Caption: In his memoirs of the Second World War, Winston Churchill recalls the Yalta Conference, held between 4 and 11 February 1945, and reflects upon the talks on the fate reserved for Germany after the end of the war.


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The first plenary meeting of the Conference started at a quarter-past four on the afternoon of February 5. We met in the Livadia Palace, and took our seats at a round table. With the three interpreters we were twenty-three. With Stalin and Molotov were Vyshinsky, Maisky, Gousev, the Russian Ambassador in London, and Gromyko, the Russian Ambassador in Washington. Pavlov acted as interpreter. The American delegation was headed by President Roosevelt and Mr. Stettinius, and included Admiral Leahy, Byrnes, Harriman, Hopkins, Matthews, Director of European Affairs in the State Department, and Bohlen, special assistant from the State Department, who also interpreted. Eden sat beside me, and my own party included Sir Alexander Cadogan, Sir Edward Bridges, and Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, our Ambassador in Moscow. Major Birse interpreted for us, as he had always done since my first meeting with Stalin at Moscow in 1942.

The discussion opened on the future of Germany.

Stalin now asked how Germany was to be dismembered. Were we to have one Government or several, or merely some form of administration? If Hitler surrendered unconditionally should we preserve his Government or refuse to treat with it? At Teheran Mr. Roosevelt had suggested dividing Germany into five parts, and he had agreed with him. I, on the other hand, had hesitated and had only wanted her to be split into two, namely Prussia and Austria-Bavaria, with the Ruhr and Westphalia under international control. The time had now come, he said, to take a definite decision.

I said that we all agreed that Germany should be dismembered, but the actual method was much too complicated to be settled in five or six days. It would require a very searching examination of the historical, ethnographical, and economic facts, and prolonged review by a special committee, which would go into the different proposals and advise on them. There was so much to consider. What to do with Prussia? What territory should be given to Poland and the U.S.S.R.? Who was to control the Rhine valley and the great industrial zones of the Ruhr and the Saar? These were questions which needed profound study, and His Majesty’s Government would want to consider carefully the attitude of their two great Allies. A body should be set up at once to examine these matters, and we ought to have its report before reaching any final decision.

I then speculated on the future. If Hitler or Himmler were to come forward and offer unconditional surrender it was clear that our answer should be that we would not negotiate with any of the war criminals. If they were the only people the Germans could produce we should have to go on with the war. It was more probable that Hitler and his associates would be killed or would disappear, and that another set of people would offer unconditional surrender. If this happened the three Great Powers must immediately consult and decide whether they were worth dealing with or not. If they were, the terms of surrender which have been worked out would be laid before them; if not, the war would be continued and the whole country put under strict military government.

Mr. Roosevelt suggested asking our Foreign Secretaries to produce a plan for studying the question within twenty-four hours and a definite plan for the dismemberment within a month. Here, for a time, the matter was left.

Other questions were discussed, but not settled. The President asked whether the French should be given a zone of occupation in Germany. We agreed that this should certainly be done by allocating to them part of the British and American zones, and that the Foreign Secretaries should consider how this area was to be controlled.

At Stalin’s request M. Maisky then expounded a Russian scheme for making Germany pay reparations and for dismantling her munitions industries. I said that the experience of the last war had been very
disappointing, and I did not believe it would be possible to extract from Germany anything like the amount which M. Maisky had suggested should be paid to Russia alone. Britain too had suffered greatly. Many buildings had been destroyed. We had parted with much of our foreign investments and were faced with the problem of how to raise our exports sufficiently to pay for the imports of food on which we depended. I doubted whether these burdens could be substantially lightened by German reparations. Other countries had also suffered and would have to be considered. What would happen if Germany were reduced to starvation? Did we intend to stand by and do nothing and say it served her right? Or did we propose to feed the Germans, and, if so, who would pay? Stalin said that these questions would arise anyway, and I answered that if you wanted a horse to pull your wagon you had to give him some hay. We eventually agreed that the Russian proposal should be examined by a special commission, which would sit in secret at Moscow.

We then arranged to meet next day and consider two topics which were to dominate our future discussions, namely, the Dumbarton Oaks scheme for world security and Poland.

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At this first meeting Mr. Roosevelt had made a momentous statement. He had said that the United States would take all reasonable steps to preserve peace, but not at the expense of keeping a large army in Europe, three thousand miles away from home. The American occupation would therefore be limited to two years. Formidable questions rose in my mind. If the Americans left Europe Britain would have to occupy single-handed the entire western portion of Germany. Such a task would be far beyond our strength.

At the opening of our second meeting on February 6 I accordingly pressed for French help in carrying such a burden. To give France a zone of occupation was by no means the end of the matter. Germany would surely rise again, and while the Americans could always go home the French had to live next door to her. A strong France was vital not only to Europe but to Great Britain. She alone could deny the rocket sites on her Channel coast and build up an army to contain the Germans.

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