'End of the dream of an understanding with Stalin' from Le Monde (22 July 1985)

Caption: At the Potsdam Conference, held from 17 July to 2 August 1945, the first signs of tension between the USSR and the United States become apparent, particularly during negotiations on the occupation of defeated Germany.

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End of the dream of an understanding with Stalin

When they left Yalta in February 1945, Roosevelt and Churchill had not given up hope of reaching some kind of understanding with their difficult ally, Stalin. At Potsdam in July, following 16 days of negotiations, that glimmer of hope was virtually extinguished. Negotiations had been hard, and the outcome far from satisfactory. Once the enemy had been defeated, the alliance no longer had any real purpose. Above all, peace in Europe did not feel like a true peace.

'What disturbs me most', wrote William Averell Harriman, United States Ambassador to Moscow, some months before, 'is this: when a country starts to extend its influence beyond its own borders by means of force, under the pretext of safeguarding its security, it is very difficult to see how we can draw a line where it must stop. If we concede that the Soviet Union has the right to invade its immediate neighbours in order to safeguard its security, why should it not invade the next neighbouring state in due course? Where does it all end?'

The spring of 1945, when victory was assured, was actually a time of great anxiety for Churchill. The way in which Poland, an ally of the USSR, was forced to yield to the demands of its liberator during those months between Yalta and Potsdam was, for him, a test. He insisted on a tripartite meeting at the earliest possible moment, but Truman needed more time, and Stalin was certainly in no hurry.

'We cannot be happy', wrote Churchill to Stalin on 29 April 1945, 'looking at a future where you and the countries you dominate, together with the Communist parties in many other countries, would be on one side and the nations allied to the English-speaking countries and their dominions be on the other! Such confrontation would lead the world to ruin, and those among us from whichever side who had any responsibility would bear the shame of when the history of that period came to be written.'

Stalin's reply on 5 May was curt:

'I must tell you frankly', he concluded, 'that your attitude precludes any possibility of an agreement on Poland.'

In the United States, Truman had recently taken over from Roosevelt. He was still feeling his way, vacillating this way and that. According to some of his advisers, the United States had to avoid being dragged along by the old British imperialist system. Could there not be a specifically Soviet-American line of diplomacy in addition to Anglo-American friendship? As before Yalta, all in-depth consultation with the British was avoided so as not to give any cause for mistrust in the mind of the third partner.

Faits accomplis in Poland

We have no documentary evidence as to how the USSR prepared itself for the negotiations. The effect, however, is clear. In Poland, there were more and more 'faits accomplis'. In March, German territories to the East of the Oder and Neisse Rivers were returned to Polish administration; on 11 April, a 20-year military alliance was concluded with the Warsaw Government, the 'reorganisation' of which had been agreed at Yalta and would be done in June, but only in formal terms; the arrest in late March of 16 leaders of the Polish National Resistance who were taken to Moscow and tried in June, and so on. In Berlin, where Marshal Zhukov was in charge until the Allied Control Council came into operation at the end of July, four major German political parties were authorised and were immediately founded, along with various other popular organisations. In the words of Walter Ulbricht: 'Everything must appear to be democratic, but everything must be controlled by us', that is to say by the Communist Party, which was in the process of reconstruction.

Would Germany be the 'next neighbouring state' which Harriman referred to?

That situation did not occur, but discussions were tougher than at Teheran or Yalta. They were mainly concerned with Germany and the countries 'liberated' by the USSR. The diplomats had prepared a

programme for Germany that was fairly general and essentially negative (demilitarisation, denazification and, lastly, democratisation). In the countries of Eastern Europe, there was no shortage of grounds for recrimination.

The problem of reparations

However, plenty of other subjects were touched on: entry of the USSR into the war against Japan, the atomic bomb test at Los Alamos, the internationalisation of the Rhine and the Danube, which was proposed unsuccessfully by President Truman, while the Soviets were looking towards Turkey, the Bosphorus and the Near East, demanding trust territory status over the Libyan province of Tripolitania as well as four-power control over the Ruhr.

The British and the Americans contested the legitimacy of governments installed in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and even in Austria, and refused to recognise them. The Soviet Union replied with memorandums on the situation in Greece. It concentrated its efforts on Germany and the problem of German reparations, which had been on the back burner since Yalta. On the one hand, some degree of freedom was demanded for the liberated countries, and, on the other, a fixed amount of reparations was demanded by the countries that had been invaded, especially the USSR.

Poland was at the centre of the debate: not only was that country's liberty somewhat precarious, but, by a unilateral decision of the USSR, it had received nearly 20 % of the territory of pre-war Germany. How could this territorial upheaval not have repercussions on the whole question of reparations? How could one of the occupiers dispose of a territory that did not belong to it without the agreement of the others? Stalin replied: 'We are not bound by this decision.' Discussions went on for a fortnight but did not bear fruit. On the margins of this debate, Soviet plans for the Near East, principally the Bosphorus, the Mediterranean and control of the Ruhr provided much food for thought. Instead of a peace founded on stability and a return to normality, a dynamic, not to say expansionist, programme was taking shape.

Having decided to postpone finding a solution to these problems, James Byrnes, Truman's Secretary of State, proposed a compromise between majority and minority, such as might have been drawn up in the United States Congress, in order to bring the proceedings to a close:

1. The Western Powers, subject to a peace treaty, would no longer dispute the transfer to Poland of the German provinces to the east of the Oder-Neisse Line. They would consider recognising the governments in power in the Balkans, in return for some evidence of goodwill on their part.

2. The Soviet Union would abandon its claims for a fixed amount by way of reparations. These would be levied in kind by each of the powers within its own occupation zone in Germany.

A bad compromise

It was a bad compromise, since it tended towards the partition of Germany (even if, in retrospect, that was almost inevitable) and, as regards the Eastern European countries, there was no quid pro quo for the Western Powers. All the same, it was a compromise that was duly adopted and enabled the Conference to draw to a close on 1 August.

Who won? Stalin confirmed his hold over Central and Eastern Europe. Was there any possible way of dislodging him other than by force, which out of the question? The Western Allies had not given in to Soviet demands in relation to Turkey, the Bosphorus, Tripolitania or control of the Ruhr. On the whole, the USSR had got the best of the deal, having forced the Western Powers to accept many of the 'faits accomplis'. But could this advantage last?

When, in August 1945, Stalin claimed the right to occupy a zone in Japan, Harriman, without specific instructions from Washington but remembering Potsdam, immediately opposed the idea. This was the first manifestation of the policy of *containment*, which would be properly formulated in 1946–47 but which had

already been present within the Potsdam experience like ‘a thunderstorm in a cloud’.

We do not know what Moscow thought of those agreements. According to the official *History of the Foreign Policy of the USSR*, the Western Allies at Potsdam continued to dream of dismembering Germany. The USSR’s steadfastness of purpose had closed off that route. As regards the Eastern European countries, they simply sought to lay the blame at the door of the Soviet Union. From these opinions the conclusion may be drawn that Potsdam gave the USSR a certain amount of satisfaction, especially as regards Germany. After Potsdam, it is not unreasonable to imagine a Germany over which, after a peace treaty — that is to say after withdrawal of the occupying forces — the Soviet Union would exercise a dominant influence because of its proximity, of reparations and of the actions of various political and administrative organisations created in the Soviet Zone in the summer of 1945.

For such a policy to be implemented, the Western leaders would have to be extremely short-sighted. The style of the negotiations at Potsdam and the scope of the projects engendered mistrust. For many who took part in this conference, the idea of a long-term understanding between the victors had gone up in smoke. Accordingly, encouraged by Churchill, the idea began to develop, at least in government circles, of a European reawakening that would include Germany, if at all possible. Henry Stimson, Secretary of State for War, put forward these ideas in a memorandum which he sent to President Truman on 24 July while he was still at Potsdam.

Misery and grandeur

The situation was, however, viewed very differently in France. The French programme for peace in 1945 envisaged the Ruhr and the Rhineland independent of Germany. Those plans had not been approved by any of the Allies either in the West or the East. However, without this being the intention, France was to contribute to the shifting of the focus towards Europe which took place during 1947–48. By vetoing the creation of central German administrative systems in the autumn of 1945, the French Government made the future integration of West Germany into the European system considerably easier. It was a peculiar roundabout route, but, for once, this one had a happy ending, for the real lesson of Potsdam was that, faced with a system like the Soviet Union, the pure and simple assertion of ‘national interests’ in the narrow sense of the term was not enough. Interests had to be fitted into a wider perspective, in this instance the European perspective.

Thus it was that, from the misery of the Potsdam Conference was born if not ‘grandeur’ then at least the breadth of a long-term political programme, one that was common to both the Europeans and the Americans and which could last until such time as other solutions, not yet envisaged, might appear.

At Potsdam, in an expansive — or perhaps absent-minded — moment, Stalin had spoken some words which merit attention: ‘Any freely elected government would be anti-Soviet, and that we cannot allow.’ That was the starting point.

Raymond Aron was to write in 1983: ‘In this day and age, it is the very survival of free institutions in world history which is at stake.’ That is the goal.

Jean Laloy