

## James F. Byrnes, Speaking Frankly

**Caption:** In his memoirs, James F. Byrnes, Foreign Minister under US President Harry S. Truman between 1945 and 1947, recalls the negotiations on the German and Polish questions during the Yalta Conference held from 4 to 11 February 1945.

**Source:** BYRNES, James F. Speaking Frankly. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1947. 324 p. p. 25-32.

**Copyright:** (c) The James F. Byrnes Foundation

**URL:** [http://www.cvce.eu/obj/james\\_f\\_byrnes\\_speaking\\_frankly-en-b382d69f-63b0-40a6-a12e-d127198030ab.html](http://www.cvce.eu/obj/james_f_byrnes_speaking_frankly-en-b382d69f-63b0-40a6-a12e-d127198030ab.html)

**Last updated:** 02/07/2015

## James F. Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*

[...]

The major problem in connection with the surrender of Germany arose from an informal suggestion, broached at Teheran, that the future security of Europe required Germany to be cut up into a number of individual states.

The discussion was brief but there seemed to be general agreement among all three that Germany should be divided into an unspecified number of states. Marshal Stalin was of the opinion that the Germans in surrendering should be told about this plan. Mr. Churchill suggested that the questions involved were so complex that further study should be made. The President then suggested that the Foreign Ministers study the matter and submit recommendations within the next thirty days.

[...]

During all the consideration of the German question at Yalta, reparations were the chief interest of the Soviet delegation.

At the conference table Marshal Stalin sat between Mr. Molotov and I. M. Maisky, Deputy Commissar for Foreign Affairs. Maisky had served as the Russian Ambassador in London for eleven years, and at Yalta often acted as interpreter as well as adviser to Stalin. It was he who presented the Soviet proposal on German reparations.

"Our plan foresees that reparations in kind should be demanded from Germany in two ways," Mr. Maisky explained. "First, withdrawals from the national wealth of Germany. That means factories, land, machinery, machine tools, rolling stock of railways, investments in foreign enterprises, and so on. Second, yearly payments in kind after the war in the course of ten years."

He proposed that 80 per cent of all German industry should be withdrawn, specifying the iron and steel, engineering, metal and chemical industries. He added that aviation plants, facilities for the production of synthetic oil and all other military enterprises and factories should be withdrawn entirely.

"By withdrawal I mean to confiscate and carry away physically and use as reparations payments," he emphasized.

Retention of 20 per cent of Germany's heavy industry would be adequate to sustain the country's economic life, he said. All reparations should be terminated within ten years and the removal of factories and other wealth should be completed in two years. German enterprises important as war potentials should be internationalized with representatives of the three powers sitting on the boards of these enterprises for as many years as the three countries should desire.

Reparations funds should be paid only to those countries that had sustained direct material losses such as damage to factories, land and homes and the losses of personal property by citizens, Mr. Maisky maintained. Because such losses were so huge he proposed that a system of priorities be established among the countries to receive reparations based on their contribution to the winning of the war and the value of their direct material losses.

He then stated that reparations should be fixed at twenty billions of dollars and that the share of the Soviet Union in the reparations fund should not be less than ten billion dollars.

Mr. Churchill responded first to Mr. Maisky's statement. He recalled the experience of the United Kingdom after World War I.

"The process was a very disappointing one," he said. "With great difficulty about 1,000 million pounds was

extracted from Germany, and that would never have been extracted if the United States, at the same time, had not loaned Germany a larger sum."

"Removal of plants and factories to a certain extent is a proper step," he declared, "but I am quite sure you will never be able to get out of ruined Germany for Russia alone anything like 215 million pounds a year." He pictured Britain's losses and heavy debts and referred to the severe losses of other countries which must be considered in allotting reparations.

"Secondly," Mr. Churchill continued, "there arises in my mind the specter of an absolutely starving Germany.

"If our treatment of Germany's internal economy is such as to leave eighty million people virtually starving, are we to sit still and say, 'It serves you right', or will we be required to keep them alive? If so, who is going to pay for that? ... If you have a horse and you want him to pull the wagon you have to provide him with a certain amount of corn – or at least hay."

"But the horse must not kick you," Mr. Maisky objected.

Mr. Churchill switched to a nonkicking illustration by saying:

"If you have a motorcar you must give it a certain amount of petrol to make it go. I am in favor of having a reparations inquiry committee set up to explore this subject with the object of getting the most we can in a sensible way."

In presenting the position of the United States, President Roosevelt pointed out that after the last war we loaned to Germany billions of dollars, and emphasized "We cannot let that happen again."

"We are in the position of not wanting any of Germany's manpower," the President said. "We do not want any of her machinery, tools, or her factories. There will be some German assets in the United States that might be credited against what Germany owes the United States, but it will amount to very little." After the meeting I advised the President that the best estimate placed the value of German assets in this country at 150 million dollars and that the value certainly would not exceed 200 million. He later used these figures to point out what an exceedingly small amount we would receive in contrast to other nations.

The American people want the Germans to live, the President told the conference, but do not want them to have a higher standard of living than other states, such as the Soviet Republic. He stressed that the United States would emerge from the war in poor financial condition and that we would have no money to send into Germany for food, clothing or housing.

"All I can say is that we will do the best we can in an extremely bad situation," the President said, and concluded by adding we would support the creation of a reparations commission as proposed by the Soviet Union.

Marshal Stalin then entered the discussion. "The root of the trouble the last time," he asserted, "was that reparations were demanded in money. Then, the question arose of transferring the German mark into foreign currencies. That was the rock upon which reparations broke down."

Marshal Stalin urged that the three powers that carried the burden of the war should have priority in reparations. He said it must be admitted that "France did not have any sacrifice to compare to the three powers I have in mind." And then to clinch the argument, he said, "France at this time has in the war eight divisions while the Lublin government has ten divisions." There is no doubt that his opinion as to the claims of a government was influenced by the number of its divisions. He is credited with having said at Yalta, when reference was made to the views of the Pope, "How many divisions does he have?" The Marshal did not make that statement at Yalta. But it was the yardstick he frequently used.

Stalin concluded his statement with a proposal that a decision be made as to whether reparations should be based upon the contributions made in the prosecution of the war or upon the losses sustained, or whether both should be considered. During the discussion, the President made a statement which still remains a source of misunderstanding between ourselves and the Russians. He said the Reparations Commission "should take, in its initial studies as a basis for discussion, the suggestion of the Soviet government, that the total sum of reparations should be twenty billions and that fifty per cent of it should go to the Soviet Union."

[...]

Closely related to the reparations issue was the problem of fixing Poland's boundaries. President Roosevelt said, at the outset of the discussion, that the United States felt that Poland's eastern boundary should generally follow the so-called Curzon Line. He still held, he said, the view he had expressed at Teheran that it would be desirable to adjust the southern end of the line so that the city of Lwow and at least a portion of the oil fields should be inside Polish territory.

Prime Minister Churchill pointed out he had supported the Curzon Line in Parliament including the Soviet Union's retention of Lwow. The claim of the Soviet Union to this area, he said, "is one not founded on force but upon right." But if the Soviet Union made a "magnanimous gesture to a much weaker power" such as that suggested by the President, Mr. Churchill said, Britain "would admire and acclaim the Soviet position."

Marshal Stalin replied with an impassioned statement.

"The Curzon Line is the line of Curzon and Clemenceau and of those Americans who took part in 1918 and 1919 in the conference which then took place," Stalin declared. "The Russians were not invited and did not take part. ... Lenin was not in agreement with the Curzon Line. ... Now some people want that we should be less Russian than Curzon was and Clemenceau was. You would drive us into shame. What will be said by the White Russians and the Ukrainians? They will say that Stalin and Molotov are far less reliable defenders of Russia than are Curzon and Clemenceau. I could not take such a position and return to Moscow with an open face."

At this point, Stalin stood at the conference table as he spoke. It was the only time during the entire conference that he exhibited his strong feelings in such a manner.

"I prefer the war should continue a little longer although it costs us blood and to give Poland compensation in the west at the expense of the Germans," he continued. "I will maintain and I will ask all friends to support me in this. ... I am in favor of extending the Polish western frontier to the Neisse River."

Mr. Churchill doubted the wisdom of extending the western boundary of Poland to the Neisse River. He agreed that Poland's western boundary should be moved into what had been German territory but asserted "it would be a pity to stuff the Polish goose so full of German food that he will die of indigestion." He estimated that the taking of territory in East Prussia as far west as the Oder would necessitate the moving of six million Germans.

Stalin protested that the number would be much smaller because "where our troops come in, the Germans run away."

Churchill reminded him that consideration must be given "to where those Germans are that run away," and asked, "will there be room for them in what is left of Germany?"

Privately, Churchill expressed to me the opinion that placing the line at the Neisse River would mean the transferring of nearly nine million Germans. Such a number, he asserted, could never be absorbed in what would remain of Germany.

The discussion was long and earnest but Stalin finally accepted the Curzon Line in principle and the following somewhat equivocal statement on Poland's frontiers was approved for inclusion in the protocol:

"The three heads of government consider that the eastern frontier of Poland should follow the Curzon Line with digressions from it in some regions of five to eight kilometres in favour of Poland. They recognize that Poland must receive substantial accessions of territory in the North and West. They feel that the opinion of the new Polish Provisional Government of National Unity should be sought in due course on the extent of these accessions and that the final delimitation of the western frontier of Poland should thereafter await the peace conference."

Not only Poland's boundaries but Poland itself was one of the most serious issues of the entire conference. More time was spent on this subject than on any other. Because of the intensity of the argument, Mr. Roosevelt would assume a role more of arbiter than of advocate although he, as well as Prime Minister Churchill, urged the establishment of a new Polish government in Warsaw.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, wanted to continue the Lublin government. Stalin was willing to add a few persons but he wanted to make certain that those who were added did not affect the Soviet Union's control of the government.

The President said he favored a Polish government which would resolve all the political differences by "creating a government of national unity, a government which would represent all the political parties." Such a government, he maintained, should be provisional, and should regard as its primary duty the establishment of a permanent regime. He said the United States wished to have Poland on friendly terms with the Soviet Union and he felt if the conferees should solve the Polish question, they could make it easier to establish peace in the world.

"Britain," the Prime Minister said, "declared war on Germany in order that Poland should be free and sovereign. Everyone knows what a terrible risk we took and how nearly it cost us our life in the world, not only as an Empire but as a Nation. Our interest in Poland is one of honor. Having drawn the sword in behalf of Poland against Hitler's brutal attack, we could never be content with any solution that did not leave Poland a free and independent sovereign state."

He repeated the sentiment expressed by the President saying that Poland should not be "free to entertain hostile designs against the peace and safety of the Soviets."

Mr. Churchill eloquently painted the danger which arose from the continuing existence of two Polish governments. He urged that provision be made for a free election and that, in the meantime, effective guarantees could be made to secure the lines of communication of the Soviet army.

Stalin displayed great earnestness in replying.

"For the Russian people, the question of Poland is not only a question of honor but also a question of security. Throughout history, Poland has been the corridor through which the enemy has passed into Russia. Twice in the last thirty years our enemies, the Germans, have passed through this corridor. It is in Russia's interest that Poland should be strong and powerful, in a position to shut the door of this corridor by her own force. ... It is necessary that Poland should be free, independent in power. Therefore, it is not only a question of honor but of life and death for the Soviet state."

In every subsequent discussion the Soviet Government has used this argument to justify what it has done in Poland. Their idea of a friendly government is a government completely dominated by them. The Lublin government fitted this description and Stalin did not want to take any chances with representatives of other political parties. Later I discussed the subject with Mr. Molotov. I could not impress him with my views that Soviet security would be better assured by having in Poland a people who were friendly, rather than a government that was friendly only because it was dictated to by the Soviet Union. Unsuccessfully, I argued that governments would come and go, but that if the Soviet Government's conduct in Poland won the friendship of the people, the friendship of the government would be assured.

After the first discussion of Poland, President Roosevelt wrote a letter to Stalin suggesting that delegates from the Warsaw and London governments, and representatives of the several political factions in Poland not represented in those governments, meet to consider the formation of a new Polish Government. The letter became the basis of further discussions.

The conferees debated the President's proposal for several days. Finally they agreed on a declaration providing, among other things: "The provisional government which is now functioning in Poland should therefore be reorganized on a broader democratic basis with the inclusion of democratic leaders from Poland itself and from Poles abroad. This new government should then be called the Polish Provisional Government of National Unity."

A commission composed of Mr. Molotov, Mr. Harriman and Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, was appointed to consult, first, in Moscow with the members of the Lublin government, with democratic leaders from within Poland, and others from abroad, with a view to reorganizing the government along the lines indicated.

The declaration pledged the Provisional Government to the holding of free and unfettered elections as soon as possible on the basis of universal suffrage and secret ballot.

As the conferees neared what we thought was agreement on this troublesome issue, President Roosevelt asked:

"How long will it take you to hold free elections?"

"Within a month's time," Mr. Molotov replied.

The election which, by our standard, was not "free", actually was held twenty-three months later on January 19, 1947.

[...]