

## Statement by Winston Churchill to the House of Commons (27 February 1945)

**Caption:** On 27 February 1945, Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister, presents the principle findings of the Yalta Conference to the House of Commons, focusing on Germany's fate and the Polish question.

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[...]

The Crimea Conference finds the Allies more closely united than ever before, both in the military and in the political sphere. Let Germany recognise that it is futile to hope for division among the Allies and that nothing can avert her utter defeat. Further resistance will only be the cause of needless suffering. The Allies are resolved that Germany shall be totally disarmed, that Nazism and militarism in Germany shall be destroyed, that war criminals shall be justly and swiftly punished, that all German industry capable of military production shall be eliminated or controlled, and that Germany shall make compensation in kind to the utmost of her ability for damage done to Allied Nations. On the other hand, it is not the purpose of the Allies to destroy the people of Germany, or leave them without the necessary means of subsistence. Our policy is not revenge; it is to take such measures as may be necessary to secure the future peace and safety of the world. There will be a place one day for Germans in the comity of nations, but only when all traces of Nazism and militarism have been effectively and finally extirpated.

On the general plan, there is complete agreement. As to the measures to give effect to it, much still remains to be done. The plans for the Allied Control Commission will come into operation immediately on the defeat of Germany; indeed, they are far advanced — advanced, as I have said, to the point where they could be instantly made effective. On the longer-term measures, there are many points of great importance on which detailed plans have yet to be worked out between the Allies. It would be a great mistake to suppose that questions of this kind can be thrashed out, and solutions found for all the many intractable and complex problems involved, while the Armies are still on the march. To hurry and press matters of this kind might well be to risk causing disunity between the Allies. Many of these matters must await the time when the leaders of the Allies, freed from the burden of the direction of the war, can turn their whole or main attention to the making of a wise and far-seeing peace, which will, I trust, become a foundation greatly facilitating the work of the world organisation.

I now come to the most difficult and agitating part of the statement which I have to make to the House — the question of Poland. For more than a year past, and since the tide of war has turned so strongly against Germany, the Polish problem has been divided into two main issues — the frontiers of Poland and the freedom of Poland.

The House is well aware from the speeches I have made to them that the freedom, independence, integrity and sovereignty of Poland have always seemed to His Majesty's Government more important than the actual frontiers. To establish a free Polish nation, with a good home to live in, has always far outweighed, in my mind, the actual tracing of the frontier line, or whether these boundaries should be shifted on both sides of Poland further to the West. The Russian claim, first advanced at Teheran in November, 1943, has always been unchanged for the Curzon Line in the East, and the Russian offer has always been that ample compensation should be gained for Poland at the expense of Germany in the North and in the West. All these matters are tolerably well-known now. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary explained in detail last December the story of the Curzon Line. I have never concealed from the House that, personally, I think the Russian claim is just and right. If I champion this frontier for Russia, it is not because I bow to force. It is because I believe it is the fairest division of territory that can in all the circumstances be made between the two countries whose history has been so chequered and intermingled.

The Curzon Line was drawn in 1919 by an expert Commission, of which one of our most distinguished foreign representatives of those days, Sir Eyre Crowe, was a member. It was drawn at a time when Russia had few friends among the Allies. In fact, I may say that she was extremely unpopular. One cannot feel that either the circumstances or the personalities concerned would have given undue favour to Soviet Russia. They just tried to find out what was the right and proper line to draw. The British Government in those days approved this Line.

[...]

We speak of the Curzon Line. A line is not a frontier. A frontier has to be surveyed and traced on the ground and not merely cut in on a map by a pencil and ruler. When my right hon. Friend and I were at Moscow in October Marshal Stalin made this point to me, and at that time he said that there might be deviations of 8 to 10 kilometres in either direction in order to follow the courses of streams and hills or the actual sites of particular villages. It seems to me that this was an eminently sensible way of looking at the problem. However, when we met at Yalta the Russian proposal was changed. It was made clear that all such minor alterations would be at the expense of Russia and not at the expense of Poland in order that the Poles might have their minds set at rest once and for all and there would be no further discussion about that part of the business. We welcomed this Soviet proposal.

One must regard these 30 years or more of strife, turmoil and suffering in Europe as part of one story. I have lived through the whole story since 1911 when I was sent to the Admiralty to prepare the Fleet for an impending German war. In its main essentials it seems to me to be one story of a 30 years' war, or more than a 30 years' war, in which British, Russians, Americans and French have struggled to their utmost to resist German aggression at a cost most grievous to all of them, but to none more frightful than to the Russian people, whose country has twice been ravaged over vast areas and whose blood has been poured out in tens of millions of lives in a common cause now reaching final accomplishment.

There is a second reason which appeals to me apart from this sense of continuity which I personally feel. But for the prodigious exertions and sacrifices of Russia, Poland was doomed to utter destruction at the hands of the Germans. Not only Poland as a State and as a nation, but the Poles as a race were doomed by Hitler to be destroyed or reduced to a servile station. Three and a half million Polish Jews are said to have been actually slaughtered. It is certain that enormous numbers have perished in one of the most horrifying acts of cruelty, probably the most horrifying act of cruelty, which has ever darkened the passage of man on the earth. When the Germans had clearly avowed their intention of making the Poles a subject and lower grade race under the *Herrenvolk*, suddenly, by a superb effort of military force and skill, the Russian Armies, in little more than three weeks, since in fact we spoke on these matters here, have advanced from the Vistula to the Oder, driving the Germans in ruin before them and freeing the whole of Poland from the awful cruelty and oppression under which the Poles were writhing.

In supporting the Russian claim to the Curzon Line, I repudiate and repulse any suggestion that we are making a questionable compromise or yielding to force or fear, and I assert with the utmost conviction the broad justice of the policy upon which, for the first time, all the three great Allies have now taken their stand. Moreover, the three Powers have now agreed that Poland shall receive substantial accessions of territory both in the North and in the West. In the North she will certainly receive, in the place of a precarious Corridor, the great city of Danzig, the greater part of East Prussia West and South of Koenigsberg and a long, wide sea front on the Baltic. In the West she will receive the important industrial province of Upper Silesia and, in addition, such other territories to the East of the Oder as it may be decided at the peace settlement to detach from Germany after the views of a broadly based Polish Government have been ascertained.

Thus, it seems to me that this talk of cutting half of Poland off is very misleading. In fact, the part which is to be East of the Curzon Line cannot in any case be measured by its size. It includes the enormous, dismal region of the Pripet Marshes, which Poland held between the two wars, and it exchanges for that the far more fruitful and developed land in the West, from which a very large portion of the German population has already departed. We need not fear that the task of holding these new lines will be too heavy for Poland, or that it will bring about another German revenge or that it will, to use a conventional phrase, sow the seeds of future wars. We intend to take steps far more drastic and effective than those which followed the last war, because we know much more about this business, so as to render all offensive action by Germany utterly impossible for generations to come.

Finally, under the world organisation all nations great and small, victors and vanquished will be secured against aggression by indisputable law and by overwhelming international force. The published Crimea Agreement is not a ready-made plan, imposed by the great Powers on the Polish people. It sets out the agreed views of the three major Allies on the means whereby their common desire to see established a

strong, free, independent Poland may be fulfilled in co-operation with the Poles themselves, and whereby a Polish Government which all the United Nations can recognise, may be set up in Poland. This has become for the first time a possibility now that practically the whole country has been liberated by the Soviet Army. The fulfilment of the plan will depend upon the willingness of all sections of democratic Polish opinion in Poland or abroad to work together in giving it effect. The plan should be studied as a whole, and with the main common objective always in view. The three Powers are agreed that acceptance by the Poles of the provisions on the Eastern frontiers and, so far as can now be ascertained, on the Western frontiers, is an essential condition of the establishment and future welfare and security of a strong, independent, homogeneous Polish State.

The proposals on frontiers are in complete accordance, as the House will remember, with the views expressed by me in Parliament on behalf of His Majesty's Government many times during the past year. I ventured to make pronouncements upon this subject at a time when a great measure of agreement was not expressed by the other important parties to the affair. The Eastern frontier must be settled now, if the new Polish administration is to be able to carry on its work in its own territory, and to do this in amity with the Russians and behind their fighting fronts. The Western frontiers, which will involve a substantial accession of German territory to Poland, cannot be fixed except as part of the whole German settlement until after the Allies have occupied German territory and after a fully representative Polish Government has been able to make its wishes known. It would be a great mistake to press Poland to take a larger portion of these lands than is considered by her and by her friends and Allies to be within her compass to man, to develop, and, with the aid of the Allies and the world organisation, to maintain.

I have now dealt with the frontiers of Poland. I must say I think it is a case which I can outline with great confidence to the House. An impartial line traced long ago by a British commission in which Britain took a leading part; the moderation with which the Russians have strictly confined themselves to that line; the enormous sacrifices they have made and the sufferings they have undergone; the contributions they have made to our present victory; the great interest, the vital interest, which Poland has in having complete agreement with her powerful neighbour to the East — when you consider all those matters and the way they have been put forward, the temperate, patient manner in which they have been put forward and discussed, I say that I have rarely seen a case in this House which I could commend with more confidence to the good sense of Members of all sides.

But even more important than the frontiers of Poland, within the limits now disclosed, is the freedom of Poland. The home of the Poles is settled. Are they to be masters in their own house? Are they to be free, as we in Britain and the United States or France are free? Are their sovereignty and their independence to be untrammelled, or are they to become a mere projection of the Soviet State, forced against their will by an armed minority, to adopt a Communist or totalitarian system? Well, I am putting the case in all its bluntness. It is a touchstone far more sensitive and vital than the drawing of frontier lines. Where does Poland stand? Where do we all stand on this?

Most solemn declarations have been made by Marshal Stalin and the Soviet Union that the sovereign independence of Poland is to be maintained, and this decision is now joined in both by Great Britain and the United States. Here also, the world organisation will in due course assume a measure of responsibility. The Poles will have their future in their own hands, with the single limitation that they must honestly follow, in harmony with their Allies, a policy friendly to Russia. That is surely reasonable — *[Interruption]*.

The procedure which the three Great Powers have unitedly adopted to achieve this vital aim is set forth in unmistakable terms in the Crimea Declaration. The agreement provides for consultation with a view to the establishment in Poland of a new Polish Provisional Government of National Unity, with which the three major Powers can all enter into diplomatic relations, instead of some recognising one Polish Government and the rest another, a situation which, if it had survived the Yalta Conference, would have proclaimed to the world disunity and confusion. We had to settle it, and we settled it there. No binding restrictions have been imposed upon the scope and method of those consultations. His Majesty's Government intend to do all in their power to ensure that they shall be as wide as possible and that representative Poles of all democratic parties are given full freedom to come and make their views known. Arrangements for this are now being

made in Moscow by the Commission of three, comprising M. Molotov, and Mr. Harriman and Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, representing the United States and Great Britain respectively. It will be for the Poles themselves, with such assistance as the Allies are able to give them, to agree upon the composition and constitution of the new Polish Government of National Unity. Thereafter, His Majesty's Government, through their representative in Poland, will use all their influence to ensure that the free elections to which the new Polish Government will be pledged shall be fairly carried out under all proper democratic safeguards.

Our two guiding principles in dealing with all these problems of the Continent and of liberated countries have been clear: While the war is on, we give help to anyone who can kill a Hun; when the war is over we look to the solution of a free, unfettered, democratic election. Those are the two principles which this Coalition Government have applied, to the best of their ability, to the circumstances and situations in this entangled and infinitely varied development.

[...]

The agreement does not affect the continued recognition by His Majesty's Government of the Polish Government in London. This will be maintained until such time as His Majesty's Government consider that a new Provisional Government has been properly formed in Poland, in accordance with the agreed provisions; nor does it involve the previous or immediate recognition by His Majesty's Government of the present Provisional Government which is now functioning in Poland. We are awaiting — *[Interruption]*. Let me remind the House and those who have undertaken what I regard as an honourable task, of being very careful that our affairs in Poland are regulated in accordance with the dignity and honour of this country — I have no quarrel with them at all, only a difference of opinion on the facts, which I hope to clear away. That is all that is between us.

Let me remind them that there would have been no Lublin Committee or Lublin Provisional Government in Poland if the Polish Government in London had accepted our faithful counsel given to them a year ago. They would have entered into Poland as its active Government, with the liberating Armies of Russia. Even in October, when the Foreign Secretary and I toiled night and day in Moscow, M. Mikolajczyk could have gone from Moscow to Lublin, with every assurance of Marshal Stalin's friendship, and become the Prime Minister of a more broadly constructed Government, which would now be seated at Warsaw, or wherever, in view of the ruin of Warsaw, the centre of government is placed.

But these opportunities were cast aside. Meanwhile, the expulsion of the Germans from Poland has taken place, and of course the new Government, the Lublin Government, advanced with the victorious Russian Armies, who were received with great joy in very great areas in Poland, many great cities changing hands without a shot fired, and with none of that terrible business of underground armies being shot by both sides, and so forth, which we feared so much, having actually taken place during the great forward advance. These opportunities were cast aside. The Russians, who are executing and preparing military operations on the largest scale against the heart of Germany, have the right to have the communications of their Armies protected by an orderly countryside, under a Government acting in accordance with their needs.

It was not therefore possible, so far as recognition was concerned, to procure the dissolution of the Lublin Government as well as of the London Government simultaneously, and start from a swept table. To do that would be to endanger the success of the Russian offensive, and consequently to prolong the war, with increased loss of Russian, British and American blood. The House should read carefully again and again, those Members who have doubts, the words and the terms of the Declaration, every word of which was the subject of the most profound and searching attention by the Heads of the three Governments, and by the Foreign Secretaries and all their experts.

How will this Declaration be carried out? How will phrases like

“Free and unfettered elections on the basis of universal suffrage and secret ballot”

be interpreted? Will the “new” Government be “properly” constituted, with a fair representation of the Polish people, as far as can be made practicable at the moment, and as soon as possible? Will the elections be free and unfettered? Will the candidates of all democratic parties be able to present themselves to the electors, and to conduct their campaigns? What are democratic parties? People always take different views. Even in our own country there has been from time to time an effort by one party or the other to claim that they are the true democratic party, and the rest are either Bolsheviks or Tory landlords. What are democratic parties? Obviously this is capable of being settled. Will the election be what we should say was fair and free in this country, making some allowance for the great confusion and disorder which prevail?

[...]

One cannot entirely avoid some nucleus of party inspiration being formed, even in this country, and no doubt sometimes very able Members find themselves a little out of joint with the party arrangements. But there are a great number of parties in Poland. We have agreed that all those that are democratic parties — not Nazi or Fascist parties or parties of collaborators with the enemy — all these will be able to take their part.

These are questions upon which we have the clearest views, in accordance with the principles of the Declaration on Liberated Europe, to which all three Governments have duly subscribed. It is on that basis that the Moscow Commission of three was intended to work, and it is on that basis it has already begun to work.

The impression I brought back from the Crimea, and from all my other contacts, is that Marshal Stalin and the Soviet leaders wish to live in honourable friendship and equality with the Western democracies. I feel also that their word is their bond. I know of no Government which stands to its obligations, even in its own despite, more solidly than the Russian Soviet Government. I decline absolutely to embark here on a discussion about Russian good faith. It is quite evident that these matters touch the whole future of the world. Sombre indeed would be the fortunes of mankind if some awful schism arose between the Western democracies and the Russian Soviet Union, if all the future world organisation were rent asunder, and if new cataclysms of inconceivable violence destroyed all that is left of the treasures and liberties of mankind.

[...]