precipitated a Japanese surrender. The knock-on effect would have been that the planned Soviet invasion of mainland Japan would have gone ahead at the end of August 1945, resulting in a postwar division of Japan similar to that in Germany.

The problem with the strong version of the atomic diplomacy hypothesis – one could call it a myth – is that Truman did not play the atomic card at Potsdam, not much anyway. Truman received news of the atomic test shortly after he arrived in Berlin. At the conference he casually told Stalin about the atomic test. No doubt Truman was trying to impress the Soviet leader but Stalin, who already knew about the atomic bomb programme through the many Soviet spies infiltrated into the Manhattan Project, feigned disinterest in the news. After Potsdam Stalin ordered a crash Soviet project to build an atomic bomb but he was never overly impressed by the new weapon and remained unimpressed by it. Atomic diplomacy had no discernable impact on Stalin's behaviour at Potsdam or on Soviet foreign policy more generally during the early postwar years. By 1949 Stalin had his own bomb but he continued to maintain that armies win wars not atom bombs³⁰.

There is one kernel of truth in the atomic diplomacy hypothesis. In the original version of the Potsdam Declaration – the statement issued

²⁹ The atomic diplomacy hypothesis dates back to the 1940s but it was given a significant boost with the publication of Alperovitz 1965. The author pursued this argument in many subsequent publications, notably Alperovitz 1995.

³⁰ For an alternative view, that emphasises the importance of the atomic factor in postwar Soviet policy see Craig/Radchenko 2008.

at the conference that threatened Japan with prompt and utter destruction if it did not surrender immediately – the Soviet Union was listed among the signatories even though the country was still neutral in the Far Eastern war. The Soviets were agreeable to signing the declaration and even produced their own draft of the document. The Americans, however, unilaterally changed their draft to exclude the USSR's signature and made it public without further consultations with the Soviets. This episode revealed that Truman and Byrnes, in the aftermath of the successful atomic bomb test, no longer felt constrained to appease the Soviets because of the need to involve the USSR in the war against Japan. No one knew how effective the bomb would be when it was used against Japan – a decision that Truman took while he was in Potsdam – so the USSR's participation in that war was still welcome, but Soviet military action was no longer seen as essential to defeat the Japanese at the lowest possible cost to the Americans. Truman and particularly Byrnes were also having doubts about the high political price Stalin had extracted from Roosevelt in exchange for his promise to invade Manchuria, which included significant territorial concessions from China. Byrnes encouraged the Chinese to string out their negotiations with the Soviets, the calculation being that if the war came to an end before the Red Army attacked Japan they would be able to resist at least some of the Soviet demands. In the event, Stalin decided to go ahead with the planned invasion without waiting to conclude an agreement with the Chinese – an action which spurred them to accept the deal the Soviets had agreed with Roosevelt³¹.

This episode was not a happy one for the Soviets but it did not disrupt the harmony of the conference. Potsdam was not as intimate and cosy as Yalta or Tehran had been but it was just as friendly and positive. The war in Europe was over. As a victory conference taking place close to the defeated enemy's capital it was a celebratory event.

The Soviets' post-conference evaluation of Potsdam was as laudatory as that for Yalta. The Yugoslav ambassador in Moscow recorded:

³¹ On this episode see Roberts 2006, pp. 279–295.

"According to Molotov ... at the conference it was possible to see and to see in its results that the English and Americans accept that they have lost Eastern Europe and the Balkans ... Molotov said that throughout the conference there was a good atmosphere, albeit not without harsh polemics and sharp words. Everyone tried to ensure that all questions were resolved by compromise decisions ... Truman ... was quite cultured and shows much understanding of European problems."³²

Conclusion

Yalta and Potsdam have generated a myriad of historical mythology, much of it the result of interpreting the two conferences through the lense of subsequent events. But, as Michael Neiberg pointed out in his book on Potsdam, Soviet and Western leaders in 1945 were not grappling with the problems of the coming cold war – about which they had no knowledge. Their reference points were the failure of the post-Versailles international order and the experience and results of the war³³. Viewed from that perspective, Yalta and Potsdam represented the end of an era rather than the beginning of another. As to the future Yalta and Potsdam pointed in many different directions, towards an enduring Grand Alliance as well as to the cold war.

It is often said that Grand Alliance was forced into existence by Hitler and fell apart as soon as Nazi Germany was defeated. But neither the formation of the Grand Alliance nor its collapse was inevitable. The Grand Alliance was created because the leaders of the Big Three willed it into existence and their personal collaboration was key to its success during the war. That collaboration persisted through to the Yalta and Potsdam conferences and survived both the death of Roosevelt in April 1945 and Churchill's political defeat in the British General Election of July 1945. The disintegration and then collapse of the grand alliance after Potsdam was the result of many factors, including the failure of the postwar troika of leaders – Stalin, Truman and Attlee – to continue the personal collaboration of their wartime predecessors. It was this denouement that helped create the

³² Cited by Gibianskij 1994, p. 32.

³³ Neiberg 2015, especially the author's conclusion pp. 247–256.

greatest myth of Yalta and Potsdam – that the perspective of a peacetime grand alliance was destined to fail.

Summary

The Yalta and Potsdam conferences have generated a myriad of historical and political myths. The main source of this mythology has been retrospectivity and political expediency but like all historical myths those about Yalta and Potsdam contain kernels of truth that contribute to an appreciation of the complex and contradictory character of the two conferences. The most persistent myth is that Yalta and Potsdam were the inception of the cold war. In fact, Yalta and Potsdam represented the end of an era rather than the beginning of a new one. Decision-makers at the two summits saw themselves as grappling with the collapse of the post-Versailles international order and sought to construct a peacetime grand alliance of the great powers that would guarantee peace and security for all. The coming of the cold war was mainly a function of postwar failures, not wartime differences and difficulties. Yalta and Potsdam pointed towards many different futures, not least the possibility of postwar cooperation and the achievement of the ideals proclaimed by Attlee, Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin and Truman.

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Christoph Koch (Hrsg.)

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Rechtliche Bedeutung und historische Auswirkungen

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