# The land between two rivers – an exploration of the decision to make Niederschlesien a part of Poland

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Contents

# Abstract

Three conferences attended by the Allied leadership at Tehran (1943), Yalta (1945) and Potsdam (1945) determined the political shape of the post-war world. The last of these, the Potsdam Conference, was a celebratory meeting of the victorious war-time allies, held on the territory of the defeated and it was also the location for decisions on retribution, the sharing of the spoils of war and the preparation for future peace. This investigates why the decision was made at Potsdam, that Niederschlesien, a province of Germany, whose population was German, and that had been part Germany for hundreds of years, should become part of Poland. The chief focus is on the part played by the British leadership and diplomats in the decision-making resting on the affirmation that although, according to the Potsdam Protocol, the future of Niederschlesien was to be settled at a future peace conference, its fate was, de facto, decided at Potsdam itself. After setting frontier issues for the conference in context via an examination of the preparations in the foreign office and the War Cabinet, and a review of discourse in the media, this thesis will examine three main approaches to the decision-making. Firstly, it will deal with the close discussions about Niederschlesien and top level decision-making by the elites around the table at Cecillienhof. Then, it will enrich the enterprise by offering a cultural history of the conference using Pierre Bourdieu's toolbox with a view towards eliciting wider cultural influences and a consideration of the non-conscious perspective. Thirdly, on an analogous basis, the application of Daniel Kahneman's research results, despite coming from behaviourist psychology, can add an enriching dimension to the decision-making by the conferences participants.

# Introduction

Three conferences attended by the Allied leadership at Tehran (1943), Yalta (1945) and Potsdam (1945) determined the political shape of the post-war world. The last of these, the Potsdam Conference, was a celebratory meeting of the victorious war-time allies, held on the territory of the defeated and it was also the location for decisions on retribution, the sharing of the spoils of war and the preparation for future peace. It is often said that most of the foundational decisions had already been made by the allies at Tehran and Yalta but it was at Potsdam that these were confirmed or modified. It was there that attempts were made to reduce the ambiguities in earlier agreements made under war-time pressures and move towards new post-war relationships. The British and Americans returned home afterwards declaring it to have been a success, with some reservations, and still hopeful that a long-term relation with the Soviet Union was possible.[1] My thesis will investigate why the decision was made at Potsdam, that Niederschlesien, a province of Germany, whose population was German, and that had been part Germany for hundreds of years, should become part of Poland. This cannot be a standalone project as it is impossible to rip just one element out of the broad canvas and examine it alone and so there must also be an examination of parts of the rich interwoven fabric of the Potsdam Conference and events leading up to it. The focus will be on the part played by the British leadership and diplomats in the decision-making resting on the affirmation that although, according to the Potsdam Protocol, the future of Niederschlesien was to be settled at a future peace conference, its fate was, de facto, decided at Potsdam itself. No peace conference with Germany happened, and a generation later in 1970, Chancellor Willy Brandt for Germany and Prime Minister Jozef Cyrankiewicz for Poland signed the Treaty of Warsaw, and in recognising the Oder Neisse Line as the frontier between the two countries, confirmed the

[1] Harry S. Truman, ‘Radio report to the American people on the Potsdam Conference’, Harry S Truman Library and Museum, 9 August 1945, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/97/radio-report-american-people-potsdam-conference [accessed 2 March 2026].

reality on the ground.[2] Historian Thomas Otte, using a football analogy fairly states that "Just as a football reporter cannot capture the dynamics or the flow of the match, the intricacies of the passing game or the effectiveness of counter-pressing by focusing on just one team, so the historian cannot simply concentrate on one side alone." And so there is much discussion about the interchanges with the other two world powers, but to stretch the analogy further, its focus here is mostly on the behaviour of the home team and the British participation is in the floodlights.[3]

Within the British diplomatic portfolio being carried to Potsdam on 14 July 1945, there was the clear intention to make sure that the eastern border of Germany, which had been discussed with Stalin as early as the Tehran Conference, would be as far east as possible and the city of Breslau would remain German. The official brief stated "a reasonable western frontier for Poland (which will necessarily be well short of her (RUSSIAN) present claims and should in the view of H.M.G. not exceed the free city of Danzig, East Prussia south and west of Koenigsberg, Oppeln Silesia and the most eastern portion of Pomerania."[4] Sixteen days later, Article 1X of the Communique on the Tripartite Conference in Berlin, denoting a failure to achieve this aspiration, states "The three Heads of Government agree that, pending the final determination of Poland's western frontier, the former German territories east of a line running from the Baltic Sea immediately west of Swinemunde, and thence along the Oder River to the confluence of the western Neisse to the Czechoslovak frontier, including the portion of East Prussia not placed under the administration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in accordance with the understanding reached at this conference and including the area of the

[2] 'Poland and Federal Republic of Germany: Agreement concerning the basis for normalization of their mutual relations. Signed at Warsaw on 7 December 1970'. United Nations Treaty Series, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20830/volume-830-I-11878-English.pdf [accessed 2 March 2026].
[3] T.G. Otte, 'The Inner Circle: What is Diplomatic History? (And why we should study it): An Inaugural Lecture', *History* 105 (2020), pp. 5-27 (p. 12).
[4] *Documents on British Policy Overseas 1945. Series 1. Volume 1. The Conference at Potsdam, July – August 1945*, ed. by Rohan Butler and M.E. Pelly (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1984) [hereafter *DBPO Potsdam*], p. 222.

former free city of Danzig, shall be under the administration of the Polish State and for such purposes should not be considered as part of the Soviet zone of occupation in Germany."[5] In simple terms, Niederschlesien, which lay east of the Western Neisse, would be administered by the new Polish Government until its future would be decided at a future peace conference. In the meantime, its German population, or to be more precise, all those Germans who had not already fled westwards would be expelled and replaced by Polish people who had been ejected from territories further east. The judgement being made here is that, regardless of the words in the communique, such movements were irreversible and once sanctioned by the three Allies, and with the arrival new Polish settlers, then Niederschlesien became de facto part of Poland. Up until the signing of the protocol Niederschlesien's future was still open. Two days from the end of the conference, on 29 July at 3.00p.m. at the Prime Minister's residence, Clement Attlee, the new British Prime Minister, said directly to Bierut, the leader of the new Polish Government "His majesty's government could not mislead the British public in such matters by pretending that what would in reality become a final settlement was a purely provisional one. In the Labour Party they were accustomed to call a spade a spade."[6] Before the conference, the Allies had already decided that Germans would be ejected from all territories belonging to other nations and so the decision about Niederschlesien added millions more to the numbers of people who would be ejected from their homes and relocated somewhere within the reduced frontiers of Germany.[7] Whatever diplomatic language was used afterwards to domestic audiences by any of the negotiating parties, they all knew the consequences of their decision.

There was much to play for at Potsdam – much to be gained or lost. There is the notion abroad that the military and economic context limited the manoeuvrability and bargaining power of the British and Americans. Clement Attlee wrote in his autobiography, ten years later,

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[5] *The Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences: Documents* (Progress Publishers, 1969), p. 330.
[6] *DBPO Potsdam*, p. 978.
[7] Matthew Frank, *Expelling the Germans, British Opinion and Post-1945 Population Transfer in Context* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

when out of office, “We were obliged to accept the position pending a peace settlement, but it was obvious that, once settled in this sense, it would be difficult to change the boundary.” There was nothing deterministic about the final placement of Niederschlesien within Poland and the case will be made here that much depended on the performance of the negotiators facing each other across the table, even if they felt bounded in some way by the context in which they found themselves. Tough decisions had to be made and the British delegates sometimes had to choose between options which ran against their habitual thinking and their values. My approach and examination of this particular topic can serve as a case study for how decisions under uncertainty are made at key junctures in history, when the military and post war tensions mean that opportunities for the stable settlement of contested issues are reducing. If, as is claimed here, that complementary approaches from outside the discipline can enrich the understanding of international decision-making, then this will have obvious benefits.

Soon after their arrival from the eastern territories, expellee associations were set up to press for the return of lost lands and for compensation, and in the early post war years “there was hardly a politician in those earlier years who did not agree with the ‘right to a homeland’ loudly demanded by the association leaders.”[8] In the years since, these associations lobbied hard on issues and events allied to their cause including Brandt’s Ostpolitik in the 1960s, and unification in the 1990s. Seventy years after Potsdam, and despite all the formal national and international treaties on Poland’s western borders, there is still public discourse about the Oder Neisse Line and there are still people who are alleged to harbour revanchist tendencies within the German population [9]. The generations of people who suffered directly through the decisions made there have mostly passed on, but identity and memory are powerful forces and so the

[8] Christian Habbe, ‘Der zweite lange Marsch’, *Der Spiegel*, 14 April 2002, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/der-zweite-lange-marsch-a-ca876b0e-0002-0001-0000-000022078263 [accessed 2 March 2026].

[9] ‘Charges of Historical Revisionism Stir Up Berlin’ Spiegelm International, 4 August 2010, http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/germany-s-expellee-museum-charges-of-historical-revisionism-stir-up-berlin-a-710132.html [accessed 2 March 2026].

issue is still alive, although declining within the following generations. The historian Eric Langenbacher formed the view that in the ongoing contest for this part of German collective memory, by the twenty-first century, "advocates of the Holocaust-centred memory succeeded in convincing many others to consider the obliteration of German cities, the loss of former homelands east of the Oder-Neisse line, and the division of the country as the 'just punishment' for the misery and death that Nazi Germany unleashed."[10]

In the years since World War Two and as relationships between Poland and Germany slowly improved, millions of people have made the trip eastwards to retouch their earlier lives or in search of their ancestry, with varying degrees of satisfaction or consolation. From 2016 onwards, German citizens were granted all permissions to purchase agricultural land in Poland and without doubt some of them will attempt to purchase and reoccupy the farms of their parents or grandparents. The Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation, dedicated to the history of forced migrations of people east of the Oder-Neisse Line was opened in Berlin in the summer of 2021. After this long period there is strong appetite for understanding and reconciliation. It may be that the official acceptance of the frontiers and events that happened in is German Polish Border Treaty in 1990 is now an acceptance that is shared by all the populace except for a tiny minority. The passage of time also allows for a more detached treatment of the Potsdam Conference by historians. Books written on the topic in the aftermath of the world conflict and caught up in the development of the cold war are clearly marked by the prevailing political viewpoints of their times. They were handicapped by unavailable documents and also by accepted historians' approaches to the writing of political and diplomatic history. There is a substantial body of historiography about the Potsdam Conference much of it written before the cultural turn, without a proper input from the ordinary

[10] Eric Langenbacher, 'Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany', *German Politics & Society*, 21.2 (2003), pp. 46-68.

people and institutions of the western democracies being acknowledged, without a search for any German influences on the stances taken, played out as an interchange between huge world characters, and often concluding in a suggested and finely graded collection of causes about why decisions were made. The conference is treated as if it was a foregone conclusion and usually figures as a subsidiary chapter in wider studies on World War Two or the development of the Cold War.[11] If decisions and events were measured by their impact on populations, and the western historical writers and politicians were more willing to examine their earlier international political compromises and their occasional sacrifice of their declared sacred principles, then Potsdam deserves a much higher number in the historical pecking order of conferences. It would also be given a bigger space in school history books. It is for all these reasons that a fresh interpretation is justified.

In the decades that followed the conference useful biographies, diaries and memoirs became available.[12] Eventually, in the 1960s the opening of state archives in the United States of America (USA) and Great Britain in 1970s facilitated the writing of mostly rather traditional

[11] Michael Dockrill & Michael F. Hopkins, *The Cold War 1945-49*, (Palgrave Macmillian, 2006).

[12] Biographies include: Rudy Abramson, *The life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891-1986* (William Morrow, 1992); Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (Simon & Schuster, 1986); David Robertson, *Sly and Able: A Political Biography of James Byrnes* (W.W. Norton, 1994); J. Robert Moskin, *Mr Truman's War: The Final Victories of World War II and the Birth of the Postwar World* (University Press of Kansas 1996); Roy Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography* (Macmillan, 2001); Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983); Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (Phoenix, 2003); David F. Schmitz, *Henry L. Stimson: The First Wise Man* (Scholarly Resources, 2001); William Lasser, *Benjamin V. Cohen: Architect of the New Deal* (Yale University Press, 2002); Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary 1945 – 1951* (Oxford University Press, 1984); D.R. Thorpe, *The Life and Times of Anthony Eden, First Early of Avon, 1897-1977* (Chatto & Windus, 2003). For Diaries and memoirs, see for example: Anthony Eden, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon: The Reckoning* (Houghton Mifflin, 1965); Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull, Volume One* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1948); James F. Byrnes, *All in One Lifetime* (Harper & Brothers, 1958); James F. Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly* (William Heinemann, 1947); Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume 5: Closing the Ring* (Cassell, 1952); Harry S. Truman, *The Memoirs of Harry S. Truman, Volume 1: The Year of Decisions* (New American Library, 1955); *Where the Buck Stops: The Personal Writings of Harry S. Truman*, ed. by Margaret Truman (Warner, 1989); Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman, ed. by Robert H. Ferrell (Harper & Row, 1980); Clement R. Attlee, *As it Happened* (Odhams, 1954); Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History 1929-1969* (W.W. Norton, 1973); W. Averell Harriman & Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941-1946* (Random House, 1975); George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Little, Brown, 1967); David Dilks, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938-1945* (Cassell, 1971); Count Edward Raczynski, *In Allied London: The Wartime Diaries of the Polish Ambassador* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962).

diplomatic histories. Some of the key individuals involved later set up arrangements for collections of their papers (personal and public) to be accessed.

There are no historical interpretations focused solely on the of fate Niederschlesien in 1945. Coverage of the Potsdam conference appears in many historical narratives elsewhere but the examination of the Niederschlesien issue and in particular why the decision about its future was made at Potsdam is never addressed as a singular and separate topic. There were hundreds of decisions made there, all contingent, with many of them interdependent and conditional upon one another, and these narratives have tended to make a general sweep of events instead of having a particular focus. Many books have been written with a view to persuading the readers that the conference itself marked the start of the Cold War. The selection of books reviewed here start with those that were written very early after the events, by insiders or those with who had political allegiances, and which delivered narratives with a strong polemical element. The later narratives, aimed at a more popular market, use a more traditional political history approach.

In interrogating this historiography on the Oder/Neisse Line the earliest significant book is *The Logic of the Oder-Neisse Frontier* by Jozef Kokot first published in Polish in 1957.[13] It is a state-funded piece of propaganda attempting to justify the Potsdam decisions based on legal principles within international law and agreements. It offers a very positive picture of the nature of population transfers in the world generally and Germany in particular and a description of changes in the economic structures in Poland in the pre and post war period. Not supported by balanced evidence, the author claims that the territories along the Oder were Polish historically.[14] Published in the same year, but taking a very different view, was the book *The Genesis of the Oder-Neisse Line* written by Wolfgang Wagner and published with the

[13] Jozef Kokot, *The Logic of the Oder Neisse Frontier* (Wydawnictwo Zachodnie, 1959).
[14] Richard Hiscocks, review of *The Logic of the Oder-Neisse Line* by Jozef Kokot, *International Affairs*, 37.1 (1961), p. 100.

financial support of the Federal German Government.[15] Just as the above book reflects the mentality of the Soviet controlled GDR, then this book, a much more sophisticated achievement and a more complex read, could be taken to represent ideas within the Federal government. There is no doubt that it reveals the mentality of some people in the late 1950s in the Federal Republic but without the use of appropriate sources it is unable to reveal much about the mentalities of the groups and forces in Britain and the USA where the Oder-Neisse plan was developing during the war-time period. Stalin is portrayed as the rogue at the event and the other two Allied leaders only yielded under the strong pressure of the Polish government and the lie perpetuated by Stalin who said that by then the greatest part of the German population had already fled across the line.

Herbert Feis's book about the Potsdam Conference called *Between War and Peace*, was written by an insider, fifteen years after the war.[16] It is a thorough and professional explanation of events around Potsdam but it is very much a period piece and he feels comfortable about making the following overt comment in his summary:

> The Potsdam Accords were not, in intention or in effect, unjust or cruel to the Germans. The central conceptions - to allow the Germans to experience the same kind of deprivation and misery that they had brought on others; to cast out and debar from influence those who had served the Nazi cause ardently; to reduce German industrial power to make war; to forbid the Germans all military forms and organisations; to redirect their political life in the hope of shaping it into a peaceful democracy - all these are good.'[17]

[15] Wolfgang Wagner, *The Genesis of the Oder Neisse Line* (Brentano-Verlag, 1957).
[16] Herbert Feis, *Between War and Peace: The Potsdam Conference* (Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 272.
[17] Ibid., p. 272.

Feis had worked in his earlier life for the Roosevelt administration as an economic adviser for international affairs at the Department of State and for the Department of War where he worked for Henry L Stimson, who was then Secretary of War and who attended the Potsdam Conference. One could be easily persuaded to use this book as an example of the difficulties inherent in writing about policy related topics in the very recent past, where history is being used to justify foreign policy decisions and ideology.

Two elements of significance were raised by Feis and these need to be re-examined on the basis of material not available at the time. The first is that on 29 July 1945 Stalin said to Bierut that "The Americans had presented their boundary proposal based on the eastern Neisse and the line of the Oder, including Stettin. In view of this concession should the Poles not do likewise and agree to the line of the Queis (Kwisa) instead of the Lausitzer (Western) Neisse.?"[18] The second is that at core of his book he places the so-called "package deal" which was a workaday compromise which Feis says had three elements; Niederschlesien, the American terms for reparations, and the refurbishment of Italy. Feis's opportunities for comprehensiveness in his account is very much staunched by his reduced access to primary sources. He uses a very narrow collection of American archives along with memoirs and secondary texts. No British archival sources are mentioned at all. Only a few memoirs and biographies of prominent British leaders are used and very little of the British perspective is included. For this reason this is a very ethnocentric book. The focus is always on exchanges of correspondence between the main players and there is no attempt to examine public opinion or press coverage. His underlying methodology means he is unable to fully develop a narrative about the long-term drivers affecting the thinking of all the parties.

[18] Ibid., p. 261.

Charles Mee's book entitled 'Meeting at Potsdam" 1975 is journalistic account of the conference.[19] Parts of the book appear very much like a script for a play with conversational text simply transcribed. Here and there are bracketed words, like "ingratiatingly" or "laughter" or "after a moment's silence" attached to the dialogue as if they are directions for actors on a stage. Finney would say that "by treating language as transparent," the writer "simply re-inscribes with little comment, the discourses of policymakers".[20] Mee is perhaps making the assumption the story of the conference can be rewritten as theatre and that norms and values remain the same over space and time. Nevertheless, the storyline moves quickly and is very readable. He plunders the past in a cut and paste fashion, to write a good story and to please an American audience.

The book called *Nemesis at Potsdam* by Alfred M. de Zayas deals with the background to the expulsions and its consequences and also applies the obligations attached to international law to decisions made at the relevant conferences.[21] Surprisingly the discussions between the parties at the Potsdam Conference on 30 July and 1 August when trading happened and the final agreement was reached are not dealt with in any detail: in fact, the "package deal" was not even mentioned. No analysis of the media or public opinion in America or Britain is attempted. Alfred de Zayas includes some British archives in his bibliography, including documents on British foreign policy, but they are rarely put to use. Most of the time he is skimming across the top, taking high level diplomatic statements and pronouncements as undisputed evidence of a nation's stance on issues. Alexander Cadogan, the permanent under-secretary (PUS) of state for British foreign affairs, is not even listed in the index and Churchill is obviously assumed to be the embodiment of the nation. Anyone lower down in the pecking

[19] Charles L. Mee, *Meeting at Potsdam* (Andre Deutsch, 1975).
[20] Patrick Finney, 'International History, Theory and origins of World War Two', in *The History and Narrative Reader*, ed. by Geoffrey Roberts (Routledge, 2001), pp. 390-408 (p. 403).
[21] Alfred M. de Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam: The Anglo-Americans and the Expulsion of the Germans* (Routledge & Paul Kegan, 1977).

order, even if they were involved in developing or preparing policy is ignored. Some comments made by dissenting Members of Parliament (MPs) on the floor of the House of Commons are included, but for the most part, except for the vivid descriptions of the suffering endured by the millions of victims in the story, this is written at the macro level, and is essentially traditional political history. It strongly addresses the question of the legality of the expulsions in international law but its focus is not on the decision-making processes themselves. His approach is very traditional and narrow, and is undoubtedly a polemic, written with a legalistic view of the legitimacy of the decisions taken at various points before the formation of the United Nations organisation. Published in 1977, more than a generation after the exodus, and seven years after the Warsaw Treaty where the German and Polish governments officially recognised the Oder Neisse Line as the border between them, he even raises the possibility of the "voluntary termination" of the occupation of territory.[22]

The book *Poland's Place in Europe: General Sikorski and the Origin of the Oder-Neisse Line* was written by political scientist Sarah Meiklejohn Terry in 1983.[23] It is a very commendable piece of academic work using British and American archives and also the material available at the Polish Institute (the Archive of the Polish Government in exile) in London. She reveals conflicts within the British foreign office staff and between it and other agencies and shows how the policy process worked. The main thrust of the book is the part played by Sikorski as leader of the Polish government in exile in the development of a post war policy and she outlines his plans for the annexation of land for the new Poland to the north and west and his efforts to promote these with Anthony Eden and Franklin Roosevelt.[24] She makes a claim that for various reasons, a wall of silence was erected around Sikorski's role in the development of Polish post-war policy. Her stated quest was to answer the question "why has

[22] De Zayas, *Nemesis*, p. 175.
[23] Sarah Meiklejohn Terry, *Poland's Place in Europe: General Sikorski and the Origin of the Oder-Neisse Line 1939-1943* (Princeton 1983).
[24] Ibid., pp 302-306.

the conventional wisdom concerning the origins of the Oder-Neisse line been accepted for so long, while General Sikorski's pursuit of a similar boundary for Poland has remained obscured?"[25]

If the volume of footnotes could be taken as a measure of thick description, then Terry succeeds. Events are explained in terms of multiple causes and how these causes all relate to each other. So, she is moving towards the practice of cultural history before it became fashionable.[26] Strategic, economic, social, diplomatic, and personal interests all come together in the narrative. However, it has a declared focus on a particular individual and only covers part of the period of interest to this thesis. Also, to a greater extent it is operating from within the bubble that was the exiled Polish community in London, presumably because her topic automatically confines her to this. Broader public opinion is not canvassed. She very generously writes a bibliographical essay at the end of her book and from that it is completely obvious that she has left out the British and American media altogether.[27] Her study ends in 1943 with the death of Sikorski.

*Expelling the Germans* by Matthew Frank, started as a doctoral project.[28] In the second chapter it examines British wartime studies in population transfer, and, given the symbiotic relationship between transfers and frontiers, this is very pertinent. Having already examined the development of the principle of population transfer from the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 up until the outbreak of hostilities in World War II, he then looks at the impact of the war on British thinking on this topic. He reaches out to areas that others do not and on the issue of population transfer he traces the developing stances taken by the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal parties. He then examines the reports prepared by the League of Nations Minorities

[25] Ibid., p. 9.
[26] Susanne Schattenberg, 'The Diplomat as an actor on a great stage before the whole people'? A Cultural History of Diplomacy and the Peace Negotiations of Portsmouth in 1905, in *The Diplomats' World: A Cultural History of Diplomacy, 1815-1914*, ed. by Markus Mosslang and Torsten Riotte (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 174.
[27] Meiklejohn Terry, *Poland's Place in Europe*, pp. 359-367.
[28] Frank, *Expelling the Germans*.

Committee, an advisory body called Foreign Research and Press Service, and a report prepared by the Foreign Office.[29] He gathers some comment from magazines attached to the main political parties and throws in a comment from each of *The Times*, *Telegraph* and *Observer* newspapers, which although small in circulation were read by the influential people in the land. All this amounts to thick description. In all of the books about the post war situation this one is closest to exploring the cultural construction of stances about the expulsion of Germans taken by various groups in British society. The wheeling and dealing that went on during the conference itself is not the writer's main interest.

Michael Neiberg in his 2015 book called *Potsdam* tries to explain the Potsdam conference by understanding the world as the leaders gathered there saw it.[30] Both Churchill and Truman had been soldiers on the western front in World War One and Stalin's background was very varied and proactive in political and military matters. They were, therefore, not deskbound diplomats but knew directly about war and its aftermath. Thus, how the statesmen there understood the past inevitably conditioned the way they saw the past and present. Yuen Foong Khong suggests that the way policymakers remember their own past influences determines how they establish their positions about issues they see in the present and Neiberg applied this to Potsdam.[31] Therefore, he starts with the Treay of Versailles where he believes their initial views were born and takes the major themes through from 1919 to 1945. He writes that although he gives due weight to the great characters involved, that strategic environments and historical understandings limited and shaped the range of options open to these men.[32] And so, James Byrnes, John Maynard Keynes and Harry Truman chose the Versailles settlement as their analogy and wanted to avoid the mistakes of financial allocation made there, while

[29] Ibid., pp. 57-73.
[30] Michael Neiberg, *Potsdam: The End of World War II and the Remaking of Europe* (Basic, 2015).
[31] Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton University Press, 1992).
[32] Neiberg, *Potsdam*.

Anthony Eden and Averell Harriman had Munich in their minds, and they saw acquisitive and aggressive Soviet behaviour during the period leading up to the conference as analogous to that of Adolf Hitler in the run-up to the 1938 Munich Conference. This counts as a major part of his explanation for events.

Neiberg deals with the Oder Neisse line and Silesia in a late chapter called "The bastard of Versailles". In his view both Truman and Churchill were unwilling to make Poland a major issue at Potsdam and only Anthony Eden wanted to push the issue. He says that several British leaders did not understand the difference between the eastern and western branches of the Neisse river which he describes as approximately the size of Massachusetts and containing 2.7 million ethnic Germans. Therefore, the area went to the Poles almost as much out of confusion as out of design and British and American misunderstanding of the geographical, historical and cultural contexts of Eastern Europe impacted on the lives of millions of people.

The outstanding interpretation on events surrounding the decision on Niederschlesien, if only as a secondary topic within a larger narrative, is *Orderly and Humane* by R.M. Douglas.[33] With a different focus, it covers a very broad canvas including analogies with expulsions of populations during and after World War One elsewhere, especially the forced Turkish-Greek Exchanges in 1923, and then eventually comprehensive and detailed coverage of expulsions of the Germans in 1945 and afterwards.[34] Although the main body of the work is about the flight of the expellees themselves and the dire consequences for them of the German defeat on the Eastern Front, it includes a great deal of top-table talk amongst decision-makers within governments and at conferences, and much material on the attitudinal changes within the various European political communities. He attempts to deal with many "deeply uncomfortable and – still – highly contentious and divisive questions," and he refers to a

[33] R.M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane. The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (Yale University Press, 2012).
[34] Ibid., pp. 70-71.

"messy, complex, morally compromised, and socially disruptive episode".[35] Noting that when General Sikorski, the Polish leader, went to see President Roosevelt in December 1942, with the intention of asking him for support for the annexation of German Silesia only as far as the Eastern Neisse, the most important demographic question on his mind was not the removal of Germans. This was because he had earlier said to Anthony Eden that it would be "quite impossible … for Poland to continue to maintain 3.5 million Jews after the war. Room must be found for them elsewhere."[36] Both of these aspirations changed shortly afterwards. Using sources not used by other historians he also writes that "Stalin sardonically assured the Lublin Poles that Churchill would never know the difference" if the frontier was changed from the Eastern to the Western Neisse, thus doubling the number of Germans to be forcibly evacuated.[37] The Potsdam Conference itself is dealt with very swiftly but he makes two significant judgements about the deliberations of the decision-makers there on Niederschlesien. Firstly, he writes that Stalin "unbent so far as to agree to a pair of compromise formulae presented by the U.S. and British delegations respectively, to enable the Allied leaders to cover their blushes." Secondly, when commenting about the Poles being allowed to administer Niederschlesien, he writes: "This at least kept open the theoretical possibility that a future conference might return some of the lands to Germany, and enabled the Western leaders to maintain for a little longer the fiction that the western boundaries of the new Polish state were yet to be determined."[38] The research is very thorough and impressive throughout this book and the author has worked hard to explore the humanity of the people involved. Although the main part of the book gives the impression that it is a traditional narrative trying to discover the truth, the influence of postmodernism is very obvious in the way that he investigates how the various European countries have endeavoured to both remember and repress the experiences of the expulsions.

[35] Ibid., p. 3.
[36] Ibid., p. 24.
[37] Ibid., p. 82.
[38] Ibid., p. 90.

The literature reviewed in the preceding paragraphs show a number of distinct trends. Some authors have set out to write polemics, while others are short on sources or have neglected essential areas of investigation. It appears to be the case, at least in the earlier studies, that the writers are operating on the presupposition that there is one truth and that this can be found and clearly described. They had not been exposed to the later postmodernist thinking which points to "the impossibility of linguistic and discursive closure" and prefers to accept a state of aporia.[39] Some of these other avenues need to be explored. Secondly, there is heavy use of analogy, parallels and metaphor in these interpretations of events at Potsdam. These are sometimes directly stated as if they are explanations by the historians, sometimes just as presentational effects to aid the readers' understanding, or sometimes they are placed in the mouths of the historical agents. Thirdly, the preference by the writers is for analyses of the conversation around the top table based on their close scrutiny of selected surviving documents. Powerful elites, usually men of advanced years and considerable committee and decision-making experience, are deciding on world issues between them. Geopolitical issues are in the foreground and it appears decisions are logical and based on convincing assertions by leaders and diplomats operating within a well-practised protocol. Analysis of the logic within the documents is always the dominant concern and the unsaid, habitual, and taken-for-granted are given little consideration. Little room has been given in these interpretations for cultural history of the kind that has been developing within the profession over the past few decades.

There is an unstated acceptance that our interface with the world is a representationalist affair, in other words that people do not understand reality directly but indirect realism is at play. We are only able to make sense of the "real" world via intermediate concepts and symbols, and these are constructed within a social context. This means that the construction of the normal historical narrative or any other form of epistemological enterprise relies on language and

[39] Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (Routledge, 2003), p. 31.

symbols. Other accepted pre-suppositions are the existence of free will, the basic folk psychology that action follows intention in human behaviour, and that the past no longer exists. These ought not to be thought of as disposable, because without pre-suppositions and other mental constructs it would be impossible to construct any narrative about past events. They allow people to think historically in the first place. Without seeking to go on a long journey of philosophical analysis, if this is the basic philosophical platform upon which diplomatic history rests, then it presents a few difficulties for practitioners, particularly those offered by postmodernists. As David Reynolds puts it: "At a philosophical level, postmodernism and post-structuralism have had an unsettling effect on a sub-discipline supposedly dedicated to the objective analysis of documentary evidence."[40] These are essentially the same challenges that historians in other fields have to address.

The linguistic turn questions the possibility of coping with language reliably, suggesting that meanings cannot be pinned down in a stable way and retain their meanings.[41] This is important for my work because of the nature of the written records that I will be using. The diplomatic protocols, such as Ernest Satow's *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, was designed to introduce some stability to behaviour, language and symbols in diplomacy, but meanings, depending always on networks of supporting words, are always subject to change.[42] "As Derrida stresses, 'conventions, institutions and consensus are stabilizations (sometimes stabilizations of great duration, sometimes micro-stabilizations)' and 'this means that they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic'."[43] The notion of instability in language has been extended by postmodernists into the idea that it also applies to "our various social institutions, conventions, law-codes and political systems [that] are all attempts to

[40] David Reynolds, 'International History, the Cultural Turn and the Diplomatic Twitch', *Journal of Social History Society*, 2.3 (2015), pp. 75-91 (p. 78).
[41] Keith Jenkins, 'A Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin', *History and Theory*, 39.2 (2000), pp. 181-200.
[42] Ernest Satow (Revised by H. Richie), *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1932).
[43] Laura M. Henderson, 'Deciding to Repeat Differently: Iterability and Decision in Judicial Decision-Making', *European Journal of Legal Studies*, 2.1 (2018), pp. 117-27 (p. 118).

stabilise ‘unstable and chaotic’ social and cultural formations.”[44] Diplomats have to deal with all the complexities involved in verbal interchanges within this chaos. Misunderstandings are not uncommon. It is therefore not surprising that everyday words such as ‘democracy’ or ‘courts’ have varying meanings in different locations. In some ways diplomats, particularly those who are skilled in their field, rely on the instability of language because its inherent ambiguity allows them to reach face-saving agreements which can be interpreted differently later on.

The second important turn for my work, which at times challenged more traditional diplomatic history, is the cultural turn, where more prominence is given to contested meanings from wider sources. But historian Thomas Otte firmly states that, “These new approaches…cannot replace the concern with top-level decision-making, more especially when things are on the cusp of peace and war.” The focus is still on “the history of decision-making” and “those who made decisions.”[45] Applied to Potsdam, this places the primacy on the agency of the elites who represented their countries in the negotiations while others are left out of interpretations. However, decisions are never made in a vacuum. by rational thinkers. Therefore, whatever his thoughts are about “the inner circle” and postmodernism seeking “to dissolve history”, Otte concedes that “Undoubtedly, these new approaches add to our understanding of international history; they can enrich it:”[46] Elites are bred and embedded in the language and symbolism used in the wider culture and at Potsdam this followed them to the round table at Cecilienhof where many of the decisions were made.

This thesis will seek to add to our understanding of decision-making at Potsdam by introducing the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu which allows ways for those, other than the elites, to become part of the historical narrative. Implemented fully into the historical context,

[44] Jenkins, *Refiguring History*, p. 22.
[45] Otte, ‘Inner Circle’, p. 27.
[46] Ibid., p. 26.

Bourdieu's toolbox of interrelated concepts allows for a much broader perspective, where the links within wider society, involving domination and subjugation, are exposed, and can be incorporated into the narrative. The elites are not pushed aside but others are included in the story. Important historians have enriched the study of diplomatic history by including cultural approaches. In her study of the Treaty of Portsmouth, Susanne Schattenberg has shown that the element of performance is as important as the diplomatic arguments.[47] Meanshile, Andersen and Newman have examined the unspoken assumptions involved in Wampum diplomacy.[48] And Luís Nuno Rodrigues examines cold war cultural relationships and attempts by the United States to integrate Portugal into its sphere via educational exchange links and the Fulbright programme.[49] This thesis intends to build on approaches such as these.

The third issue worth dwelling upon comes from the nature of representationalism itself. Natural scientists, who arguably rely on the inviolable assumption that there are times when one set of circumstances can be the same as some other sets of circumstances, may be able to rely and act on temporary statements about the nature of their world, until they are disproven.[50] For historians, representationalism is not able to offer this level of certainty about what happened and why it might have happened. Relying on the use of ideas constructed by human beings, historians' enterprise cannot avoid an attachment to meaning and thus they will always be involved in some kind of hermeneutic examination. Rather than being able to claim that a statement or affirmation conforms to a law of some kind, they are condemned to point to some kind of translational relationship. As Eelco Runia notes, "By being bound up with metaphor, representationalism is irremediably *horizontal*: it may suggest illuminating, surprising and inspiring ways to see one thing in terms of another but precisely because of this

[47] Schattenberg, 'The Diplomat as an Actor'.
[48] Morten S. Andersen & Iver B. Neumann, 'Practices as Models: A Methodology with an Illustration Concerning Wampum Diplomacy', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 40.3 (2012), pp. 457–481.
[49] Luís Nuno Rodrigues, 'Establishing a "Cultural Base"? The Creation of the Fulbright Program in Portugal', *International History Review*, 40.3 (2018), pp. 683-697.
[50] Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (Routledge, 2002).

it does not bring us any closer to the inexorable, meaningless numinosity of reality."[51] Thus, one thing is described in terms of another. Historical interpretation involves the metaphorical, and every text is littered with metaphor, parallels, analogies, folk wisdom, aphorisms and common-sense, all varieties of language which involves iteration of some kind. Sometimes smuggled and hard to spot, and at other times drawn deliberately into an exposition to support an argument, they are a fundamental part of the historical interpretation. Natural scientists refer to explanations and they can use laws in support, but historians produce interpretations and they use metaphor and analogy. Meaning is irrelevant and an inappropriate word in the practice of natural science, but for historians it is fundamental. In natural science, the circumstances are not believed to be unique but in studying the past they are. As Thomas Otte puts it, 'The main events are unique, irreversible and unrepeatable. A historical truth is true only once.'[52] The main difficulty with analogy is that when applied, its functionality is very limited and although very appealing when first presented, its power to impress breaks down the more it is pressed into service. As well as throwing up the similarities, the dissimilarities are also pinpointed.[53]

Analogy, metaphor, folk wisdom and commonsense are all useful in a particular space of human understanding. Reinhart Koselleck states that "If everything always repeated itself identically, there would be no change or surprise either in the economy or elsewhere…If, in contrast, everything were new or innovative, humankind would fall into a black hole from one day to the next, helpless and bare of all orientation."[54] Nothing could be understood. This is the space for analogy, iteration, and so on. Things happen again but slightly differently, and the only way to grasp any understanding from that experience is via these. Historians may say that

[51] Eelco Runia, 'Inventing the new from the old – from White's "tropics" to Vico's "topics"', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 14.2 (2010), pp. 229–241.
[52] Otte, 'Inner Circle'.
[53] Roderick Carberry, 'Historical Explanation with Particular Reference to The Use of Analogy and its Implication for Teaching History' (unpublished master's thesis, University of London Institute of Education, 1985).
[54] Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. and trans. by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (Stanford University Press, 2018).

every event is unique but by pointing to an analogous situation or a parallel they are essentially saying otherwise. They are saying that events, including the decisions made during these events are the same, but also different. This is one of the methods for judging plausibility within the discipline. If a similar event has happened in a similar context, with the historical agents having similar dispositions, then there is a good probability that it will happen again, and probability is at the heart of plausibility. Historians are not able to ground their judgement about plausibility in a law, a luxury which natural scientists claim, but they can and do make experienced judgements based on analogy. If all the required research is carried out rigorously within the profession's protocols, and the surrounding conditions are right, they will make the judgement on the basis of analogy and in turn their peers will make a further plausibility judgement. This never gives certainty but it is what happens in practice if historians are attempting to understand the decision-making of the people they are studying. This helps to explain the preponderance of analogy and other forms of iteration in the texts that are reviewed above and indeed in most historical narratives.

Excellent for quick persuasion and useful for illuminations or presentational purposes, an analogy my rest on only a small number of presumed commonalities, but in general the more commonalities there are the better. It is very common for someone like Margaret Howard to be invited into the TV studio to comment on the war in Ukraine or events in some other hotspot, and if so, it is almost guaranteed that she will focus on iteration and analogy. She will say something like "History never repeats itself but this event is rather like …." And she will choose to liken it to another event. Events are, after all, the same but different. Analogies are more than just cognitive shortcuts. If they are going to be used, then perhaps they could have a sounder foundation than just a whim or the supposed experienced judgement of the historian. There are some forms of decision-making that have been studied and tested in rigorous fashion outside of the historical discipline and could be called upon as being analogous and suitable.

Postmodernists who believe that “the only thing we can offer in a history is a present-centred proposal, a tentative proposal of how things might have been” would be happy to accommodate such an intrusion.[55] The analogy does not have to be analogous to another historical decision, just to another piece of decision-making in the present. And, after all, to the postmodernist, the historical undertaking happens in the present.

The behavioural psychologist Daniel Kahneman has researched a whole series of decision-making scenarios which have yielded probability rates for particular kinds of decisions and in certain circumstances these could be applied as analogies instead of or alongside the judgement of historians. Their main advantage would be that they would have a scientifically tested probability rather than resting on the subjective and perhaps simply intuitive judgement of the historian. It would be another form of analogy or iteration with just a bit more rigour and it may enrich understanding of the decision-making. It is behaviourist psychology and adds nothing to the ideographic tendency associated with historical study, but is is nomothetic instead, and so it a judgement from the outside rather than the inside. There are many nomothetic elements to the discipline already and another form of generalisation could be construed as an enrichment.

Another difficulty comes from the absence of the inclusion in interpretations of non-conscious action in traditional diplomatic history narratives. The elites sitting around the table at Potsdam may have been making some of their decisions without deliberate conscious thought. Things slip through and firm up into decisions, because of habit, because they are taken for granted, on the basis of useful heuristics (often unreliable), or perhaps through intuitive thinking. These are construed here as being, at least in part, non-conscious thoughts without the considered intentions of the decision-makers. There may come a time when past events can be interpreted with the help of neuroscience, although, without access the human

[55] Jenkins, *Refiguring History*, p. 40.

brains of the past actors, it is difficult to imagine that any kind of completeness of interpretation could ever be achieved. Until then, we rest our quest for understanding of actions in the past on the assumption that humans, with free will and rationality, carry out their conscious actions on the basis of intentionality. This presupposition usually goes unchallenged and it is the folk psychology basis of the historian's work.[56] Nonetheless, there is growing evidence, that the non-conscious matters in human action and decision-making, and this thesis makes an attempt to accommodate such non-conscious matters, the evidence for which, is by definition hidden away from the conscious minds of the historical actors. There is some evidence from cognitive psychologists that "The experience of consciousness is a passive accompaniment to the non-conscious processes of internal broadcasting and the creation of the personal narrative."[57] In other words, the real work of thinking and decision-making happens outside of the control of consciousness. We already know that the non-conscious brain has control of most of the body's functions and actions. As David A. Oakley and Peter W. Halligan state: "Over the past 30 years, there has been a slow but growing consensus among some students of the cognitive sciences that many of the contents of 'consciousness,' are formed backstage by fast, efficient non-conscious systems".[58] It is not the place here for a full-scale investigation of this cognitive science, but it has enough traction and scientific underpinning to upset or disturb the existing and usually unquestioned folk psychology presupposition that Bevir argues is a key platform for the discipline. There is no argument here for a deterministic version history, just an aspiration to enrich the narrative with the inclusion of any evidence of unconscious thought.

Adding to the already widening perspectives of the linguistic and cultural turns in the field of diplomatic history are two approaches from outside the discipline of history, with their

[56] Mark Bevir, 'Historical Explanation, Folk Psychology, and Narrative', *Philosophical Explorations*, 3.2 (2000), pp. 152-168.
[57] David A. Oakley and Peter W. Halligan, 'Chasing the Rainbow: The Non-Conscious Nature of Being', *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017), p. 1924.
[58] Ibid.

origins in the taken-for-granted and the unspoken elements of social interaction. These, I argue, help in understanding the decision-making at Potsdam and enriching the historical interpretation. Daniel Kahneman's research in behavioural psychology has revealed that as well as slow and deliberate conscious thought, humans also use fast and efficient, and sometimes error-prone, non-conscious systems in their decision-making.[59] Some of the decisions made about Niederschlesien were under pressure, with high risk attached, and in circumstances of great uncertainty where key information was missing. This is ideal territory for the application of Kahneman's ideas. Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual toolbox based on the idea of 'habitus' allows for a close examination of social relations focusing in particular on the ways that some people are able to dominate and subjugate others.[60] Bourdieu's concept of 'practice', which rests on 'habitus', has already entered the vocabulary of diplomatic historians.[61] This centres on the notion that people manage their lives through their habits and these "account for what most of us do most of the time"[62] The application of both of researchers, one from sociology and the other from behavioural psychology, holds out the possibility of having considerable interpretative power about decision-making, not just in the understanding of present everyday human action but also of the actions and decisions of people in the past. Historians rate the ideographic as more central to their work over the nomothetic although both are obviously involved. If the view is taken that the non-conscious is an important factor, then there ought to be some room in historian's interpretations for this, even if there is a degree of nomothetic understanding involved. On this basis, if evidence is available, then it is both viable and legitimate for this to be in historians' interpretations. In this instance, such evidence, because

[59] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Penguin, 2011).
[60] Michael Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (Routledge, 2012).
[61] Jeremie Cornut, 'The Practice Turn in International Relations Theory', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 20 November 2017, https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-113 [accessed 9 March 2026].
[62] Ted Hopf, 'The Logic of Habit in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16.4 (2010), pp. 539-561 (p. 547).

of the availability of a huge range of documentary evidence and the recording of conversations produced by the foreign bureaucracies at Potsdam, alongside the ritual and symbolic behaviour of the participants, provides an unusually rich batch of sources.

The two forms of enrichment mentioned do not displace the major and traditional method of dealing with crises or routine interchanges in diplomacy at the highest international level, but offer an enrichment. This effectively means that after setting frontier issues for the conference in context via an examination of the preparations in the Foreign Office, and a review of discourse in the media, this thesis will have three main approaches to the decision-making. Firstly, it will deal with the close discussions about Niederschlesien around the table at Cecillienhof. Then, it will enrich the enterprise by offering a cultural history of the conference using Pierre Bourdieu's toolbox with a view towards eliciting wider cultural influences and a consideration of the non-conscious perspective. Thirdly, on an analogous basis, it will argue that the application of Daniel Kahneman's research results, despite coming from behaviourist psychology, can add an enriching dimension to the decision-making by the conferences participants. Isaiah Berlin wrote "That every separate mental activity can properly be judged to have failed or succeeded only by reference to its own particular end and its own particular standard, and by reference to no other end or standard, though some of these ends may be found to coincide, is so plain and obvious and self-evident that to emphasise it might at first seem like breaking in through open doors".[63] It is proposed that these three strands should deliver a rich interpretation of the decision to make Niederschlesien a part of Poland in 1945. Humans are perfectly able to receive and understand three complementary perspectives together, just as they can enjoy simultaneous lines of a polyphonic piece of music.

[63] Isaiah Berlin, 'Some Procrustations' *Oxford Outlook*, 10.52 (May 1930), pp. 491–502, *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library* https://isaiah-berlin.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-01/bib.3%20-%20Some%20Procrustations%20-%20Oxford%20Outlook%20May%201930.pdf [accessed 9 March 2026].

Chapter 1 of this thesis provides an introduction, literature review and a section on methodology. Also, the place of analogy in history writing will be outlined, and, resting on analogous argument, the case will be made for the use of Daniel Kahneman's ideas in historical interpretations. Chapter 2 covers the preparations made by the British Foreign Office in the years and months leading up to July 1945. Chapter 3 is a review of the British public discourse about the proposed frontiers of Germany and Poland throughout the war-time period, as discerned through the texts of four national newspapers up until the time when the British delegates set off for the Potsdam Conference. Chapter 4 examines how the British War Cabinet perceived the Polish frontier issue and managed their preparations for frontier change with their allies. Chapter 5 examines the negotiations over Poland's western border carried through by the British delegation at Potsdam, from their arrival up until the signing of the final protocol to their departure. Chapter 6 is a cultural interpretation of British diplomacy at Potsdam using Pierre Bourdieu's toolbox and Chapter 7 applies Daniel Kahneman's ideas to the interpretation of decision-making at Potsdam. Chapter 8 provides a summary and some conclusions.

# Chapter 1. The Foreign Office and the Oder Neisse Line

The Foreign Office, a body of experts with advisory duties, was officially obliged to prepare the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary for their interface with their allies and enemies during World War Two. Lord Strang, a former Permanent Under-Secretary, pointed out in 1955 that "It was within the lifetime of men still employed in the Foreign Office that the Home Department emerged fully from clerkly bondage into its present status as an advisory body".[1] Prime Minister Winston Churchill never felt confined by the advice that he received, but an understanding of the Foreign Office's origins, content and potency is essential to appreciate the stance taken and promoted on the Oder Neisse Line at Potsdam. It was created over a lengthy period by a fluid group of mostly traditionally educated upper class men, some of whom had known each other since childhood, school or Oxbridge. Historian Andrew Roberts encapsulates these shared experiences and values when he wrote the following words about R.A. ('Rab') Butler, who worked in the Foreign Office,

> The Marlburian Butler wrote to the Wellingtonian Brabourne complaining of the Old F.O. team where PPSs [parliamentary private secretaries], ministers and officials called each other by their Christian names and had exactly the same brains. In the Foreign Office of 1938, Eton College could number amongst her sons Eden, Halifax, Vansittart, Cadogan, six of the eleven Counsellors, half the Private Secretaries, and the Ambassadors to Berlin, Rome, Moscow, Warsaw, The Hague, Stockholm, Ankara, Bucharest and Athens.[2]

Mark Bevir, Oliver Daddow and Ian Hall note that "People are not autonomous, so their agency is always situated against an inherited web of beliefs and practices. Their beliefs and actions

[1] Lord Strang, *The Foreign Office* (Allen & Unwin, 1957), p. 147.
[2] Andrew Roberts, *Holy Fox: The Life of Lord Halifax* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), p. 87.

draw on an inherited tradition."[3] At that time, the Foreign Office was all male and all white, and all its staff had had a priviledged education. They joined after university and then internalised the foreign office traditional world view if they did not have it already. Their shared outlook and cultural experiences, embraced the possibility of intellectual and academic difference, but it was very much of its time. Thus, any review of the historical traces should recognise the shared norms and values of the staff, sometimes referred to as the 'Foreign Office Mind'.[4] They provided advice to prepare their political masters for important national decision-making. There is very little evidence amongst the chosen sources of decision-making on the basis of sentiment. One real exception to this was a long letter written by Owen O'Malley, British Ambassador to the Polish Government in exile, in which he questions the morality of doing business with the Soviets when it became clear to him that they were indeed responsible for the massacre at Katyn.[5]

This chapter examines the work of the Foreign Office in connection with the development of policy, including the handling of the post war frontier settlement in Eastern Europe. I will examine internal conversations and dealings with the Poles, Soviets and Americans either at the officals' own discretion or under the instructions of their political leaders. Their advice culminated with the production of a final portfolio of formal and informal advice given to the delegates for Potsdam in the summer of 1945. This is why an examination of the Foreign Office, and more precisely of the attitudes and mindsets of those working there is important for my thesis. There could never be any certainty that the advice would be ever fully embraced or ignored by the decision-makers.

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[3] Mark Bevir, Oliver Daddow and Ian Hall, 'Interpreting British Foreign Policy', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15.2 (2013), pp. 163-174.
[4] T.G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Office Policy, 1865 -1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 5-7. This has a good examination of the concept.
[5] Kew, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), FO 15/192/43, No. 51, Letter from Owen O'Malley, British Ambassador to the Polish Government in Exile, to Anthony Eden, 24 May 1943.

The chapter is set out in several parts starting with an outline of the workings of the Foreign Office, some comments about the inherited attitudes of the staff and a brief review of the actions and positions taken by the London Poles whose imagined future they were trying to wrestle from the great powers. This will then be followed by review of the troubled relationship between the Soviet and the British diplomatic staff, and then a chronological narrative of the handling of events leading to the composition of the final Foreign Office advice placed in the portfolio. Throughout this chapter I intend to show how the topic of Poland's western frontier moved slowly towards the centre of the Foreigh Office's focus as the war progressed. This was not because of the weight being allocated to the events within Niederschlesien but to the difficulties in the relationship with the growing power of the Soviet Union.

Before World War Two, the Foreign Office, an institution with a structure and procedures stretching back over a long history, had last been reformed in 1906.[6] The war brought some changes, often forced upon it by the working habits and idiosyncrasies of a few powerful individuals.[7] In 1943, Anthony Eden started carrying through some fundamental changes which in the longer term modernised and streamlined the whole office, the most important one being the recruitment on the basis of talent and examination rather that by social or family connections. The impact of this modernisation took time and was not felt during the wartime period. Formally, the power of decision-making lay with the elected foreign minister and for most of this period this was Anthony Eden. However, during the wartime period much of that was wrested away from the Foreign Office and Anthony Eden by Winston Churchill, who was inclined to make decisions on the hoof, without proper research and sometimes without taking formal advice from the professionals.[8] Dealing with issues relating to post war

[6] Otte, *Foreign Office Mind*, pp. 240-258.
[7] Jonathan Schneer, *Ministers at War: Winston Churchill and his Wartime Cabinet* (Oneworld, 2015). This is an excellent book on the in-fighting amongst the members of the wartime Cabinet.
[8] *The Diaries of Alexander Cadogan, 1938-1945*, ed. by David Dilks (Cassell, 1971), p. 765.

plans, and anything pertaining to the eastern front, was the Northern Department with Christopher Warner at its head. Throughout the war papers poured in from Moscow via the Ambassador Stafford Cripps and after 1943 Ambassador Archibald Kerr. Owen O'Malley was appointed as the intermediary with the Polish Government in exile whose headquarters were in Portland Place. The Western Department, which was led by William Strang and after 1943 Oliver Harvey, was responsible for Germany amongst other western European countries. Another department headed up by John Balfour, after 1943, was responsible for the American countries and reports and papers were ferried across the hazardous Atlantic routes from the Ambassador, The Marquis of Lothian, and after 1940 Ambassador Lord Halifax in Washington. Sitting at the top of the administration and pyramid that was the Foreign Office, was the permanent under-secretary Alexander Cadogan, whose office in the building was just below that of the Secretary of State, supported by his deputy Harold Orme Sargent. These two men met regularly met with Anthony Eden and later Ernest Bevin, usually in the Secretary of State's office upstairs.

Alexander Montagu George Cadogan, OM, GCMG, KCB, PC, was born into a wealthy and distinguished aristocratic family, and was the youngest son of the Fifth Earl Cadogan. Cadogan's time as PUS was split into two parts, the first part being the period up until 1941 when "he oversaw what might be called the Foreign Office's war, in which allies were sought, efforts were made to avoid acquiring new enemies and bureaucratic adjustments were made to meet the exigencies of the conflict." The second part after 1941 was when he became the main adviser to the War Cabinet, Eden and Churchill included.[9] He then spent less and less time in the Foreign Office. The key functional units of the Foreign Office were the 38 departments, each one covering a particular country or part of the world. The junior members of each

[9] Keith Neilson and T.G. Otte, *The Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 1854-1946* (Routledge, 2009), p. 256.

department usually worked in a largish office known as the third room and it was here that most incoming papers were initially handled. Usually, first suggestions were made in the form of minutes and these were passed onwards and upwards with at a routine pace or with alacrity depending on the perceived urgency of the paper. Sometimes, issues could be rushed through to the very top of the administrative chain and even to the Foreign Secretary within the hour. Letters from important individuals or friends could also be individually addressed and thus gain immediate attention. Three departments were involved in handling the communications relating to the final frontiers of Germany and Poland, the Northern, Central and Southern.[10]

As Hitler started breaking the Treaty of Versailles and advancing through Europe in the late 1930s the Foreign Office found itself deciding between appeasing Hitler and joining up with the French and Soviets to stop him. The ideologies were being compared and judgements made about which side was more dangerous to British interests. A paper written by the diplomat Francis D'Arcy Godolphin Osborne, who regarded communism as much more dangerous than facism, was making its way through the higher echelons of the Foreign Office in 1938. It stated that "the methods of the Comintern are devised to a large extent by the brilliant imaginativeness, mental agility and disintegrative predilections of the Jew, combined with the semi-asiatic fanaticism of the Russian. The first works on the intellectuals, the second on the mob of under-dogs".[11] This reveals as much about the attitudes, written and unwritten, of the diplomats as it may say about the Russians. Alexander Cadogan thought the paper contained 'a good deal of sense', buttressed by some excellent quotations, but he agreed not to have it printed lest the foreign service degenerate into a debating society. Then he set down his own conclusion: 'I personally - with all humility - think it otiose to discuss whether Fascism or Communism is the more dangerous to us. It is quite plain that, at the moment, the former is the

[10] John Connell and John Henry Robertson, *The Office: The Story of the British Foreign Office, 1919-1951*, (Wingate, 1958).
[11] Francis D'Arcy Godolphin Osborne quoted in Donald Lammers, 'Fascism, Communism, and the Foreign Office, 1937-39', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6.3 (1971), pp. 66-86 (p. 69).

more dangerous, because it is the more efficient, and makes more and better guns and airplanes.' Cadogan may or may not have agreed with the "Semitic ranting and colourful expletives" in Osborne's paper but was turning down any arrangement with the Soviets not because of ideology but because he believed they were too weak to be useful as an ally against the Germans in 1938. Nonetheless Osborne's paper is suggestive of the notion that many members of Foreign Office accepted that appeasement was necessary for ideological reasons. Most of the senior readers of this document were still engaged in foreign office business throughout the war years and they had not shrugged off these anti-communist attitudes laced with racism and still held the same views towards Russians and communists. They had experienced British foreign policy through the First World war, the founding of the Soviet state, and appeasement and the failure to combine with the Russians in 1938-39. They were anti-communist, just as their political leader was. They preferred to appease Hitler rather than ally with the communists against him. It is hardly surprising that such people, part of the British elite, with their association with land ownership and other forms of material and intellectual capital, should hold these views about foreigners who aimed to destroy their way of life. Six years later when relations between the Soviet Union and Britain were deteriorating over a false story placed in *Pravda* about the British meeting with Ribbentrop in the Pyrenees, the PUS himself wrote in his diary: "This is quite monstrous. We tell the Russians everything and play square with them. They are the most stinking creepy set of Jews I've ever come across."[12] Undoubtedly, the other partner in the wartime relationship may have had much to do with the development of the uneasy relationship government by mistrust and suspicion. The Soviets and in particular Stalin was reputed to be suspicious of Britain's every move. However, the Foreign Office's assumptions about the Soviets and the attitudes displayed may go some way to explain slow headway.

[12] *Diaries of Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 597.

When the Second World War started few in the Foreign Office would have forecast the extent of future boundary changes across central Europe and the forced removal of huge populations just a few years later. The layout of their imperial-style premises in Whitehall and the lavish expenditure on the India Office is a testament to the centrality of their world-wide colonial interests. Their standard view about Europe, as outlined by former PUS Sir Eyre Crow many years earlier, was that countries would always pursue their own national interests and therefore Britain should aim to achieve a balance of power amongst her immediate neighbours there: "It is all a question of real military preponderance in numbers, cohesion, efficiency and geographical location of each state".[13] Relationships with a small country such as Poland therefore were low on their list of priorities unless it was likely to upset the balance between the major powers.

**There had for many decades been ideas held and promoted by various Polish nationalists, historians and writers envisioning new boundaries for the Polish nation based on their ideas of territory held in the long and distant past.[14]** The appropriate British diplomats may have been aware of them but the dreams and aspirations of nations throughout the world were rarely recognised and usually did not figure highly in the thinking and daily work of the foreign office staff. There is no record during those years of the British ambassadors in Warsaw, Howard William Kennard or Cecil Francis Joseph Dormer reporting such matters to the Foreign Office. Their staff, home based or in embassies around the world, were people at the centre of a huge colonial administration, not renowned for empathy and used to imposing their will rather than acquiescing to the aspirations of others. Nonetheless, the Foreign Office

[13] Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (Pan, 2002), p. 245.

[14] On 21 June 1939, Stanislaw Mikolajczyk made his Posen Speech "until she is based on the Oder". Mikolajczak became leader of the Polish government in exile in London after the death of Sikorski in 1943. See Wladyslaw Palucki's *Return to the Oder* (*Wracamy nad Odre*), published in London in 1942. Sarah Meiklejohn Terry suggests there is ample reason to believe that Sikorski knew about the contents of the book in 1940 when it was written and that it influenced his thinking directly. See Sarah Meiklejohn Terry, *Poland's Place in Europe. General Sikorski and the Origin of the Oder-Neisse Line, 1939-1943* (Cambridge, Mass, 1983), p. 75.

relationship with the exiled Polish Government in London would have a great influence on the future of Niederschlesien whose territory was coveted by them.

The exiled Polish government-in-exile along with many other foreign leaderships and an indeterminate number of émigrés from all over Europe arrived in Britain in the summer of 1940. The Poles had, as their perceived best option, fled to France after their country was invaded, and after the German invasion of France they found themselves being dependent on the goodwill of the British, people who had previously not offered them much support in the recent establishment of the Polish State. During the First World War the British did not want the old kingdom to be restored and preferred it to be given some form of Home Rule within the Russian Empire. They insisted on a plebiscite in Upper Silesia before ceding it to the new Poland. They proposed the Curzon Line as Poland's eastern boundary and stood against Poland's movement further east. They strongly objected to the Polish seizure of Teschen Silesia in 1938. Thus, in 1940, the British found themselves in a reluctant partnership and throughout the war it never became a smooth one. Their prime minister and commander-in-chief, General Sikorski, led a coalition of at least three contesting political parties. In 1940 and 1941, amongst their leadership, there could be no immediate co-ordinated approach to future plans for a country that was currently being occupied and brutalised by two invading neighbours. Sarah Meiklejojn Terry outlines their positions in her hypothesis that "the concept of a Poland extended westward to the Oder and Neisse, as a practical policy rather than just an historical conception, first gained currency not among Polish Communists in Moscow, but within exile circles in London and in the non-communist underground" and "that Sikorski did not conceive of territorial gains in the north and west primarily as compensation for possible losses in the east, but rather as justified in their own right by Poland's economic and social needs and by needs of the federation"[15] They were struggling towards developing their ideas on post-war

[15] Terry, *Poland's Place in Europe*.

programmes and mustering support from the great powers. Initially, Britain, their new host, was busy making attempts to woo Russia away from Germany, and discussions around the abandonment of the Riga Treaty, which had laid out the Polish/Russian Frontier in March 1921, were secretly part of the diplomatic trading. Sikorski was attempting to consolidate his position as leader of the famously argumentative team, and lines of communication with the Russian and British governments were not yet set out. Given the fluidity of events across Europe and the unfathomable intentions of the Russians, the Poles themselves were not able to develop, promote or communicate a single and undivided plan on their future boundaries and its place in post war Europe. The evolving Polish positions which were being promoted in Britain were available in written form through pamphleteering, media and records of meetings with the Foreign Office. Rarely consistent, they reflect the competing interests of groups within the Polish government and community. Some were produced in response to particular incidents while others were based on research or committee meetings and embraced social, economic, strategic and political issues. Thus, notions on the various proposed western boundaries can never be considered in isolation as they were almost always embedded within wider amalgams, including ideas such as an East European Federation, the frontier with USSR, economic viability, security, great power guarantees and geographically defendable territory.

As the idea of the Oder Neisse as Poland's western frontier travelled from its earlier cultural origins along a precarious path towards its physical manifestation, it was shaped by a blend of developing influences such as the constraining effects of the 1941 Atlantic Charter which promoted self-determination, and later the doctrine of unconditional surrender, meaning that a settlement of frontiers could only happen at the surrender of Germany. Stalin's insistence on, and the London Government's resistance to the Curzon line as Poland's eastern frontier, and inability of all parties to agree on the nature and make-up of a future Polish government further aggravated matters. There is no evidence that any branch of the Foreign Office ever set

out a proactive plan with clearly stated aims and objectives for what would become the German/Polish boundary at the end of the fighting. There were reasons for this, the foremost of which was the statement demanding unconditional German surrender which was formally announced by Roosevelt at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943. Progress towards an agreement on an understanding of Poland's western borders was also heavily influenced by the evolving state of working relationships and the level of trust between the three powers. Factors which contributed to a breakdown in that trust and thus subverted the chances of a common agreement included the poor working relationships between the British military attaches in Moscow and their Soviet counterparts, the British perceived moral dilemma of working with an ally involved in atrocities such as the Katyn Massacre, the unwillingness of allies to accept the press coverage in their partner's homelands, the level of access that their ally was willing to allow their country in order to travel and inspect their military and living conditions, and the huge cultural gap in perceptions about race, individual and press freedoms, and political ideologies.

Sikorski's first expression of a Polish position with regard to the future western frontier was not directly with the Foreign Office but with the Labour politician, and member of the War Cabinet, Ernest Bevin, in November 1940. The content of a long memorandum prepared by Sikorski was discussed and later that month a written copy was given to Bevin and another was submitted by Ambassador Raczynski to Alexander Cadogan at the Foreign Office.[16] The memorandum laid out current Polish government thinking about the country's long term security and covered a host of interrelated issues including the weakening of the possible future bases of German power and the formation of East European Federation.[17] The topic of the future eastern frontier was missing but ideas on the western frontier were included. The key

[16] Terry, *Poland's Place in Europe*, p. 88, Footnote 48.
[17] Kew, The National Archives, FO 371/26419, Code 62, File 14 (to paper 3659), Future status of Europe - war and peace aims.

point in the document was that the Oder was mentioned, along with statements about the relatively low German populations living in Pomerania and Prussian Silesia, and the strategic need for the shortening of the border line. Already, they were envisioning or allowing for the possibility that East Prussia, Pomerania and at least some of Silesia would be part of the new Poland, but this obviously rested on notions about the ancient kingdom of Poland rather than any notion of compensation for the loss of eastern territories.[18] This memorandum concludes by stating that this plan must be regarded as provisional. Bevin's response to these approaches is unknown but William Strang, then the under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office, was quite dismissive, writing in a cover note, "You have never, I think, seen this tiresome paper. The only thing we can think of doing with it is to circulate it to the War Aims Committee if the S[ecretary] of S[tate] agrees."[19] An unwanted document had come their way and was categorised as low status. The outcome was that Anthony Eden took the view that the Polish document "illustrates the difficulty of laying down our war aims in any detail now, and strengthens the case for confining ourselves to general terms in anything we say in public on that thorny subject."[20] The diplomats were learning something about Poland's aspirations but it was weightless pressure from the Poles and was easily put on the back burner. This phase in the Foreign Office treatment of the topic of Germany's eastern frontier remained fixed until the following year when Stalin advocated a change in the east of Poland. Ernest Bevin continued meeting Sikorski into mid-1941 even though William Strang at the Foreign Office "doubted whether this sort of thing ought to be encouraged."[21] The department saw no objections to these talks but said it would be glad if Bevin would record anything of interest or importance.

Those in the Foreign Office who had turned down co-operation with the Soviet Union as Hitler advanced through Europe in the 1930s on the grounds of Soviet weakness were keen

[18] Ibid.
[19] Kew, National Archives, FO 371/26419, C 741/14/62/42.
[20] Kew, National Archives, FO 371/26419 43.
[21] Kew, National Archives, FO 371/26718 C5693/151/55 116.

to find out how they would fare against the Germans once Operation Barbarossa got under way. It changed the tempo and as yet unrealised potential of Foreign Office meetings with Poles from then on. The Axis invasion of the Soviet Union started on 22 June 1941 and the minutes of a meeting on 3 July 1941 between General Sikorski and Ernest Bevin, record that "Poland for her part, would be willing to come to some compromise arrangement about the Polish Soviet frontier after the war. Poland would then seek compensation at Germany's expense to the westward." Frontiers were immediately on the agenda. William Strang at the Foreign Office noted that "the two interesting points in General Sikorski's exposition are i) his statement that the Polish Government would be ready to reach a compromise with the Soviet Government about the Polish eastern frontier, and ii) that it was in the west (at the expense of Germany) rather than in the east, that Polish aspirations lay."[22] This may be the first time Sikorski was eyeing western lands as compensation rather than as a natural right of the Polish people. It suggests that he already had certain knowledge of Stalin's ambitions of holding on to eastern Poland after the war. Twenty years earlier, in an attempt to end the war between the new Poland and communist Russia in 1920, the British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon proposed a particular geographical line between the two countries. The Poles won that military struggle, ignored the line and made peace at Riga with Russia, which lost a large portion of territory. Sikorski, who had actually fought in that war, was capable of flexible thinking but many of his colleagues in the London Polish cabinet would not yield on the Curzon Line.

Diplomatic relations with Soviet Union had been unproductive since the beginnings of the communist regime, when in Churchill's words, they tried "to strangle at birth the Bolshevik State". The Communist government was initially recognised in 1924 and both nations were very suspicious of each other during the rise Hitler and expansion of Germany, being unable to combine against him. As Operation Barbarossa got under way in June 1941 there was a

[22] Kew, National Archives, FO 371/26755 C 7458/3226/55 48.

complete reverse and an immediacy about relations between the Foreign Office and the Soviet Union. As Eden put it, "My immediate purpose, even during the first weeks after the Nazi attack or Russia, was to restore relations between the Polish Government, now in exile in Britain and the Soviet Government."[23] The Foreign Office and Stafford Cripps, the new Special Envoy sent to Moscow, stepped up attempts to engage unfamiliar partners in a common enterprise. Cripps' approach was to offer concessions in order to build up trust and goodwill. The British had already offered the Soviets assistance should Germany attack and as soon as the invasion started Eden offered to send a military mission urgently.[24]

Anthony Eden travelled to Moscow with Alexander Cadogan in December 1941, a risky venture with the Germans at the gates of the city. The main purpose of the meeting was to prepare a treaty between the two new allies but Cadogan noted that for Stalin "what really interested him was Russia's frontiers."[25] Stalin, already taking a long-term stance, was looking to Eden to condone his plan to hold on to pre-war gains in Poland and pushing for a formal agreement on post war boundaries. Thus, the Polish western boundary first meaningfully entered British diplomatic conversation with the Soviets when Stalin mentioned the return of East Prussia to Slavdom and stated that the western frontier should move west to the Oder. This was included in one of two draft treaties which Stalin gave to Eden, one of which was to have a secret protocol.[26] The freshly inked Atlantic Charter of August 1941 prevented the British from entering such an arrangement without a plebiscite amongst the populace concerned or mutual agreement with the Poles, and Eden declared that 'it is quite impossible for His Majesty's government to commit themselves to any post war frontiers in Europe.'[27] Eden learned at this meeting that Stalin had plans to for the eastern boundary and when that was

[23] Eden, *Memoirs*, p. 314.
[24] Ibid., p. 313.
[25] Diaries of Alexander Cadogan, ed. by Dilks, p. 422.
[26] Eden, *Memoirs*, p. 335.
[27] Kew, The National Archives, PREM 394/3. Here Eden writes a summary of his discussions with Stalin in Moscow.

confirmed to the Poles in London it created a seachange in Sikorski's overall view.[28] He no longer nursed his hopes for the return of all the eastern territories and he knew that the British had been asked to recognise the Curzon Line. This may have changed his thinking but the Cabinet that he led felt differently. Their insistence on protecting the east, and in particular the city of Lvov, may have delayed the development of their thoughts and arguments for compensation in the west.

In the spring of 1942 Molotov was in London negotiating the Anglo-Soviet Treaty. This period of Foreign Office's official activity was marked by prevarication. They were not willing to take a stance or make any commitment to the Poles while they were discussing that country's border with its powerful and assertive neighbour. Both sides needed each other desperately and Stalin, despite the fact that German forces were just outside Moscow, kept the tension high in the talks by insisting that the Soviets be allowed to keep the frontiers as they stood before the German attack in June 1941. Churchill and Eden, no doubt worried that the Soviets might repeat Brest Litovsk and sign a deal with Germany, were willing to yield on Poland's eastern frontier and they asked for Roosevelt's support in re-interpreting the Atlantic Charter. As Churchill said: "The increasing gravity of the war has led me to feel that the principles of the Atlantic Charter ought not to be construed so as to deny the Soviet Union the frontiers she occupied when Germany attacked her."[29] Roosevelt was not prepared to agree at this stage. As the discussions were progressing Cadogan remarked in his diary "It's curious that A[Eden], of all people, should have hopes of 'appeasement'. !! Much better to say to the Russians 'We can't discuss post-war frontiers: we want to work with you now and later: let's have a mutual guarantee. Frontiers can easily be agreed upon later."[30] Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs

[28] Birmingham, University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, Personal and Political Papers of Anthony Eden – First Earl of Avon (hereafter Anthony Eden Papers), POL 42/2.
[29] *Roosevelt and Churchill: Their Secret Wartime Correspondence*, ed. by Francis Loewenheim, Harold Langley and Manfred Jonas (Barrie & Jenkins, 1975), document no. 40, March 1941, p. 186.
[30] *Diaries of Alexander Cadogan*, p. 449.

Vyacheslav Molotov continued to argue but finally gave in and signed the treaty without any agreement on frontiers. As well as offering each other mutual support the key element of the treaty was an agreement that neither would make peace with Germany without the consent of the other. Cadogan was wrong about the frontiers being easily sorted out later.

Inside the Foreign Office, even at the deepest point of the struggle against Hitler, some economic and political planning was getting under way. In August 1942, Gladwyn Jebb prepared a paper on post-war planning, proposing the setting up of a Policy Committee comprising the USA, Great Britain, the USSR and China. This so-called Four Power Plan was a response to Roosevelt's early ideas on the United Nations. Gladwyn Jebb suggested that the British aim should be to organise some kind of unity within eastern Europe with the aid of the Americans:

> leaving the East to be guided either by some association of the West Slavs, with Russia in the background, or possibly (if we could not prevent it) by Russia herself...all would agree that Germany must somehow or other be reduced to physical impotence. Few would disagree with the further conclusion that one of the ways of achieving this would be to rearrange her frontiers to some extent, e.g. to give East Prussia and perhaps Upper Silesia to Poland, Alsace-Lorraine to France, and, possibly, set up an independent Austria.[31]

Jebb was interested in creating areas of economic self-sufficiency, political stability and holding Germany in check in the long-term future. All the major players in the foreign office commented on this memo and there was by no means a common view. Orme Sargent wrote that Jebb's view conflicts with the present British stances which was working towards a set of confederation schemes for Europe rather than the division of Europe into two spheres. Germany's eastern territories would eventually fall into one of these arrangements. This meant

[31] Kew, The National Archives, FCO 73/261, Gladwyn Jebb Paper, 17August 1942.

that the Oder Neisse area was caught up in bigger economic and political thinking, in other words the smaller states falling geographically between Germany and Russia. This kind of planning revealed a deeply entrenched view that Britain was entitled and confident enough to redraw another map somewhere in the world. Jebb's social and professional circle at the Foreign Office was very wide and he had a habit of gleaning information from a range of formal and informal contacts late in the evening over a bottle of wine. On an amended version rewritten by Jebb after receiving comments from right across the office, Lord Strang, who later became the Permanent Undersecretary added further comments that "We shall probably have to lop off a) East Prussia; b) Austria; c) perhaps a bit of Upper Silesia; as well as d) restore Alsace Lorraine to France."[32] Here were people, right in the centre of things and in full knowledge of the lack of progress on the Curzon Line and they did not mention compensation. The paper was eventually sent to the War Cabinet by Eden and many of its ideas became a common part of discourse in the office in the following years. The planners felt at ease with the possibility of assigning pieces of territory to different countries with supporting notions of the balance of power, buffer zones, economic viability and most of all the reduction of German military potential. Germany's eastern frontier was open for re-creation but at this point the Oder Neisse Line was not specifically mentioned.

In May 1941, General Sikorsky, Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the London Poles, had visited Washington for the first time and perhaps sent two memos to President Roosevelt about proposals for a new Polish border. There is no evidence that the British Foreign Office saw them. However, in preparation for his third visit in December 1942, memoranda were prepared in advance and copies of two of them were lodged with the British Foreign Office on 1 and 17 December. They were entitled 'Measures to be Applied to Germany Immediately after Cessation of Hostilities', and 'The German Problem with Special Relation

[32] Ibid.

to Poland'. Polish aspirations had moved on considerably since the Bevin Memorandum with much more clarity about the limits of the boundary and further justifications for a land grab.

> Our approach to the problem of the western boundaries is dictated by the necessity of: control over the mouth of the Oder, which possesses paramount importance for a federation as the artery directly linking our common centre of Silesian industry with the sea; the creation of conditions for our effective and rapid intervention against Germany should it attempt to remilitarise. In this regard, western Pomerania based on the Lower Oder and secondly, the northwestern part of the Sudetes with an outlet towards Leipzig are of paramount importance for the federation.

The memo on the Cessation of Hostilities envisaged that central Germany would be occupied and this "strict occupation" would take place in the frontier zones. As it explained:

> This term is used to define territories the incorporation of which into other states is foreseen, or...the occupation of which is indispensable from the military viewpoint to exact by force the strict execution of imposed conditions. Such strict occupation includes the following areas: a. in the east: a line following the left bank of the river Gorlitzer [Lusatian] Neisse and the left bank of the Oder, including the necessary bridgeheads; the estuary of the Oder, including Stettin, the islands of this estuary and the Isle of Rugen. The occupying power should be Poland and in the southern area bordering Czechoslovakia - Poland and Czechoslovakia; ...b. in the North: at least the German islands on the North and Baltic Seas, as well as the [Kiel Canal] and its bordering zones. The occupying powers in the areas of the North Sea and the [Kiel Canal] should be Great Britain and America; in the area of the Baltic islands Great Britain and Poland.

There is little doubt that Sikorski had in mind the Western Neisse as the permanent frontier and that the Foreign Office knew this in late 1942, but no evidence of their opinion about this at the time remains in the records, and even if Sikorski had not asked directly for this large extension of territory, the British delegation in Tehran knew about it. In the intervening months the death of Sikorski in an aeroplane crash at Gibraltar, the revelations about Katyn and the stubbornness of the London Government over the Curzon line curtailed promotion of this higher demand for territory. However, this was the very same frontier that Molotov presented for approval at the Crimean Conference three years later. It could be argued that the first formal diplomatic presentation was generated by the London Poles and not the Lublin Poles supported by the Soviets.

At Casablanca, in January 1943 Churchill and Roosevelt along with the Free French met to discuss allied strategy and at the end of the conference Roosevelt announced to the press, with Churchill's agreement, a policy of unconditional surrender. Churchill went on to explain what that meant in a speech to the House of Commons on 22 February 1944:

> I may point out that the term "unconditional surrender" does not mean that the German people will be enslaved or destroyed. It means, however, that the Allies will not be bound to them at the moment of surrender by any pact or obligation. There will be, for instance, no question of the Atlantic Charter applying to Germany as a matter of right and barring territorial transferences or adjustments in enemy countries. No such arguments will be admitted by us as were used by Germany after the last war, saying that they surrendered in consequence of President Wilson's 14 points. Unconditional surrender means that the victors have a free hand. It does not mean that they are entitled to behave in a barbarous manner nor that they wish to blot out Germany from among the nations of Europe. If we are bound, we are bound by our own consciences to

> civilisation. We are not to be bound to the Germans as the result of a bargain struck. That is the meaning of unconditional surrender.[33]

Up until that point the possibility of an accommodation with Germany still theoretically existed. Whatever effect this may have had upon the enemy war efforts, it impacted on diplomat's business because officially all discussions about German frontiers would be left until a peace conference at the end of the fighting. From then onwards, they may have been discussed within the Foreign Office, but could not be cemented until the war ended at a German Peace conference. Whatever frontier plans being conjured up by the Poles in exile in London, or later by the Poles sponsored by Stalin in Moscow, they would not be officially sanctioned by the allied leadership until war's end.

At the end of the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles had set the precedent for abandoning the promise of *oblivio et amnestia* and this was automatically incorporated into the thinking of all the key players in British foreign policy in the 1940s.[34] The political and diplomatic leadership had all lived through that formative experience and participated in one way or another. Right from the start of the Second World War the words "guilt" and "punishment" were in routine usage and were restated immediately after every construed Nazi atrocity.[35] It was believed that finding the culprits may have been difficult and it followed that the easiest forms of punishment were the removal of territory through boundary changes and the imposition of financial penalties, and both of these were therefore likely to figure in final peace settlement. The principles embedded in the Atlantic Charter were invoked routinely by

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[33] Hansard HC Deb, 22 February 1944, vol. 397, cc663-795, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1944/feb/22/war-and-internationa-situation [accessed 9 March 2026].
[34] For hundreds of years, most peace treaties tried to suppress the memory of war after the killing stopped, a practice reaching back to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which appealed for "perpetua oblivio et amnestia", meaning "perpetual oblivion and amnesty" from both the winning and losing sides.
[35] Hansard HC Deb, 10 November 1944, vol. 404, cc1714-64, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1944/nov/10/germany-war-criminals [accessed 9 March 2026].

the Allies but interpreted to suit their own perspectives. In practice Germany was removed from the Atlantic Charter's promise that territorial adjustments must be in accord with the wishes of the people living therein and that all people had the right to self-determination. Churchill outlined his interpretation of the charter soon after it was signed to the House of Commons including the notion that it contained principles governing any alterations in the territorial boundaries which may have to be made.[36] This, along with unconditional surrender, opened up the possibility of delivering punishment as well as using Germany territory to compensate Poland for the loss of lands in the east.

There is little mention of the Oder Neisse Line in the records during 1943. The rump of the London Polish Government, now led by Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, was steadfastly resisting Soviet pressure for acceptance of the Curzon Line even with encouragement and pressure from Eden and Churchill. Their stance had changed and they were now actively trying to persuade the Poles to accept. After the Katyn Massacre Polish-Soviet relations deteriorated further. Stalin then cut off contact with them altogether and withdrew recognition when, unlike the two Allied Powers, the Poles refused to accept the Soviet explanation that the Germans had fabricated the whole event.

On 8 July 1943, Christopher Warner, Head of the Northern Department in the Foreign Office, wrote to Clark Kerr in Moscow that "The main trouble there, as I see it, is that in our wholesale appeasement period, we made rash promises to the Russians which we cannot fulfil. It may be worth it, but I doubt it. It will however be encouraging if it turns out that not only the Soviet-Polish imbroglio but also the bombshell can pass without a lengthy and serious dislocation of general Anglo-Russian relations."[37] This admission of appeasement, made at the

[36] Hansard HC Deb, 9 September 1941, vol. 374, cc67-156, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1941/sep/09/war-situation#:~:text=I%20deprecate%20it%20at%20this,of%20a%20totally%20different%20nature. [accessed 9 March 2026].
[37] Kew, The National Archives, FO800/301, p. 102.

point of Sikorski's death, begs a question about the length of the wholesale period. It may stretch right back to Cripps' time as Ambassador in Moscow, when the British yielded to Stalin over the Baltic States, to mid-1943 when the British were trying to get the Poles to accept the Curzon Line and Stalin's word on the Katyn Massacre.[38] This use of the word "appeasement" by Warner, would have carried significant baggage because of its recent association with the policy followed by the Foreign Office in the period up to 1939. Was it a throwaway phrase used between fellow professionals arising out of recent frustrations or a weighty judgement about the wisdom of the whole approach and style taken with the Soviets? Earlier in that year on 9 April, Christopher Warner had written to Clark Kerr in Moscow using language that might characterise appeasers:

> Some time give me your thoughts on the general question of tactics with the Russians on this sort of matter i.e. is the sort of rule of thumb under which we have been working viz never say anything unpleasant to the Russians if we can possibly help it however much we disapprove of their doings - the right one? Or is there anything to be said for letting the Russians know our views frankly even though we may not have much hope of producing any concrete result, so long as those views are respectable, and can be justified in terms of the joint war effort.[39]

Clearly, there was not a unified view within the Foreign Office about the best way to deal with the Russians.

In public, the war leadership always promoted the view that Poland was very important to Britain. Yet, at the time of the Warsaw uprising, Lord Beaverbrook, a member of the cabinet, sent a private letter to the Foreign Secretary saying "...the Poles have always been unsatisfactory...But whatever the cause of the tragedy the friendship of Russia is far more

[38] Kew, The National Archives, CAB 66 21 49 P 3, Draft policy document Eden wrote to Lord Halifax, 8 February 1942.
[39] FO 800/301 P 42.

important to us than the future of Anglo-Polish relations.[40] "In what might be judged as naivety or self-deception, Roberts at the British Embassy in Moscow responds on 26th August 1944 by saying that "No-one would argue that the Poles are more important to us than the Russians, but it is however possible that our reputation for fair play might be more valuable than either of them."[41] This is one of a number of self-congratulatory comments made by Foreign Office staff about the fair-minded way the British do their diplomacy and they obviously have no wish to square this up against the Sykes Picot Pact (1916), Churchill's 'Forty Thieves' meeting (1921) and the Hoare-Laval Pact (1935). Most of the senior members of the diplomatic teams had been working somewhere in the Foreign Office and diplomatic service during these three events and were familiar with both the truth and the reconstruction involved. Routinely, throughout this war-time period, the diplomats were often praising themselves on their good behaviour and propensity for fair play. It would not be too controversial to suggest that their own diplomatic practice was actually characterised by duplicity and bad faith. In Moscow, Stalin's initial view of the behaviour of the British was probably quite different to their own self-image. He appeared suspicious of every word and action with the result that mutual trust deteriorated significantly at various points during the war. Their reputation hindered the development of trust with an ally, newly introduced and not necessarily familiar without all the tested protocols of diplomatic life. The British way of doing business must have had some effect on the progress made in all parts of their business and there is no doubt that it impacted later on during the fraught discussions with the Soviets on Poland and the Oder Neisse Line.

One amongst other factors that contributed to the breakdown of trust was the disputes over the press coverage in both the Soviet Union and Britain. In advance of the Foreign Ministers' Conference in 1943, the Foreign Office Research Department sent from Moscow to

[40] Anthony Eden Papers, Pol/44/180.
[41] Anthony Eden Papers, Pol/44/184. Roberts' prepared response to Lord Beaverbrook, Pol/44/180.

the Foreign Office a long memorandum detailing examples of where "The chief Soviet newspapers 'Pravda', 'Isvestiya', 'Red Star', etc., have maintained a constant flow of messages and articles which have been unfriendly in tone to this country."[42] They took the view that these articles represented the views of the government. In return, the Soviets accused the Foreign Office of leaking to *The Times* newspaper correspondence between Churchill and Stalin in March 1944, when relations between the Poles and Russians were at a very low ebb.[43] This long running dispute petered out after Orme Sargent at the Foreign Office advised the British ambassador Clark Kerr to write to Molotov with a prepared response saying that the article in question was written on the basis of a report by the *New York Herald Tribune*. If the two cultures, one with centralised media production and the other using western censorship principles, could manage no fusion of horizons in this area, then there was little prospect of them doing so over the trickier area of frontiers. Soviet diplomats were probably perfectly capable of perpetuating imagined sleights or grievances in order to gain a perceived advantage and similar exchanges at other points mitigated against the maintenance of trust.

Christopher Warner, having interviewed a Major Salt from the British Military Mission, asked the ambassador in Moscow to investigate claim of anti-Soviet attitudes of British staff posted there, particularly interpreters.[44] A short while later in May 1943, Edward Crankshaw, who worked in Moscow in signals intelligence, wrote a confidential letter to the ambassador Clark Kerr complaining about the anti-Soviet attitudes of some British staff including the Head of the mission General Martel.[45] He was replaced a few months later by General Brocas Burrows, a friend of Anthony Eden (Eton and Oxford), whose Russophobia proved to be even more obvious. The Soviet generals did not like him and said he was haughty in his behaviour

[42] The National Archives, FO 800 301 Pp 176/180.
[43] The National Archives, FO 800 302m Pp 171-190.
[44] The National Archives, FO 800 301 P 95.
[45] FO 800 302 P 51.

towards senior Soviet military staff.[46] The man denied everything but eventually Clark Kerr after discussion with Molotov and Stalin recommended his removal.[47] Christopher Warner interviewed him at the Foreign Office on his return and formed the opinion that he had indeed behaved badly.[48] This sequence of events encouraged the Foreign Secretary to intervene and put measures in place to remove staff with anti-Russian attitudes. But it also no doubt reaffirmed existing Soviet attitudes about the British sense of superiority and diminished the work being done by those hoping to develop and retain trust with the Soviets.

During this period there were many exchanges between staff about the best way of working with the Soviets. Diplomatic progress was not good and relations were strained over a whole series of issues to the extent that the British Ambassador Clark Kerr, a gregarious character who felt hemmed in by the restrictions in Russia, unlike Maisky, his equivalent in London who could travel widely and was almost a media personality, volunteered to return to London for a while in March 1944 if the Head of Northern thought it would improve matters. Trust appeared to be breaking down and a trawl through the correspondence may reveal factors that contributed to this. Some raise the issue of the British style of diplomacy. Clark Kerr himself had written earlier,

> We have indeed been more than puzzled, we have been frankly disturbed by what seemed to us at this end to be something like an excursion into disingenuousness. It saddens me to reflect that His Majesty's Government at this stage still think that, in dealing with the Russians, they can get away with such stuff as this. They can't. Here again I would like to know whose is the mind that puts forth this kind of thing. Can you

[46] FO 800 302 P 137.
[47] FO 800 302 P 118.
[48] FO 800 302 P 282. "P.S. The story of old Burrows is a sad one. But, though very careful how he spoke to Moley (Orme Sargent) and myself at two lunches we had with him, it transpired that he was really talking of the Russians as it they were savages in other quarters...."

> help me? It is painful to me that I have to go on telling my masters that half-truths will not do and they must learn to be sincere and candid.[49]

There was no shortage of ideas being put forward as to why progress on issues was sluggish, and how to improve speed it up. Geoffrey Wilson from the Russian Department held a rather patronising view about the issue as he revealed to Clark Kerr in Moscow:

> When I got back from Moscow and the others got back from Teheran, I started writing a piece to the effect that we should be making a terrible mistake if we took all the Russian professions of a desire for co-operation etc. at their face value; that the Russians were only now emerging onto a frightened world as a great power; that we could not reasonably expect them to exercise that power with a moderation which we ourselves only learnt after two or three hundred years and according to a set of rules largely drawn up by ourselves; and that in any case by habit and tradition their methods were more robust and brutal than those we should allow ourselves to use...P.S. It's too bad that Stalin and Molotov were not at Eton and Harrow but what can we do about it?[50]

In simple terms, they did not know how to behave. A year later Wilson was still writing in the same vein to colleagues. "In a recent dispatch Sir Archibald Clark Kerr drew attention that Russia had too recently emerged from a period when she was treated by the other nations as a pariah unfit for civilised intercourse to feel wholly satisfied about the readiness of her allies to cultivate permanent relations with her as an honourable equal." He continued:

[49] FO 800 301 P 147, 31 July 1943.
[50] FO800 302 P 36, Geoffrey Wilson to Clark Kerr, 19 March 1944.

> Long accustomed themselves to intrigue against the stability of other states, the Soviets will be slow to abandon the belief that important elements in Britain and America are plotting against them or at least planning to let the enemy down lightly after the war. For the last twenty years every Soviet citizen has been taught that his duty is not to co-operate with foreigners (particularly the British) because they are probably spies and saboteurs. The result is that, by and large, Soviet officials, in their dealings with foreigners, are clumsy, ignorant and suspicious.[51]

Wilson even had criticism of Winston Churchill's lack of understanding of cultural difference.[52] It may have had something to do with this, but it may have been the Soviets' lack of experience, their communist education that made them fear foreigners, that they took a very hard line on the defence of their western frontier, or their belief that they could successfully force the issue through in a ruthless fashion. Whatever the reason, the Foreign Office recognised that trust was an issue between the two parties when a strong clear relationship was required to come to an agreement on such a compound issue, which had so many closely-held attachments for one of them and huge repercussions for others.

The Foreign Office staff often discussed the motives and the objectives of the Soviets, their ways of working and how best to handle them. On 28 September 1943, Christopher Warner wrote to Clark Kerr in preparation for the Third Moscow Conference (on 18 October 1943):

…I do feel that we must begin to acquire evidence of the Russian attitude. Everything they do seems to me to be equally susceptible of two interpretations a) the more optimistic one that they will collaborate and <u>can learn to do so</u>, if they are convinced that they will get a fair

[51] FO800 302 P 63, Written by Geoffrey Wilson, 24 April 1944.
[52] FO 800 302 P 89, Geoffrey Wilson to Clark Kerr, May 1944.

deal from us, b) that they have not changed at all, that they have been at pains to get as much out of us as possible while they needed it, and for that purpose have gone in for a lot of window dressing, abolition of the Comintern, recognition of the Church, lip service to collaboration etc. but that now they are out to get their own way, that “War and the Working Class” has replaced the Comintern, that what we call the restoration of law and order they would call bolstering up fascism, that they want us to give all sorts of undertakings to consult them while keeping their own hands free to follow purely Russian if not Bolshevik ends.[53]

By this point, after two years of full diplomatic contact with their Soviet counterparts, they were still not close to a good working relationship. After the conference was over, Warner sent a letter to Clark Kerr thanking him for good conference but saying that he was sad that they did not discover much about Stalin’s real intentions for eastern Europe.[54] The advice given earlier had obviously not worked and the same diplomats would be still wondering about his motives when they worked at Yalta and Potsdam. Incidentally, the above letter gives further support to the belief that for a long period appeasement was happening and Stalin’s part in this was the window dressing.

Gladwin Jebb, Head of Reconstructions Department at the Foreign Office, accompanied the British delegations to all the major conferences. Before setting out for the above conference he prepared a paper for general circulation in the Foreign Office.[55] In this document, he asked colleagues to agree that he should put forward a number of points at the conference including “the cessation to Poland of East Prussia, Danzig and the Oppeln district of Silesia.” The conference being referred to involved foreign ministers Hull, Eden and Molotov. It discussed how the bring the end of the war sooner plus the setting up of a European

[53] FO 800 301 P 196.
[54] FO 800 301 P 365, 11 November 1943.
[55] The National Archives, FCO 73/N1147, Ge/43/1 1943.

Advisory Commission and reaffirmation of unconditional surrender. There is no record of this document ever being used at the Conference, but it can be concluded that the Oder was not in his thoughts at the time in late 1943.

The Polish Prime Minister Mikolajczyk, along with the Polish Ambassador, called to see Anthony Eden straight after he returned from Moscow. They discussed Polish security, federations and the Polish secret Army. Eden started the conversation by saying that "The question of the Polish Soviet frontier was not discussed. This was in accordance with the request made to me by the Polish Government before I started for Moscow and with the policy of the United States Government not to consider frontier questions until after the cessation of hostilities."[56] In doing so, he was telling them that not even the Curzon Line was discussed never mind the contingent issue of the Polish western frontier. This declared willingness to abide by the Polish Government's request was not upheld yet again when he went to Tehran four weeks later.

The Poles had not formally asked the Foreign Office to support their claim for territory up to the western Neisse at the time of the Tehran Conference in November 1943, which was a wide-ranging set of discussions over many issues. Churchill introduced the topic of Poland's frontiers formally into the discussions.[57] The three leaders agreed that they would work towards and agree a policy on Poland between them and afterwards advise the Poles to accept. Not only did Churchill dis-apply the Atlantic Charter from the colonies and Germany, but also Poland. Churchill later wrote, "Personally I thought Poland might move westwards," like soldiers taking two steps "left close", and " I then demonstrated with three matches my idea of Poland moving westwards."[58] This was not part of a script prepared by the Foreign Office in advance of the conference, but a spontaneous performance by Churchill. The topic was examined in

[56] The National Archives, FO 954 19B 560, p. 2.
[57] Churchill, *Closing the Ring*, p. 284.
[58] Ibid., p. 285.

more detail even getting as far examining and discussing a map of the Oder Neisse Line. Churchill's motives may have related to his judgement at the time that if he managed to secure Poland fixed frontiers as soon as possible along with promises for free elections, he might still be able to keep the Asiatic power out of Western Europe. There is no surviving evidence amongst the Foreign Office papers to illuminate his or their thinking on this at the conference. No mention of frontiers appears in the Tehran Declaration that followed. The documents about war-time conferences were not available to the public until years afterwards and so the Foreign Office and political leaders were able to construct public narratives that would reduce critical comment.

As soon as the British party returned to London, the Polish Government in Exile was keen to find out what had been discussed at Tehran and their ambassador Count Raczynski visited. Anthony Eden and Alexander Cadogan told him a half truth.

> I said that I could not tell him anything definite. We had sounded Marshal Stalin and had drawn what inferences we could from what he said. The Prime Minister and I had compared notes after the conversation and found we had reached generally the same conclusion. It seemed that Marshal Stalin still had in mind that the Polish Soviet frontier should follow the Curzon Line, Poland receiving ample compensation in the west. I said that although I did not know that it would be a good proposal even from the British point of view it seemed that Marshal Stalin might contemplate the Polish frontier being advanced even as far as the line of the Oder. Count Razinski must understand that these were only indications and we had ourselves, of course, not taken any commitments whatsoever.[59]

[59] Kew, The National Archives, FO 954 19B 577, p. 4.

There was nothing about Churchill taking the lead and asking the three leaders to work towards a policy on Poland and afterwards advising the Poles to accept.[60]

Diplomacy often involves the art of concealment and truth cannot always be spoken from the beginning, and so perhaps the Foreign Office believed that time was not ready. After Tehran the foreign office had to do that transition. Churchill had already done the deal and the Poles had still to be brought around. Either way, it fitted the pattern of British diplomacy. Eight days later, at a meeting with Eden, Cadogan, the Polish Prime Minister Mikolajczyk and the Polish Foreign Minister, the British were prepared to reveal a little more in very careful language. Reporting on the Tehran meeting he told the Poles it was rather difficult to say anything definite, as neither side had taken any commitment and it had been felt that it was premature to try to arrive at rigid frontiers, but an idea had emerged that the future territory of Poland would lie between the Curzon Line and the Oder. Mikolajczyk said no more than this suggestion most certainly offered would be something to think upon. Eden wrote in his autobiography that he reported to Churchill that Mikolajczyk was not comforted "by the offer of large areas of German territory which he fears a weakened Poland would have difficulty in digesting. But nonetheless we are pegging away and I do not despair".[61] A much fuller picture of what the Soviets had in mind was now being revealed to the London Poles and their country was being re-created for them by others. The British made efforts to bring the Poles around to the new reality and at a large meeting at Chequers on Sunday, 6 February 1944. The Foreign Office staff recorded the stance of the Polish Prime Minister Mikolajczyk as saying that, "We are all grateful to the Prime Minister for all he had done but he could not go as far as proposed without abandoning Poland's moral right and losing the support of his people."[62] The Poles were still resisting British attempts at persuasion.

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[60] Churchill, *Closing the Ring*, p. 285.
[61] Eden, *Memoirs*, p. 504.
[62] Anthony Eden Papers, POL/44/28.

During 1944, as it became more likely that Germany would be defeated, perceived post-war issues came to the forefront. In regard to the relationship with the Soviet Union, "Attitudes within the Foreign Office tended to fluctuate between doubt and hope. On 31 March Eden was worrying about the situation in Italy where he feared the communists would swallow up the Badoglio government. By 3 April he was confessing to fears thathe Soviets had vast aims which might include the domination of Eastern Europe and even the Mediterranean."[63] In May, Gladwyn Jebb wrote to collegues that "they should not be expected to ignore completely the idea that Russia was a potential enemy."[64] The British ambassador in Moscow, Clark Kerr wrote in August 1944 that if the Russians were victorious then she would feel more secure, and confidence would be increased. He wrote that the theory of world revolution was put to one side but "Russia had retained her freedom of action and still possessed a morbidly developed sense of inferiority, which would need careful handling." Britain had a broad set of interests in her dealing with the Soviet Union and even after three full years of a working relationship her diplomats felt unable to agree.

Churchill and Eden believed efforts needed to be made to break the impasse over the Curzon line, and Foreign Office staff travelled with Churchill to Moscow in October 1944. There is no existing evidence of a prepared Foreign Office plan for this meeting. In the discussion of Germany's future, Stalin said that a long occupation would be necessary and went on to suggest that France and some small countries could provide forces for this purpose.[65] The British minutes of the meeting record that the

> Prime Minister thought United Poland could be employed. Marshal Stalin said Silesia would go to the Poles and part of East Prussia. The Soviet Union would take

[63] Ross, *Foreign Office Attitudes*, p. 526.
[64] Ibid., p. 529.
[65] FO800 302 P 280.

> Koenigsberg and the Poles would be very interested in the occupation of Germany. Prime Minister thought the population might be moved from Silesia and East Prussia to Germany. If 7 million have been killed in the war there would be plenty of room for them. He suggested that Mr Molotov and Mr Eden and Mr Harrison should talk this over and get a picture of the general proposals for Marshal Stalin and himself to think about and then, when the end came, they would not be without something un-probed.[66]

It appears that appeasement continued up until at least this point. Unprompted, and despite the fact that military progress was being made on all fronts and the allies probably knew the war was won, Churchill was giving more away. This time he consented to the Polish occupation of a part of Germany and the cessation of Silesia to Poland. This was akin to temporary administration and Stalin would run with that notion the following year. Appeasing is a legitimate diplomatic device and no doubt it sometimes works, but the appeased country needs to know that there is an endpoint to the transactions. Stalin had so far witnessed a long list of offers and may have believed that there was more to come. Churchill was hoping that he could achieve clear boundaries and free and fair democratic elections in return. He had to please both the the Soviets and the yet-to-be constructed Polish Government.

Churchill reported in Parliament on 27 October 1944. He outlined two big issues, the Poland's future frontiers and the Lublin versus London Government. He said he hoped the Polish Prime Minister Mikolajczyk would go to Moscow to lead a newly constructed government which would contain some of the London Poles. "Although I do not underrate the difficulties which remain, it is a comfort to feel that Britain and Soviet Russia, and I do not doubt the United States, are all firmly agreed in the re-creation of a strong, free, independent,

[66] FO800 302 P 280.

sovereign Poland loyal to the Allies and friendly to her great neighbour and liberator, Russia."[67] These words, as Churchill was to find out, meant different things within each culture. He then told the MPs the opposite of the truth: " I am very glad to inform the House that our relations with Soviet Russia were never more close, intimate and cordial than they are at the present time. Never before have we been able to reach so high a degree of frank and friendly discussions of the most delicate and often potentially vexatious topics as we have done at this meeting from which I have returned."[68] He was not reflecting the views of his advisers in the Foreign Office, and there was no mention of Silesia or suggestions for using the Polish army as an occupation force in post-war Germany.

Six weeks later he was back and he told a very sombre House of Commons that the London Poles had objected, unwilling to accept Soviet and British plans for the Curzon Line and a reconstituted government, and Mikolajczyk did not go to Moscow. He told the MPs about plans for compensating Poland by giving them lands in the west formerly belonging to Germany. Calling it a "clean sweep," he explained that all Germans would be removed from them but did not name the territories involved.[69] He also explained why, against all that had been promoted for the previous four years, territorial changes were to be made before the end of the war after all and pointed to the phrase "mutually agreed" changes from the Atlantic Charter:

> Our British principle has been enunciated that, as I have said, all territorial changes must await the conference at the peace table after the victory has been won, but to that principle there is one exception, and that exception is, changes mutually agreed. It must not be forgotten that in the Atlantic Charter is I think inserted the exception that there

[67] Hansard, HC Deb, 27 October 1944, vol. 404, cc409-9, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1944/oct/27/war-and-international-situation [accessed 9 March 2026].
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

> should be no changes before the peace table except those mutually agreed. I am absolutely convinced that it is in the profound future interest of the Polish nation that they should reach agreement with the Soviet Government about their disputed frontiers in the East before the march of the Russian Armies through the main part of Poland takes place. That is the great gift they have to make to Russia, a settlement now at this time which gives the firm title of mutual agreement to what might otherwise be disputed at the Peace Conference.[70]

The Oder Neisse Line was not mentioned.

The Foreign Office now prepared for the forthcoming conference, which was due to be held on Russian territory at Crimea. The leaders judged that the war was coming towards its end and the purpose of the meeting was the management of a conquered Germany, a program for the settlement of Europe and plan for a peaceful postwar world. But each came with their own agenda. Poland was the first item on the agenda. After the trading that followed, Molotov put forward a summary of the proposals, and with regard to the compensatory element for Poland, "It was decided that the western frontier of Poland should be drawn from the town of Stettin (which would be Polish) and thence southwards along the river Oder and the Western Neisse."[71] This was the Soviet request and Churchill and Roosevelt had to judge if it could be traded against Stalin's promise of free elections in Poland. Churchill later wrote that he personally told the conference about a telegram from the War Cabinet which asked him not to mention the Western Neisse, as that would require the resettlement of a vast number of people.[72] He agreed that Poland should receive compensation in the west up to the line of the Oder but that the War Cabinet were very doubtful about offering more. This could be construed as the final step in the British appeasement of Stalin. This telegram has never been found in the

[70] Ibid.
[71] Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy*, p. 326.
[72] Ibid., p. 337.

records. According the Churchill's later account of events, Roosevelt agreed to the proposals for moving the frontier up to the line of the Oder but "there would appear to be little justification for extending it up to the line of the Western Neisse".[73] After further objections from the British party, it was agreed that the decision would be left to the final peace conference after a new Polish Government were consulted about Silesia. A Commission based in Moscow and made up of Molotov, Harriman and Clark Kerr would oversee the setting up of this Polish Provisional Government of National Unity. The Declaration issued after seven days revealed very little about the key points of argument during the tense discussions and any mention the Western Neisse was left out.[74] There are no Foreign Office records revealing opinions of the diplomats on the conference.

The House of Commons was somewhat rebellious when Churchill gave a much clearer picture during his speech on 27 February 1945 as part of a three-day debate on the Crimean Conference. In describing the compensation due to Poland, he said,

> 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.[75]

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[73] Ibid., p. 329.
[74] 'Protocol of the proceedings of the Crimea Conference, February, 1945', Washington, 24 March 1945, *The Avalon Project*, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/yalta.asp [accessed 9 March 2026].
[75] Hansard, HC Deb, 27 February 1945, vol. 408, cc1267-345, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1945/feb/27/crimea-conference#S5CV0408P0_19450227_HOC_263 [accessed 9 March 2026].

The three-day debate that followed was dominated by the topics of Poland, frontier changes and population transfers. Thirty MPs spoke in opposition showing deep concern about the consequences. Churchill was criticized and when it came to the final vote, 25 MPs voted against the motion and one even resigned. The details of the Crimean Conference were not available to the public and Churchill was able to make a tailored delivery, for instance, Stalin's plans for Stettin were not revealed.

In the weeks following the Crimea Conference significant events happened. Firstly, President Roosevelt died and was replaced by Truman who gathered around him his own team of diplomatic advisers. Secondly, Hitler committed suicide and the fighting ended in Europe. But the Soviets showed no sign of keeping their promises about free elections in Poland. Churchill had sent Roosevelt an anxious letter on 8 March 1945 about the different interpretation that the Soviets were putting on the Crimean conference and Stalin's actions in Eastern Europe.

> I am sorry to say that the discussions in the Moscow Commission on Poland show that Molotov has quite a different view from us as to how the Crimea decision on Poland should be put into effect. As you know, nobody here believes that the present Warsaw administration is really representative. and [there has been] criticism of the decision in Parliament to the line that the decision on Moscow would not result in a really representative government being set up and that, if this was so, all hope of free elections disappeared. All parties were also exercised by the reports that deportations, liquidations and other repressive measures were being put into practice on a wide scale by the Warsaw administration against those likely to disagree with them.[76]

[76] *Roosevelt and Churchill*, ed. by Loewenheim, Langley and Jonas, p. 663.

The Foreign Office and Clark Kerr received a copy of the American Ambassador in Moscow, Averell Harriman's letter, complaining about the Soviets' attitude and behaviour in Eastern Europe on 6 April 1944, just six days before Roosevelt's death, saying that "whatever may have been in their minds at Yalta, it new seems that they feel they can force us to acquiesce in their policies."[77] Later in the month Christopher Warner and Clark Kerr received an unauthorised report of an anti-Russian speech made by Harriman off-the-record to a group of newspaper reporters. As Harriman put it:

> I have come to the conclusion on long range politics there is an irreconcilable difference or differences between the United States and Britain on the one hand and Russia on the other. The difference is this: Russia apparently intends to pursue a policy of Marxian penetration wherever she can to build up her own security system to protect her socialist conception and we want a world of free nations and peoples. It is becoming increasingly difficult to negotiate with Russia and Russia is becoming more evasive about keeping agreements entered into. For a long time we have wondered what Russia's long term policies would be but only in the last few months has evidence or rather have signs of this policy become clear or at least have begun to loom up.[78]

There is no record of their reaction to Harriman's words but clearly the mood was changing. The Western Allies were realizing that Stalin was not honouring his promise of free elections in Poland.

With the war ended, a new President, Harry Truman, in place, and the Soviet Union in complete control of eastern Europe, Churchill demanded another conference, eventually

[77] Kew, The National Archives, FO800 303 P 92.
[78] FO 800 303, p. 199.

accepting a date that did not suit him because of the forthcoming British elections. It was to be held at Potsdam outside Berlin. In the period just before the conference there were a number of significant changes amongst senior post-holders. Across the Atlantic, James F. Byrnes had succeeded Edward R. Stettinus as the US Secretary of State on 3 July 1945, while in Britain, Winston Churchill temporarily held the office of Foreign Secretary while Anthony Eden was ill from early June until 9 July 1945. The Foreign office was under a huge workload managing new international relationships but also preparing for the conference.

In internal correspondence, about the transfer of German populations, from Harrison, who was a member of the German Department at the Foreign Office, there was a clear recognition that Poland might get the Western Neisse frontier, leading to the transfer of a large number of extra Germans. “Dr Benes will probably wish to get rid of something in the neighbourhood of two and a half millions in addition to the Reich Germans who have been imported into Czechoslovakia since 1938; those from Poland and Polish occupied Germany may be anything between five and a quarter and nine million and still more if the Western Neisse is accepted as the frontier.”[79] There had been discussion about whether the British or the Americans should raise this issue at Potsdam and some level of discomfort was being felt. As Harrison noted, “the principle itself of these large-scale transfers is quite likely to be attacked from various quarters, not least in powerful organs of the British press such as the Times, Manchester Guardian etc. Do we in these circumstances wish to incur the ‘odium’ of having taken the initiative in raising the question? Would it be better simply to have concurred?”[80] What is not untypical of this internal memo in diplomatic communications is the absence of any trace of concern for the people affected by these actions. He was more concerned about managing the presentation of the event and believed that it would be much

[79] *DBPO Potsdam*, Annex to No. 59 Minute by Mr Harrison [C 3675/95/18], Foreign Office, 9 July 1945, p. 102.
[80] Ibid, p. 101.

better if someone else raised the issue and Britain just concurred. His conclusion was that "This is a very important question of tactics which can only be settled at the highest level"[81]

At a meeting to discuss the attitude and policy of the new Charge d'Affaires in Warsaw, held on 10 July, Sir Orme Sargent revealed that the Foreign Office believed that at least part of Silesia was under Polish control and has thus transgressed the agreement at Yalta. He "said he thought that the Russians would claim that much of this counted as booty, particularly such machinery as was removed from the part of German Silesia under Polish control."[82] He went on to say that "The Prime Minister had agreed at Teheran to the Oder Neisse line as the Western frontier of Poland. The Russians had pushed this claim and the Poles had fallen into the trap by attempting to seize the territory before the peace settlement. This issue might cause another war."[83] Christopher Warner, who was also at the meeting, said that "both we and the Americans considered that the frontier should be further East, but that we may not be able to obtain Russian agreement on this."[84] The comments by these two knowledgeable people who were right at the centre of diplomatic events reveals that at that point they believed the issue of the Oder Neisse line was unsettled and had the potential for change and conflict, even to the extent of a confrontation between allies. On the same day, the German Polish frontier featured amongst a brief on "Outstanding Territorial Problems in Europe" for the UK Delegation at Potsdam.[85] On 12 July 1945, reliable news reached the Foreign Office that the Soviets had in practice assigned the whole of Silesia to Polish administration. At a meeting in Berlin about coal supplies amongst other things, Marshal Zhukov stated to Sir William Strang (then adviser to General Montgomery) that "territory east of the Oder Neisse line was not within his jurisdiction and therefore that Silesian coal could not be taken into consideration," as that frontier "was agreed

[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., p. 129, No. 73, Record of a meeting in Sir O. Sargent's room in the foreign office at 5 p.m., 10 July 1945 [N 7652/211/55].
[83] Ibid., p. 130.
[84] Ibid., p. 130.
[85] Ibid., p. 160, Annex C to No 85.

at the Crimea Conference".[86] This confirmed what Orme Sargent had already suspected and it meant that the Russians were not abiding by the agreement made at Yalta and had unilaterally made Poland the fifth partner in the administration of Germany. It may have been no surprise to Winston Churchill, however, who had made the offer about Polish occupation at the Third Moscow Conference the previous year.

The UK delegation received their brief prepared by Foreign Office staff about Poland's western frontiers for the conference just before their departure.[87] It used the draft of the statement made at the Moscow Conference in October 1944 and an extract from the Crimea Conference in February 1945, documents which were never accepted by the Polish government in exile, as its basis. They probably felt able to do this because on 5 July 1945 the American and British governments had officially withdrawn their recognition from the exiled government in favour of the new Provisional Government of National Unity. The brief for the conference then outlined the British perception of the stances of the Soviet and Polish Provisional Governments and a narrative describing recent attempts to seek elucidation of the attitude of the Soviet government. The Soviets had very recently furnished them with confirmation they had indeed handed over the administration of Silesia, former German territory, but had said that this did not prejudice in any way the question of the Polish German frontier, which would be decided at the conference. This came to Mr Roberts at the Moscow Embassy from Monsieur Vyshinski and stated that, "The Polish administration in the former German territory is operating under the direction of the Polish Provisional Government and is not responsible to the Soviet Government," and "The activities of the Polish authorities in these territories cannot, however, be taken as prejudging the question of the Polish-German frontier which remains for

[86] Ibid., p. 122, No. 70, Sir W. Strang (Lubbecke) to Sir J Grigg (Received 12th July, 2 p.m. No. M. 1194 Telegraphic [C3853/24/18]).
[87] Ibid., p. 219. A note at the bottom of the page suggests that this undated brief was prepared on 12 July. A copy was given to the American Delegation.

settlement at the peace conference."[88] In a world where every word mattered and was endlessly scrutinised for meaning, "former German territory" when referring to Silesia revealed something about Russian feelings on the matter. The Foreign Office and the British delegation were expecting tough bargaining sessions and so delegates were formally given the arguments in favour of agreeing a provisional agreement between the three Allies on Germany's eastern frontier and against accepting the Oder and Western Neisse as the frontier.[89] The argument in favour of contesting the issue firmly with the Soviets at Potsdam, and in doing so, allowing a settlement to be postponed, was twofold. Firstly, it would prevent the Poles from swiftly setting up an effective administration and aggravate the difficulties of doing this at a later date, and, secondly, it would sanction the flouting of the authority of the Allied Control Council over Germany by the Soviets and Poles and set a precedent for their future misbehaviour. There were three arguments offered against accepting the Oder Neisse line. The first one suggested that the Soviets might interpret it as a sign of weakness and it would encourage them to make excessive demands in other areas. It was also argued that the British public may not have approved of the "amputation of one fifth of the total area of Germany normally inhabited by over ten million people" and that in the long term their lack of support might sabotage peace. The third argument was that the Allied Control Council would not be able to draw on food and energy supplies from Silesia, which were needed for the British and American zones, and the Russians and Poles would have more than their proportionate share.

On the basis of the above arguments the document lays out three points of advice on the stance to be taken by the British with regard to Germany's eastern frontiers. Firstly, the British, providing the Americans went along with them, would contest the Soviet interpretation of the situation but would wish to do more than just going on record as with-holding consent.

[88] Ibid., p. 221. A reply to Mr Robert's letter was received in a letter from Monsieur Vyshinski dated 1 June.
[89] Ibid.

They were prepared come to an agreement with the Soviets at the Potsdam Conference on a reasonable German eastern frontier, which included Silesia initially on the German side. Then if the French also concured, they would be prepared to move the frontier westwards, fix a permanent border, and have it ratified at the final peace conference. The British believed this to be an acceptable compromise. Should this compromise be turned down, the fallback position was that the British would only be willing to agree to give to Poland only the German territories that all four controlling Powers were prepared to allow Poland permanently. Should this fail, then the final backstop was to be a financial penalty. The British would favour the reduction of the share of reparations that would be due to the Soviets even to the extent of not allowing them any reparations at all from the British and American zones.

Cadogan for Britain, Harriman for America, and others held a preliminary meeting in Berlin on 14 July during which a batch of suitably edited British preparatory briefs were handed over.[90] Cadogan started by suggesting that the same procedure be followed as at Yalta and that the question of Germany should be made the first item on the agenda. As the discussion moved toward the administration of Germany and the associated economic issues, Cadogan expressed the view that the issue of treating Germany as an economic whole was profoundly entangled with the issue of the Polish western frontier because Silesian coal supplies needed to be secured. Mr Dunn on behalf of the Americans said that they did not like the Western Neisse line and Harriman added that he thought the best way of dealing with the two connecting issues of the frontier and population transfer "was not to make a flat statement of our own views, but to ask Marshal Stalin what his intentions were in regard to Polish territorial claims".[91] Dunn suggested that whatever else was decided the Polish western border would have to come up for decision at this conference.[92]

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[90] FO 934/2/8, Record of a preliminary meeting with the United States Delegation held at Berlin on the afternoon of 14 July 1944.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

On the eve of the conference, Roberts telegraphed Eden from the Moscow Embassy with some news received from Anglo-American journalists whose views he had garnered on their return from a tour of Silesia. They suggested that Soviet soldiers were preventing Poles from expelling Germans from Lausitz and Breslau and that “many Poles whom they met doubted whether the Poles would now receive any territory in Lower Silesia beyond Oppeln district”. On the basis of this and other information, he wrote, “While therefore the Soviet Government might agree that the Poles should not have Stettin or even Breslau they would certainly regard the frontier suggested in paragraph 4(1) of your telegram No 7,412 to Washington as inadequate and would try to gain popularity amongst the Poles at our expense by contrasting their generosity with our niggardly attitude”.[93] Even at this point, on the very eve of the conference, there was uncertainty about Stalin’s objectives in Poland.

The stage has been set and the first plenary meeting of the conference started with next day. A prepared Foreign Office brief for the British opening words at the conference states “There is…one political problem whose economic repercussions are so considerable that it needs to be discussed as soon as possible by the Big Three. That is the question of the Polish Western frontier.”[94] The British Foreign Office was to carry its language, concepts and diplomatic practice into the conference rooms at Potsdam. When they were to meet their partners or opponents, they would be holding the baggage of their relationships developed during the testing period of war-time. Relationships amongst diplomats were at a low point. Lacking in trust and suspicious of each other, they were unsure of each other’s intentions. The decision making that they would be engaging in about Germany’s eastern frontier would be to some extent influenced, consciously or non-consciously, by some of the assumptions held following what the parties had learned or not learned about each other.

[93] *DBPO Potsdam*, p. 309, No 155.
[94] Ibid., No. 169 Note for First Plenary Meeting, F.O. 934/2/8 (4), Berlin.

The experiences of Clark Kerr and his reports on them give some insight of the views that British diplomats held about their Soviet counterparts. Thinking them as thin-skinned, he portrayed them as "as sensitive of their reputation as is a prostitute who has married into the peerage."[95] He also commented about off-hand manners by writing to Eden and describing a Russian as "a wet retriever puppy in somebody else's drawing room, shaking herself and swishing her tail in adolescent disregard for all except herself."[96] These comments may also reflect on Clark Kerr's sense of superiority. Frank Costigliola writes about the behaviour and attitudes of the top Soviet leadership at a Bolshevik Revolution anniversary party where there was distinctive set of practices regarding contact among men. In a ritual of male bonding, the ambassadors were subjected to a drinking contest and homosocial emotion was exhibited. Quoting Clark Kerr, "brotherly love began to manifest itself in a cascade of kisses from Korneichuk".[97] Costigliola judges that "increasing numbers of Allied officials, irritated by matters small and large, would find these customs alien, disgusting, and further proof the Soviets were unfit postwar partners."[98] Somewhat in contrast to this, Cadogan, returned from Moscow, impressed by Stalin himself.[99] Despite its sometimes wide geographical spread the British diplomatic community kept close contact and their shared habitus meant that these views about the Russians were carried to Potsdam.

This examination of remaining Foreign Office records enables a few conclusions to be drawn. A full diplomatic relationship with the Soviet Union was rekindled in 1941 after a long hiatus, but it was shaky, resting on inherited assumptions both about the Russian and the British character and ways of doing diplomatic business. Whatever may be said about the Soviet Union's cultural style of diplomacy and Stalin's wilfulness, the British diplomatic style,

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[95] TNA, FO 371/43336. N5598/183/38, Clark Kerr to Anthony Eden, 31 August 1944.
[96] TNA, FO 371/47941. N3934/545/3, Clark Kerr to Anthony Eden, 27 March 1945.
[97] Frank Costigliola, 'Archibald Clark Kerr, Averell Harriman, and the Fate of the Wartime Alliance, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 9.2 (2011), pp. 83-97.
[98] Ibid.
[99] *Diaries of Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 422.

including some manifestations of duplicity, as judged by their own officials, contributed to the lack of trust between the two sides.

The concept of the Oder Neisse Line was originally introduced to the British by Sikorski very early on, not resting on notions about compensation for loss of land in the east. Its further development was contingent upon Stalin's insistence on the Curzon Line and the London Poles' long resistance to it. There was no evidence of any complete written plan made about Germany's eastern frontier by foreign office officials until July 1945. There were hard-nosed exchanges about frontiers usually based on political, economic and military considerations and notions of the balance of power and zones of influence without much consideration of a moral dimension. Britain's relationship with the Soviet Union was always valued more than the meeting of Polish aspirations. Up until that point their thinking on the Oder Neisse Line was usually reactive, moving from ignorance through to prevarication, and then to appeasement followed by resistance as Potsdam came closer.

The Foreign Office staff were initiated into ways of seeing the world by being brought up within a culture which provided them with their concepts and frameworks of understanding, and provided openings into the world. The Soviets too had been initiated into their ways of looking at the world that appeared natural to the them, but not so to the British. A series of unsatisfactory episodes, apparently resting on the attitudes and behaviour of British staff soured relationships and trust. No amount of late Russian dinners, generous speeches or thoughtful gifts seemed able to overcome the different ways of thinking and behaving and there appeared to be little trust between the two sides at diplomatic level. The Foreign Office constantly wondered about Soviet motives, especially over freedom for Poland, and never felt that they had partners they could fully understand. While Foreign Office judgements about the Soviets remained relatively stable, Churchill's own views of Stalin fluctuated greatly over the war period. These attitudes only started to fully harden in March and April 1945 when it became

obvious that Stalin was not keeping to his promises about Poland. Some people were early in making that judgement about him.

Two key issues which became huge points of conflict at the later Potsdam Conference were the debate over the eastern or western Neisse and the Polish occupation of Silesia. They were to form the crux of the conference. There remains a debate about whether the British and American retreat on these was inevitable or whether it was contingent upon the better geopolitical position, the military progress of the war, the distrustful diplomatic relationship with the Soviets or the performance of the delegates at the conference. The Foreign Office had an unpredictable and impetuous master, who felt that he was the leader in foreign policy. Whatever advice they gave, or whatever policy they developed, there was no guarantee it would be promoted or defended well across the conference table. Graham Ross sums up the overall British view taken by their diplomats about their likely opponent just before Potsdam opened, Saying that they saw the Soviet Union as a difficult ally "with whom unpleasant compromises might have to be made, but she was not yet seen as an impossible collaborator." He concludes that, rather, "She was seen as a state pursuing her own interests in a crude and overbearing way, not as the leader of an ideological crusade."[100]

[100] Ross, *Foreign Office Attitudes*, p. 538.

# Chapter 2: The influence of the newspapers

The chief aim of this chapter is to examine the wartime discourse of British newspapers about the future western frontier of Poland. The chapter suggests that the tone and content of the wartime newspapers had a bearing on how the diplomats thought and behaved at the Potsdam Conference. The key elements will be the perceptions of the Germans and Stalin's Russia as they were portrayed in the press along with any written articles and letters about Poland's western frontiers. The chapter relies on the judgement that the nation's key decision-makers in government and the civil service personnel were reading and contributing in some way to one or more of four selected newspaper titles[1] and the negotiators carried that mind-set to the conference.

As was remarked by Stephen Koss in his well-recognised book *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, the British press during the war period were driven by "self-serving attempts to obtain personal recognition, political leverage, and especially commercial advantage".[2] The truth is probably somewhere in-between and Tim Luckhurst's judgement is that during the war "the extent to which they were serving their selfish interests as opposed to selflessly serving the nation deserves further consideration." Luckhurst also takes the view that "They lost neither their editorial independence nor their willingness to challenge, criticise and confront. Their conduct annoyed ministers from all three major political parties in the wartime

[1] **Readership figures – taken from ABC Audit Bureau of Circulation, a non-profit organisation owned by the media industry.**

| | **1935** | **1939** | **1947** |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***The Times*** | | **204,000** | **268,000** |
| ***Telegraph*** | | **737,000** | **1,015,000** |
| ***The Sunday Times*** | **215,000** | | **568,000** |
| ***Economist*** | | | |

[2] Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume 2: The Twentieth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 980-981.

coalition."[3] However, this was mostly confined to domestic issues where they felt they were responding to the needs of their readers and could make a difference. Information was part of the war effort and the newspapers relied on the Ministry of Information, Foreign Office and service ministries for key information. It is impossible to fathom the complete motivation behind every particular story they delivered to the British public and the nuanced impact it had on its varied readership. There were many active producers and recipients of the discourse, the Foreign Office and the Government being both the influencers and the influenced. The finished newspaper articles can be mined for an understanding of the internal thinking of the decision-makers and the ideas they wished to project as well as for the influences upon them. They also offer an indication of the broader views of the nation and it is an accepted precept that foreign policy is "primarily generated from within."[4]

I will firstly examine the close relationship between the personnel in the newspapers and the Foreign Office. It was a familial and symbiotic one. Then I will demonstrate the views that these newspapers took regarding the Soviet Union and Germany. In this war, unnatural partners had joined forces on a temporary basis and there was a hardening of views about the Germans alongside endless speculation about the character and intentions of the Soviets throughout the period of alliance against Germany. Whether or not a military partner can be fully understood and trusted will obviously have a bearing on the later decision-making at Potsdam. I also will examine any direct speculation or discussion in the press about final frontier arrangements for eastern Europe expecting that these will be fluid and changeable depending on their origins and on military progress and revealed diplomatic exchanges.

There were a number of different public and private discourses in progress during World War Two. These discourses were no doubt driven by, and supportive of, political and

[3] Tim Luckhurst, 'Still Raucous and Impertinent – British Newspapers in World War II', *History Reclaimed*, 13 December 2022, https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/still-raucous-and-impertinent-british-newspapers-in-wwii/ [accessed 10 March 2026].
[4] Christopher Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 222.

military events, the unfathomable trends within society, and the peculiar interests of groups and individuals. Their content and direction did not necessarily run in any predictable way. In this case, the content selected for examination is related to the settlement at the end of the war involving the construction of borders in Eastern Europe and is taken from the British publications the *Economist*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, and *Telegraph*. The people representing Britain at the discussions in Potsdam in July 1945 read and contributed to these papers in many direct and indirect ways and an examination of the ideas therein will yield important insights into the construction of the British politicians' and diplomats' stances leading up to the Potsdam Conference. There were no doubt other discourses swirling around amongst other groupings within war-time Britain differing in socio-political origins but these were less likely to come to the attention of, or be valued by, the decision-makers in diplomatic circles. It is not possible to state the views that had the most impact on the British delegates at Potsdam, only that certain views were extant, were developed over time, and may have influenced the decision-makers.

The British representatives who went to the Potsdam Conference in July 1945 to negotiate were on familiar terms with all the elite newspaper editors and leader writers in London. They met routinely in political, business and social scenarios. Churchill even appointed Max Aitkin (Lord Beaverbrook), the owner of the most successful mass-circulation newspaper of its time, to four different Ministeries in his cabinet during the war. Some knew each other and went to the same schools and universities (see table below). Some had personal friendships. They had participated in the developing national dialogue on foreign policy since long before, as well as throughout, the war, and thus contributed in some way to the mental framework that underpinned the British negotiating stance. These newspapers were part of the main channel between the decision-makers and the British population. This was not an open channel with a free flow of information and attitudes from one side to the other. The

gatekeepers, a very diverse collection of newspaper people, while having feet in both camps, consciously and unconsciously controlled what they felt the population and the leadership needed to know and what would increase their readership numbers. They belonged to overlapping cultures and were part of a long tradition in the promotion of the perspectives of the establishment. Information and opinion used in this chapter is taken mostly from the leader articles, letters pages, special articles written by prominent people, and reports from parliament. The diplomats went to Potsdam armed with the products of their own intellectual deliberations, the cultural attitudes of their education and class, their own reflected articles written by their acquaintances working on the newspapers and the feedback from a whole range of sources including the letter pages.

In wartime Britain, there was obviously tension between the notion of freedom of speech and the requirement to make sure that high morale was generated and maintained, and nothing was allowed to be published which would advantage the enemy. The Ministry of Information was set up with a member of the cabinet taking oversight and initially had the power to both create and censor information. Brendan Bracken, a personal friend of the Prime Minister, took on this role from 20 July 1941 to 25 May 1945. Aside from the production of a whole range of useful practical information and morale-boosting chatter, this office was charged with oversight of all reporting on military and diplomatic material. Press censorship functioned on the principle of self-enforcement. Guidance was given to the press about topics that were subject to the censor and invited to offer any story that might be covered by these 'Defence Notices' (or 'D Notices'). Any story submitted in this way would be scrutinised by the censor, and, using a set of guidelines, material could be redacted. This meant that any information which might be militarily or diplomatically useful to the enemy or damaging to morale could be removed.[5] If a narrative proved to be unsuitable it was stamped officially and

[5] Christopher R. Moran, *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

sent back to the newspaper and text that was changed had blue pencil marks stroked though it. Anything that was not passed for censorship would leave the newspaper open for prosecution. After some teething problems, a system bedded down resting on the expectation that editors of all the major newspapers and the BBC would submit 'D Notices' on any material that they believed would require the oversight and sanction of the government. Such a system of self-censorship only worked smoothly and effectively if there was a similar worldview amongst the participants with regard to the general aims and objectives. Despite the normal tendencies of news reporters to chase scoops and gain the advantage over their rival newspapers, their editors could be relied upon to behave properly, rein in unacceptable attitudes and make their judgements governed by their patriotic duty and shared standards of behaviour. The links between the decision makers in the diplomatic service was very strong, based on the family, social networks and schooling. If the contributors to the letters pages reflect the readership of a newspaper, then, as a sizeable proportion of the names can be found in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, it can be claimed that in the highbrow papers the members of the British establishment were writing open letters to each other.

## The Editors

Geoffrey Dawson, as editor of the Times throughout the 1930s, exercised considerable influence, and his paper took a pro-appeasement stance. He thus had been in direct conflict with Churchill on the best way to handle Germany during those years.[6] He was a confidant of the two Prime-ministers, Baldwin and Chamberlain, and Robert Boothby called him, "the Secretary General of the establishment."[7] He stepped down in 1942. Dawson's successor Robert Barrington-Ward, who had been his long-term deputy and assistant, was right at the heart of the same milieu. A look at Barrington-Ward's daily routine illuminates how, within a

[6] Brian Lavery, *Churchill Goes to War. Winston's Wartime Journeys* (Bloomasbury, 2008), p. 11.
[7] Robert Boothby, *Recollections of a Rebel* (Hutchinson, 1978), p. 182.

small geographical area, he met all the people who provided him with everything he needed to ply his trade. As his biographer Donald McLachlan states:

> Barrington-Ward was a gay and sociable person with a wide circle of friends outside the office, and he enjoyed good talk and the food and wine that went with it. The traffic and ideas in the West End clubs and what had been spared by war and taxation of London's social pageant are constantly referred to in his diary. Four days out of seven one might expect to run into him somewhere in that tiny and exclusive quarter of London which is bounded by St James' Street Piccadilly, the Haymarket and Carlton House Terrace. His favourite clubs – the Wyndham in St James' Square, the Travellers and the Athenaeum in Pall Mall – were all five minutes' walk of one another. Almost as much as Fleet Street, it was a professional quartier for those dealing with public affairs, who could walk to it from Westminster and Whitehall across the Horse Guards' Parade or across St James' Park, up the Duke of York's steps and get from desk to table in fifteen minutes.[8]

Barrington-Ward was regularly called in to the Foreign Office for briefings or simply to be ticked off. In April 1939 he was told "We shall have quite enough of 'Ice-creamers'….If you are too bellicose, you provoke Dictators into doing something irrevocable"[9]

William Waite Hadley, the editor of *The Sunday Times*, was a close friend of Chamberlain and therefore associated with his politics. He became, with the support of Lord Kemsley, the proprietor of the newspaper, which was 'one of the most determined apostles of appeasement'.[10] *Guilty Men*, which was published in July 1940, savaged the British politicians

[8] Donald McLachlan, *In the Chair: Barrington Ward of 'The Times', 1927-1948* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p. 224
[9] *Diaries of Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 171.
[10] H.V. Hodson and Marc Brodie, 'Hadley, William Waite (1866–1960), newspaper editor', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004,

who were closely linked with the appeasement policy followed by the British Government and helped to solidify the concept in the public mind. [11] The writers claimed that Chamberlain and Halifax amongst others had left Britain unprepared for war and had emboldened Mussolini and Hitler. In 1943 Hadley wrote a book called *Munich: Before and After* to defend Chamberlain's legacy and to attempt to redress the balance.[12] Thus, politically he stood against Churchill and his construction of events.

The wartime editor of the *Economist*, Geoffrey Crowther appeared to be the least politically attached of the editors, claiming "to represent the extreme centre".[13] Despite, its reflection of the political views of business interests and the capitalist classes in Britain the *Economist* remained neutral in British elections until 1955. "A journal that is jealous of its reputation for independence would, in any event, be foolish to compromise it by openly taking sides in a general election."[14] It provided erudite and lengthier articles for its readership and only rarely were articles credited to particular writers. Circulation grew significantly during Crowther's editorship. Late in the war, Crowther's concern for Anglo-American relations led him to introduce into the paper an American survey which was intended to inform non-American readers about American affairs but which quickly became required reading for thousands of Americans from the president downwards. The *Economist* was indeed Crowther's monument, and under his editorship it became one of the most influential and most widely quoted newspapers in the world.[15]

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https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-33629 [accessed 10 March 2026].

[11] CATO (Michael Foot, Peter Howard and Frank Owen), *Guilty Men* (Victor Gollanz, 1940).

[12] William Waite Hadley, *Munich: Before and After* (Cassell, 1944).

[13] Hodson and Brodie, 'Hadley'.

[14] *Economist*, 4 February 1950, p. 243.

[15] Roland Bird, 'Crowther, Geoffrey, Baron Crowther (1907–1972), journalist and businessman', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-30988 [accessed 10 March 2026].

Churchill himself had a long association with the *Telegraph* stretching back to the previous century when, as a young soldier, he wrote military dispatches to them from India. Its editor was Arthur E. Watson, a friend of his. While Watson was a Conservative loyalist, it has been written that he had "practically no views about anything except gardening." Watson favoured a paper of "moderate views" which he defined as

> a paper that put forward principles rather than causes. People are tired of newspapers which are constantly propagating causes one after the other, and then working them to death. They dislike finding their morning paper full, day after day, of propaganda for the cause which is at the moment in the proprietor's mind. They want a real newspaper based on sound, steady, but progressive principles.[16]

The *Telegraph* published many of Churchill's articles during the 1930s and when he encountered financial problems, its owner, Viscount Camrose set up a trust to help him run his country house at Chartwell.[17] Although Churchill discontinued writing for the *Telegraph* once the war started, he maintained a close and supportive relationship, arranging introductions for its owner to President Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins, and even intervening to prevent the newspaper from being prosecuted for breaking the censorship laws.[18] He wrote to the Ministry of Information describing the *Telegraph* as "a friendly paper' and its owner as a 'patriotic man'"[19]

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[16] Ibid.
[17] Warren Dockter 'Playing Fair: Winston Churchill's Relationship with The Telegraph', *Gale Cengage Learning*, https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/warren-dockter-winston-churchills-relationship-with-telegraph [accessed 10 March 2026].
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

## Direct interference and familial relations

There can be no doubt about the close relationships between the nation's press, Churchill, the Foreign Office and the exercise of influence over newspaper content. Alexander Cadogan's diaries were published after his retirement and reveal many instances of blatant interference in the publication of newspaper articles. This could be directly with a newspaper's proprietor. On one occasion, he wrote about "A silly, ill-informed and ill-natured article on the Foreign Service in the 'Times'… A[nthony Eden] rang up about it, and said he would talk to J. Astor. [Astor was the proprietor of *The Times*] …Here Astor has said he has told Casey [in charge of *The Times*] to send Philip Graves to see me about the continuation of the article in tomorrow's issue…."[20] On another occasion it was just to rein in the writing of an article that might steal the thunder from an upcoming speech.[21] And another time, it was about the coverage of a failed peace mission: "Ridsdale [of the Foreign Office News Department] rang me up about D[aily] T[elegraph] having got hold of story of Burckhardt's visit to Berchtesgaden. Asked him to try to damp it down."[22] It might also be an article about regional foreign office strategy.[23] These examples show the foreign office expecting to exercise influence even outside the D Notices, usually by using personal contact and connections. There was obvious frustration with the *Times* editor: "...if the Times readers can swallow the swill dished up to them …...Barrington Ward is not capable of running a mussel stall. It's a tragedy that he should be, of all things, editor of the "Times".[24] *The Times* leader writer E.H. Carr was also regular target: "I hope someone will tie Barrington Ward and Ted Carr together and throw them into the Thames."[25] (On this occasion it was because he pursued a contrary line to the Foreign Office over British

[20] *Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 501.
[21] Ibid., p. 144.
[22] Ibid., p. 195.
[23] Ibid., p. 404.
[24] Ibid., p. 686.
[25] Ibid., p. 697.

intervention in Greece). This kind of informal relationship was possible because of the intersecting establishment cohorts which operated around Whitehall and Fleet Street.

| **Editors** |
|---|
| Hadley (Editor of Sunday Times) - friend of Chamberlain and associated with appeasement in 1930s. |
| Dawson (Editor of Times) - Cliveden Set and friend of Anthony Eden, Lord Halifax, Samuel Hoare and Ormsby-Gore and associated with appeasement in 1930s. |
| Barrington-Ward (Editor of Times) - Cliveden Set and friend of Lord Halifax and associated with appeasement in 1930s. |
| Watson (Editor of Telegraph) - friend of Winston Churchill who wrote articles for the paper in 1930s. Anti-appeasement. |
| Crowther (Editor of Economist) - friend of John Maynard Keynes. He claimed to represent the 'extreme centre'. |
| Lord Camrose (William Ewart Berry) – newspaper magnate and owner of the Telegraph and a great friend to Churchill. He gave financial help to Churchill including a large lump sum which enabled Churchill, who was in dire financial straits, to keep his home at Chartwell after 1945. |

| **Backgrounds - Editors** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Name** | **School** | **Higher Education** | **Club** |
| Times.<br>Geoffrey Dawson | Eton | Magdalen College and All Souls Colleges Oxford | Athenaeum |
| Times.<br>Robert Barrington-Ward | Westminster | Balliol College Oxford | Athenaeum Beefsteak Marlborough |
| Times<br>E.H. Carr | Merchant Taylors | Trinity<br>College Cambridge | |
| Sunday Times.<br>William W Hadley | Village School | | |
| Economist.<br>Geoffrey Crowther | Oundle | Clare College Cambridge | Brooks |
| Telegraph.<br>Arthur Watson | Alleyn's School | Durham University | Athenaeum Carlton |
| | | | |
| **Backgrounds -Foreign Office** | | | |
| **Name** | **School** | **Higher Education** | **Club** |
| Anthony Eden Earl of Avon | Eton | Christchurch<br>College Oxford | Carlton Bucks |
| Sir Pierson Dixon | Bedford College | Pembroke<br>College Cambridge | |
| Sir Alexander Cadogan | Eton | Balliol College Oxford | St James' |
| William Strang | Palmer's | University<br>College London | Travellers |
| William Hayter | Winchester | New College Oxford | |
| Gladwyn Jebb | Eton | Magdalen<br>College Oxford | |
| Edward<br>Ettingdene Bridges | Eton | Magdalen<br>College Oxford | Athenaeum |
| Archibald Clark Kerr | Bath College | France, Germany and Italy | |
| Sir Orme Sargent | Radley College | University Switzerland | Brooks |
| Edward Wood<br>Lord Halifax | Eton | Christchurch<br>College Oxford | Carlton |

Bound together in outlook by family, class, clubs and education, they were in the position to express and promote their views and attitudes in these newspapers through articles and

published letters. *The Times* was regarded as the voice of the nation and, according to their own company literature, they thought they were speaking on behalf of the government.[26] This is very important particularly as that newspaper was in the habit of including large chunks of parliamentary speeches verbatim. It was perhaps a Foreign Office way of conveying important attitudes and policy statements to foreign governments. Sometimes, an article not prefaced with much of an introduction actually turned out to be a speech made by Winston Churchill or Anthony Eden.[27]

## Demonising the Germans

In the period before and after the declaration of war in September 1939 it was possible to find varied and contested comments about the nature of the enemy and the approach that should be taken towards them. In his letter to the editor of *The Times* in January 1940, W.H. Dawson pointed to "the great variety of opinions on the twin subjects of peace aims and the attitudes which the Allied Powers and peoples should adopt towards Germany both during and after the war."[28] Dawson was a journalist, civil servant and author. He had been on the British delegation at the Treaty of Versailles and was regarded as an expert on German politics and society. In 1915 he wrote a book called *What is Wrong with Germany?* in which he argued that there were two Germanies, one made up of bad Germans like von Treitschke, von Moltke and Wilhelm ll and good Germans like Goethe, Kant, von Stein and Bismarck. He believed that it was possible to have a peaceful settlement of the war if one negotiated with good Germans.[29] Even at this stage, he was able to say and have published that he was "not behind others in deploring his [Hitler's] actions" and he suggested that "a programme of peace aims could even now be drawn up with Germany." This letter generated a passionate response from A. L. Rowse who said that

[26] *The History of The Times: 'The Thunderer' in the Making, 1785-1841* (Macmillan, 1935), p. 175.
[27] 'United Front, *The Times*, 28 October 1944.
[28] Letter to *The Times*, 23 January 1940.
[29] Russell Wallis, *Britain, Germany and the Road to the Holocaust: British Attitudes Towards Nazi Atrocities* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

"you cannot hope to make a satisfactory agreement with swindlers, blackmailers, proved and deliberate criminals. No doubt there are decent people in Germany with whom you could reach an agreement. But they are not as yet in control."[30] These letters were written at a time when the first reports were appearing about cruelties that were being inflicted on people in Poland. The tussle for the characterisation of the Germans was thus under way in the discourse. Whatever their analyses and proposals for action, both sides believed that not all Germans were responsible for the events that were happening in Europe.

In 1940, the Ministry of Information, which had initially decided that inserting the truth in the minds of the public was the main way to attack the enemy, launched the so-called Anger Campaign. As they put it: "The Hun is at the gate. He will rage and destroy. He will slaughter women and children."[31] The switch to the Anger Campaign rested on the notion that if the enemy was demonised then it was easier to find recruits to fight against them.[32] According to Lord MacMillan the Minister for the Ministry of Information, the working man "was in need of a sharp dose of stiffening."[33] The war-time propaganda effort was well under way in Britain by 1941. This change in approach was bolstered by the picture of the Germans constructed in the *Black Record* by Robert Vansittart.[34] The publication of an instalment the *Black Record* on 24 August 1941 generated four letters in *The Sunday Times* the following weekend. Taken together they can be judged as a struggle for the control of the meaning of Germany by the letter writers. A contest was under way at home for the definition of the enemy, running simultaneously with the real war for control of territory and resources abroad.

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[30] Letter to *The Times*, 27 January 1940. A. L. Rowse was a famous British historian at All Souls College, Oxford.
[31] Gary S. Messinger, *The Battle for the Mind. War and Peace in the era of Mass Communication* (University of Massachussetts, 2011), p. 201.
[32] Fiona MacDonald, 'The psychological tricks used to help win World War Two', *BBC*, 24 October 2016, https://www.bbc.co.uk/culture/article/20161021-the-psychological-tricks-used-to-help-win-world-war-two [accessed 10 March 2026].
[33] Ibid.
[34] Robert Vansittart, *Black Record: Germans Past and Present* (Hamish Hamilton, 1941).

The first letter to be published in response was sent in by the German-born theatre critic Alfred Kerr, who felt compelled to say that he agreed with Vansittart and then went on examine the present mental state of the Germans. He delineated four differing types, and concluded with "I believe that Germans can be shaped into anything - but it will have to be done by force" and "only by order".[35] The second letter written by Eleanor F. Rathbone, MP, saw Vansittart's article as part of his continued "campaign against those of us who believe there to be two Germanies - Hitlerite and anti-Hitlerite" and suggested that in doing so Vansittart might be playing into Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbel's hands by telling Germans that the British could see no difference between them and intended to treat them all alike.[36] This was not an uncommon view as suggested by Maxwell Garnett (Secretary to the League of Nations Union, 1920-38) writing to *The Times* from his club, the Athenaeum:

> Unfortunately the Government have allowed their Chief Adviser to say the wrong thing, and so place a powerful weapon on the hands of our enemies. His Black Book may persuade many Germans that they should support their Nazi masters to the bitter end rather than allow us to win: they may be convinced by this book that a British victory would result in themselves being treated as 'butcher birds', and in their country either being broken up into small states or else being held down by armed force for a long time to come.[37]

The third letter, from J. Watson, said that "The continued use of the words 'Hitler' and 'Nazi' is bewildering. The Socialists appear to use them to the exclusion of the word 'German' and now the Prime Minister in a speech used the former words and refers to them some forty-four times to three times of the word 'German' and once of the word 'Prussia'".[38] Words are slippery

[35] Letter to the editor, *The Sunday Times*, 31 August 1941.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

and important. The associations attached to them, the weight they carry and the way they are presented had a bearing on how the Germans would be treated when the fighting ended. If a national consensus, or even a British leadership consensus, was reached that the Germans as a whole were pervaded with a spirit of Prussian militarism then the final settlement was more likely to be deliberately harsh and unforgiving. The writer of the fourth letter, a German-speaking writer and reviewer, H.W. Belmore, said that the picture created by Vansittart was not convincing even though he "may be quite correct in the thoughts that compose it".[39] His view was that "After our victory, the only sensible thing to do would be to support with all our strength, those moral, humanising, anti-militaristic forces inside Germany the very existence of which Lord Vansittart insists on minimising, if he does not deny them outright"[40]. Throughout the war period people were competing for control of this agenda through the words that they choose to use.

Robert Vansittart, at that point still the Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the British Government, had previously been the most senior diplomat in the foreign office and had served as Permanent Under-Secretary from 1930 to 1938. In his book he characterised Germany as a "butcher bird…It will always insist on eating you", and made the case that the current German aggression should be viewed as as expected outcome of their historical behaviou.[41] He examined the "Black Record" of German history from Tacitus onwards and judged that the Nazi period was the natural culmination of their long-term entrenched militaristic behaviour.[42] In his view, their historical development prepared the grounds for Nazism. "Germans in the plural are The Brazen Horde. At least the Golden Horde was not brazen enough to pretend that they were anything but barbarians. Other people grew up and settled down. The Germans never

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Vansittart, *Black Record*, p. 7.
[42] Ibid., p. 19.

did. The brazen Horde remained savages at heart."[43] Perversely, while high German culture was being valued in London, as demonstrated by Myra Hess playing Beethoven, Bach, Schumann and Schubert in the National Gallery, Vansittart's book casting the Germans as "The Brazen Horde" and unchanged by civilizing influences became a best seller.

Vansittart, a man of his time when overt racism was tolerated even in the national discourse, felt comfortably able to label a whole nation as warlike, with the full spread of derogatory adjectives and set it in a selectively biased historical narrative. This suited the Anger Campaign which was in progress at the time and the high sales figures for the book suggest that his views were well received throughout the country. However, the serialization of his book in *The Sunday Times* and the broadcasting of excerpts on the BBC foreign service led to criticism that the views being promoted could be perceived to be official government views and the issue of a civil servant airing such views was raised in Parliament. There were many supporting and discordant voices published in the letters pages of all the high-brow papers during the weeks of the serialisation and long afterwards, many suggesting supplementary historical evidence for or against the argument. The Revered The Honourable Edward Lyttleton questioned Vansittart's notion that "the peculiar megalomania which seems to have infested the whole country [of Germany] is inherited from the earliest times as described by Tacitus" as he knows there has always been a difference between the Prussians on the one hand and the Rhinelanders and Southern Germans on the other."[44] In opposition to this Marian Seyda, a member of the Polish government in exile in London, felt "able to affirm with a most profound sense of responsibility the Nazism has not deviated from the essential nationalism of the

[43] Ibid., p. 20.
[44] Letter to the editor, *The Sunday Times*, 15 December 1940. Lyttleton, ex-Eton and Trinity College, was a notable cleric and educator.

German people as a whole." He continued: "the plain truth is the Germans respect nothing but force and adapt themselves only to a system based on real and methodically applied force."[45]

Having given his own analysis of the present condition of Germany and her aspirations, Vansittart wrote that, "Hitler gives to the great majority of Germans exactly what they have hitherto liked and wanted."[46] Vansittart said he had a cure for the disease infecting Germany but did not wish to reveal it until there was a wider acceptance of his diagnosis. His chief point was that recognising these characteristics was essential to achieve victory and peace at some point in the future, and he was an advocate of a hard rather than a soft post-war settlement. The Vansittart views appear much more frequently in *The Sunday Times* and the *Telegraph* than they do in *The Times*, perhaps an indication of editorial control.

Another contributor, Edwin A. Law claimed that he had, "yet to see any writer set out clear and satisfactory evidence of the absolute and historical truth" that a German militaristic virus led to a flow of responses resting on anthropological, biological, historical and anecdotal interpretations claiming to prove that that the virus was indeed present.[47] R.A. Simpson responded with "Again, the science of anthropology has long ago exposed the philologists' blunder, that because the English language is related to old German, the Germans are of the same stock as ourselves. It has revealed instead that in Germany today there is one of the most mixed peoples of Europe, whose basic stock is the very opposite to the British, whilst in Britain there is one of the most uniform." [48] He also claimed the Germans was the cause of the virus, "If science has taught us anything at all about race, it is that like breeds like, and so far as human biology is concerned, hybridisation produces the worst and not the best from either kind. What Sir Neville Henderson has pointed out concerning the conflicting characteristics

[45] *The Sunday Times*, 12 January 1941. Marian Seyda was a member of the cabinet of the Polish Government in Exile in London.
[46] Vansittart, *Black Record*, p. 18.
[47] Edwin A. Law, *Telegraph*, 12 August 1941.
[48] R. A. Simpson, *Telegraph*, 3 September 1941.

and dual personality of Hitler is easily bourne out in biological research."[49] The dehumanising of the enemy by Vansittart, and the racial and biological categorization by others, would make it easier to treat them more harshly at the end of hostilities.

Ideas about the new boundaries were firming up in the minds of members of Parliament during the following year. After the shooting of 47 Allied Air Officers in Stalag Luft 3, Vansittart (by then elevated to the House of Lords), with more ammunition in support of his mission, said "The butcher birds knew full well that it was butchery and that is why they had tried to conceal it for so long." He declared that "to detach East Prussia from the Reich was the only way to assure against a future war." and so the discussion of the borders moved more into the mainstream.[50] After this point in the war, it was rarer to find articles and letters that did not characterize Germans as a lumpen and guilty mass. Writers almost always advocated retribution and revenge. The press coverage on the Katyn Massacre seemed to confirm these entrenched opinions and when Bergen Belsen was liberated in April 1945, followed by David Dimbleby's radio broadcast on the BBC about it, what followed was mostly negative, but with a rare exception from a reader with a German-sounding name."[51] The diplomats thus went to Potsdamsoaked to some level in five years of demonisation of the Germans. Consequently, when decisions needed to be made, they were probably influenced by these characterisations and depictions.

## Promoting the Russians

Over a six-year period the leading politicians and the establishment more broadly moved through various phases of ambivalence in its relations with Stalin and the Soviet Union and tried very hard, using the press, to carry the public with them. After twenty years of the promotion of an anti-communist narrative throughout the 1920s and 1930s, they pirouetted

[49] Ibid.
[50] *Telegraph*, 22 May 1944.
[51] F. Seidler, Letter to *The Times*, 5April 1945.

very quickly towards positive commentary on the Russian character and motives from the time Operation Barbarossa started. Like a scissors graph, while the image of Germany was being shredded, that of the Russians was being raised and promoted. Just after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed and the German army was moving eastwards rapidly through Poland, an article in *The Times* entitle "The Noble Role of the Hyena" stated that "Germany having killed the prey, Soviet Russia will seize part of the carcass that Germany cannot use."[52] However, after Operation Barbarossa everything changed and the same newspaper printed the whole of Stalin's speech to the Russian people. Two weeks later there were pictures of Ivan Maisky (the Soviet Ambassador to Britain) at a Midlands factory receiving tanks for Russia. In the background of one of them was a tank with 'STALIN' written boldly on the turret. From then on something positive about Stalin and/or the Russians could be found in almost every edition of the highbrow papers, and he was often referred to as 'Uncle Joe.' As Tim Luckhurst has commented, "Once Russia became an ally," the British "embraced a delusionally sympathetic depiction of Josef Stalin."[53] Already in 1942, George Orwell felt able to write that "all the appeasers, e.g. Professor E.H. Carr, have switched their allegiance from Hitler to Stalin."[54]

After the battle of Stalingrad a huge pro-Soviet celebration was held in the Albert Hall and reported in all the newspapers, such as in the *Telegraph*:

> When the flags of Empire had been gathered around the Union Jack, a huge red banner, glowing with the golden hammer, sickle and star spread behind the platform. A Russian soldier with the red star on his white helmet rose before the backcloth. The figure stood motionless with rifle at the ready while the audience sang the 'Internationale' and the National Anthem. M.Maisky, the Russian Ambassador and Mme Maisky in a red

[52] *The Times*, 18 September 1939.
[53] Luckhurst, 'Still Raucous and Impertinent'.
[54] Orwell quoted in Stefan Collini, 'E. H. Carr: Historian of the Future', *The Times*, 5 March 2008.

> blouse, looked down proudly from their box. Beside them were Mrs Churchill, with the red scarf she wore when she was welcomed back by her husband from her travels, and their daughter Mary in her ATS uniform. Even the conductor, Dr Malcolm Sargent, wore a red carnation in the buttonhole of his morning coat. Lt Laurence Olivier. R.N.V.R. the actor, draped from head to foot in cardinal red proclaimed a foreward to victory in the words of Alexander Nevsky, who flung the German invader from medieval Russia.[55]

Maisky's own view was that "It was all very ceremonious, even majestic. An intricate and beautiful performance was staged. Some details might be criticized from the purely artistic point of view, but that hardly matters very much."[56]

Just a few months later, the first article about the Katyn Massacre appeared in *The Times* and Carr, also a former employee of the Foreign Office, damned the London Poles for accusing the Soviets of the atrocity and asking the Red Cross to investigate.[57] Early the following year following the recapture of the area around Smolensk, the Russians prepared a report on the massacre and large sections of a Reuters report about it were printed in *The Times*. The story on 29 January 1944 included this summary: "The Polish prisoners of war were shot by the Germans not only at Katyn but at other places. The objectives: (1) to wipe out enemies; (2) to place the blame on the Soviet Union; (3) to swell statistics of enemy casualties".[58] The newspaper offered this summary without a single word of comment or analysis. A word search of *The Times* archives during the war reveals that word 'Katyn' only sixteen times, the last one being on 6 September 1944, and silence on the issue continued right up to the end of the Potsdam Conference. It seems that nothingwas allowed to tarnish the image of the Russians in

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[55] *Telegraph*, 22 February 1943.
[56] *The Maisky Diaries: Red Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, 1932-1943* (Yale University Press, 2015), p. 487.
[57] *The Times*, 28 April 1943.
[58] *The Times*, 29 January 1944.

the public mind. Or it may simply be that the views of the Foreign Office and E.H. Carr coincided on this matter.

A lead article in *The Times* in November 1944, just after the secret "percentages agreement" between Stalin and Churchill at the Moscow Conference, written by E. H. Carr, can be found reassuring readers about Russia's future intentions. "Russia like Britain has no aggressive or expansive designs in Europe. What she wants on her western front is security ...Neither Britain nor Russia has any tradition of dominance or supremacy on the European continent or desires larger commitments there than the needs of security dictate." This stance was unsurprising from Carr, who, as an academic always advocated a realist as opposed to an idealist approach to foreign affairs. As he continued: "it is certainly not true that Russia is at present using her influence in other countries to promote 'communism' or anything like it: nor is there any reason to suppose that her attitude in this respect will change."[59] Two days later there was an article entitled "A lasting Alliance", which was essentially about the celebration of the twenty seventh anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Its core message with regard to Eastern Europe was that "There has been no sign of a desire to convert this proved authority into a domination, or to use it for the subversion of the social order in other lands."[60] But with the German armies retreating on all fronts and the expectation that war was nearing its end, editors began to appear more willing to challenge the censor and make a bid for more readers. The *Economist*, for example, made a rare adverse comment about Russian intentions in early 1945:

> It is…obvious that the Russian view of a settlement in Eastern Europe has been accepted in order to preserve good relations with the Russians. Mr Churchill appears to have committed himself to the senseless policy of dismemberment evolved in Moscow

[59] *The Times*, 6 November 1944.
[60] *The Times*, 8 November 1944.

and Paris. Yet it is an open secret that such a policy runs counter to the most expert thought and advice of the Foreign Office ….”[61]

Yet articles supportive of the Russians continued even after people learned about decisions at Yalta. *The Times* wrote soon afterwards, “All the evidence suggests that what Marshall Stalin desires to see in Warsaw is not a puppet government acting under Russian orders, but a friendly government which, fully conscious of the supreme importance of Russo-Polish concord, will frame its own independent policies in that context.[62]“ This article was probably written by E. H. Carr and includes a long narrative on the development of the Curzon Line along with arguments in favour of the decisions made in regard to Poland at Yalta. The *Telegraph* offered more support reporting a speech by Lord Halifax, the British ambassador in Washington, who said that “Britain and United States must acknowledge that Russia had a special interest in Poland as a gateway through which an invader might invade her. So, to her the western frontier and where the line is drawn are of special national interest.[63]“

Under the title of “Russian impressions from the occupied zones” the Moscow correspondent of *The Times* gave an account of the stories that were being supplied to the Russian people about the activities of their soldiers as they moved into East European territories following conquest. This article looked like a simple translation of Soviet propaganda and it appeared without any qualified editorial comment as a direct offer to the British public. It gave the impression that an organised and benevolent Soviet force was doing its best to restore law and order and encouraging all the local people to return to productive life. Their soldiers had strict rules to follow, including non-fraternization, registering of all Nazis and the fair treatment

[61] *The Economist*, 6 January 1945.
[62] *The Times*, 22 February 1945.
[63] *Telegraph*, 27 February 1945.

of all prisoners: “Every soldier in the Red Army has been told, and told sternly, that the Soviet Union seeks not vengeance, but justice.[64]“ The article continues:

> The writer has observed that even Russians who have suffered and lost all at German hands find no solace in a desire for personal vengeance. The army which has entered the Reich on the East Front is perhaps more shocked than angry. The average Russian is a thoughtful person, and at this stage of the war seems to be asking himself how a punishment can be devised for the enemy which will be at the same time a cure. The pursuit of vengeance is recognised to be the pursuit of a shadow. What is sought is a means of impressing on the German people as a whole a sense of guilt before punitive measures are taken.”[65]

The article had no provenance and the writer may not have visited the area to confirm that any of this wa being implemented. There was no British analysis or judgement included. An uncritical British reader would believe that all was well in Eastern Europe.

After four years of such comment in the public domain the British diplomats prepared to meet and discuss difficult issues with their wartime ally, about whom a complimentary discourse has been promoted. One of these issues was to be the furure of Niederschlesien and the placement of Poland’s western frontier.

## Factors governing the discourse about frontiers in the press.

Articles and letters about peace terms appeared within days of the start of the fighting and in retrospect, amazingly early. They were often philosophical. One thoughtful vicar from Chislehurst wrote “...there is an urgent case for war aims as the terms of peace. For this there are two, among many other reasons. First, war aims must deteriorate with the passage of time, because man under fire is a deteriorating person. The first idealism and charity goes: and then

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[64] *The Times*, 7 March 1945.
[65] Ibid.

something of the truth goes too. Would not the course of history have been different if we had published specific terms of peace in 1914?"[66] At this early stage, the basis for peace terms was usually limited to the return of Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland to their former boundaries. However, after Barbarossa, letters on the topic of peace terms almost faded away from the newspapers, and after the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 when news emerged about Roosevelt's insistence on unconditional surrender, they disappeared not to reappear again until 1944 when the Allies' fortunes improved. In April 1943 the *Telegraph*, under the header 'Planning for Peace', reported Leader of the House of Lords Viscount Cranbourne as saying that "a long period – perhaps years – would have to lapse between the signing of an armistice and the opening of a peace conference.[67]" Even as late as October 1943, *The Times* in a leading article about the Moscow Conference, wrote that "the time was not ripe to start difficult discussions on frontiers in central Europe.[68]"

In October 1942, the *Economist* reviewed a book entitled *Europe's Future*, and the leaders of the free governments of Poland, Belgium, Greece, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Luxembourg, Norway and Holland were represented therein.[69] Each offered their own view of the key issues. The Polish foreign minister Count Raczynski was firstly concerned with political resettlement while President Benes of Czechoslovakia gave priority to a "peace of punishment" and Mr Bech, the Luxembourg Foreign Minister, stated that, "the future of Europe is likely to be determined more by economic than political considerations." The statements by these leaders were centred around schemes for various proposed federations including a Polish Czech Confederation, a Balkan Union, Northern and Southern Slav Federations, an Eastern Mediterranean Union, a German Confederation, and a Western European Union. The assumption was that existing frontiers would be respected in this realignment and at this point

[66] L.J.R. Lamb, Letter to the editor, *The Times*, 22 September 1939.
[67] *Telegraph*, 16 April 1941.
[68] *The Times*, 18 October 1943.
[69] *The Economist*, 17 October 1942.

troublesome notions about possible border alterations were not brought to the readers' attention. Nationalist elements amongst these exiles held varied notions of national identity and territorial expansion but these did not enter the British press and it was not until later in the war that there was more British newspaper coverage of the plans of various national groups across Europe who were pressing for a change in frontiers. An example of this was an article by P. Pipinelis, a former Greek Minister to Hungary, Bulgaria and the USSR. He likened the Northern Epirus question to Poland's and said it was "no less justified than Poland's demand to push her frontier with Germany to the Oder and the Neisse.[70]

The settlement of other frontiers hinged on the settlement of the Curzon Line. Consequential speculation or discussion on Poland's western frontiers could not follow in a meaningful sense until that first issue was in some way agreed or certain. The Polish Government-in-exile in London were completely inflexible on this from the beginning. They were not willing to budge from their attachment to the Riga Treaty of 1921. They pinned their stance firmly to the principles within the Atlantic Charter and all of this was shown in plain sight in the British newspapers. The exiles lay down their marker immediately on the announcement of the Anglo Soviet Treaty. Just after the Charter was announced in the summer of 1942 the Polish leader General Sikorsky's statement was published under the title "Poland's influence on the peace" in the newspapers.

> The Polish Government is particularly pleased that the treaty is founded on the principles of the Atlantic Charter. In this way the great powers have emphasised that they reject and condemn most determinedly the conception and methods of Hitlerism in demanding lebensraum, which involves the trampling down of all the rights of other

[70] *The Times*, 5 May 1945.

> nations. Poland was and is especially interested in these rights. Poland possesses with Soviet Russia a common frontier of a length of 1,400 kilometres.[71]

There were many detractors on the construction and various proposed implementations of the Atlantic Charter. The Glasgow Labour MP John McGovern wrote that the Charter was a huge deceit and likened the issue to English exploitation of her colonies.[72] The London Poles however, were its stoutest adherents and were most prominently exhibited in the press during and after the changes in Russia's military fortunes at Stalingrad. A report on their recent cabinet meeting stated that: "The attitude of the Polish Government has been outlined in the official Polish newspaper in London Dziennik Polski as follows…Poland does not recognise any territorial changes that have taken place as a result of the German Russian Treaty. Poland wishes to maintain the best relations with the USSR now and in the future, on the basis of the Atlantic Charter and full recognition of Poland's rights."[73]

Public discourse about the eastern frontiers of Germany appears to have got under way rather late and it was not until the end of 1944 that it started taking up significant space in the newspapers. This may be related to the significance of Roosevelt's declaration on unconditional surrender and the nature of a new Polish government, which initially professed a strong adherence to the Atlantic Charter and were involved in the continual wrangling over the Curzon Line. Deliberations about frontiers might have beed expected to happen when people were discussing the final settlement and peace plans, but the statement by Roosevelt, if adhered to, essentially meant that peace terms and the reconstruction of frontiers could not be discussed while the fighting continued and therefore planning for peace was delayed.

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[71] *The Times*, 12 June 1942.
[72] *The Times*, 28 November 1941.
[73] 'Cabinet Discussion from a Polish Correspondent', *The Times*, 20 February 1943.

After the Soviets had broken off diplomatic relations, *The Times* published an article entitled “Poland’s Claim to Full Justice” about Tadeusz Romer, the new Polish Foreign Minister. In it, he said:

> On the future boundaries of a reconstituted Poland, Mr Romer said “We see no adequate reason why Poland should make any further sacrifices, either in territory or in population. The Polish Government stand firm for the integrity of Polish territory. We regard the division of Europe into zones of influence as manifestly contrary to the Atlantic Charter.”[74]

Even after the announcement of the Yalta Agreements their resistance continued to be reported by *The Times* published under the title “The Polish Refusal - Regret in London.” “The hope at first entertained that the Arciszewski Government in London would face the compromise agreed to at Yalta resolutely and realistically this not been fulfilled,” it said.[75]

Roosevelt’s influence on the open discussion of the final borders within Europe was not just limited to his decision about unconditional surrender. Recognising the power of the Polish vote in America, Roosevelt felt able to make no more than vague statements about America’s position with regards to the Curzon line and the nature of the new Polish government until after the presidential elections in December 1944, and at the Tehran Conference he told Stalin that he could not publicly take part in any arrangement about the western frontier of Poland.[76] So, for a long period he was unwilling to make any kind of public declaration about where the future frontiers might lie. The newspapers were not able to write much about his stance because he held it close to his chest.

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[74] *The Times*, 14 September 1943.
[75] *The Times*, 14 February 1945.
[76] *Roosevelt and Churchill*, ed. by Loewenheim, Langley and Jonas, pp. 396-397.

The geography, culture and politics of Eastern Europe was unfamiliar to the British establishment and the British newspaper readership. They may have been familiar with the pink coloured areas on the globe of the world because of trading and family and military links with the various colonies but anything east of the Rhine was not part of everyday parlance. The British had at one time or other occupied many of the major countries of the world and their capitals, but had never controlled Poland, White Russia or the Ukraine. These territories were outside of the British experience and so there was no obvious reason for the public or the press to know or care much about them. Whatever decisions were going to be made about territory, if they hurt Germany then they were in favour and did not really wish to know much about the details.

## Coverage on frontiers

Frontiers were not often debated in the British newspapers until the last year of the war. An exception to this was when *The Times* printed a complete, uncensored statement about the Soviet policy on Poland straight from TASS in January 1944. This stated: “The possibility is now opening for the resurrection of Poland as a strong and independent state. But Poland must arise not be sizing the Ukrainian and White Russian lands, but by the restoration to Poland of integral Pliah lands which have been taken away from her by the Germans.”[77] In August a statement from the special correspondent of *The Times* in Lublin was published in full.

> Adjustment of frontiers. Questioned with regard to frontiers M Morawski declared that his policy was to expand Poland’s western frontier to the River Neisse and a little beyond the Oder to take in Stettin. The aim was to shorten the common frontier with Germany, to lengthen the frontier with Czachoslovakia, and create a friendly

[77] *The Times*, January 1944.

> atmosphere with the Soviet Union, so that eastern frontier questions could be settled to the mutual advantage of the Polish, Ukrainian and White Russian people."[78]

The paper may have been practising its editorial freedom in the publication of this extract or perhaps acting as a mouthpiece of the government in this case.

By December 1944 people could guess where the armies were going to be placed when the fighting stopped and supposed that the military occupation of land in the short term would somehow be related to the final demarcations of territory. Also by then, although the exact lines were not agreed, it was accepted that the Poles would be losing their eastern territories to Russia and discussions were taking place in Moscow about compensation for this loss in the form of German territories. The diplomatic correspondent of *The Sunday Times* reported in October 1944 that Mikolajczyk in Moscow had made no headway with possible collaboration with the Lublin Government that he was ready to accept a provisional eastern border somewhere east of the Curzon Line, but he "was also not prepared to agree to the proposed western frontier offered to Poland which would enlarge her territory as far as the Oder." [79] There were also many references throughout this period to the expectation that the final frontier arrangements would be settled at a peace conference. The Polish Government in London would eventually split over this issue of their eastern border and the composition of the future government of their country.[80]

## Coverage from Moscow Conference to Yalta

For those who wished to read it, the extent of the territorial ambitions of the Lublin Government was made clear in the British press well before the Moscow Conference in October 1944. But the possibility of all the Germans being ejected from the territory which was to be added to the

[78] Ibid.
[79] *The Times*, October 1944.
[80] Terry, *Poland's Place in Europe*, pp. 62-65.

new Poland had not yet been officially revealed to the British public, but was only hinted at.[81] The diplomatic correspondent of *The Sunday Times* reported from the Moscow Conference in October 1944, that "The responsibility of being saddled with a minority of some 8,000,000 Germans was not one which the Polish Government could embark upon light-heartedly, although no doubt, a compromise solution would not be difficult to find."[82] The answer had to wait a few weeks more, until Churchill's notorious "Clean Sweep" speech to Parliament which was covered in a two page verbatim account by *The Times*.[83] In the first instance, and until that speech was delivered, the newspapers monitored attempts that were being made to convince the Polish Government in Exile to accept the terms that Stalin was demanding with regard to the Curzon Line and the make-up of the future Polish government. There was some hope that at this stage the Russians might still be willing to pay some attention to the Polish Government-in-exile in London.

Not long after Mikolajczyk's return to London from the Moscow Conference, *The Times* explained that the Polish Government-in-exile in London were in deep discussions every day on the matter. Both the British and the Russians were willing to give guarantees about the future Poland, it said, and Mikolajczyk "looked forward to a Poland which would be given extended territory in the west to balance acceptance of the Curzon Line in the east, a Poland led by a unified government recognised by the three powers alike."[84] *The Times* was playing its part in encouraging the Polish Government-in-exile in London towards a decision. A week later, *The Sunday Times* reported that the Polish Government-in-exile in London had prepared a new plan for Moscow to include acceptance of the Curzon Line but with the inclusion of Lvov.

[81] *The Times*, 30 August 1944.
[82] *The Sunday Times*, 22 October 1944.
[83] *The Times*, 16 December 1944.
[84] *The Times*, 24 October 1944.

As if to offer further encouragement, shortly afterwards *The Times* of 31 October quoted from a statement made by the Polish Committee of National Liberation from Moscow and in doing so showed a shift away from the power and influence of the Polish Government-in-exile in London. [85] The statement expressed the hope that they would make their decision quickly on whether or not to meet the terms. In the same edition it was reported that the Netherlands Government Information Bureau suggested the Dutch people seeking compensation for the "wanton damage done by the Germans in Holland" might seek the cessation of some German territory adjoining Holland.[86] Talk of compensatory territorial change was in the air.

Mikolajczyk who was willing to compromise on the Curzon Line in order to accommodate Stalin's demands attempted to convince his colleagues on his return from Moscow and this was being reported in the papers.

> Among some Polish groups several reasons are given for delaying acceptance of the proposals which Mr Mikolajczyk brought back from Moscow. Both they and Mr Mikolajczyk recognise that the Lublin Committee is facing many political and material differences and they reject its claim to be the true voice of Poland. But from that point their policies diverge. Mr Mikolajczyk and those around him see that agreement will become ever harder to reach as the Lublin Committee takes over the administration of more territory in Poland. Others argue that acquiring new territories will land the committee into difficulties so crippling that its lack of popular support will be apparent to all and a fresh attempt at wider agreement will be made.[87]

Mikolajczyk resigned on 24 November1944 having failed to carry the rest of the cabinet. Following this, the British Government's momentous decision on the future of Poland was

[85] *The Times*, 31 October 1944.
[86] *The Sunday Times*, 29 October 1944.
[87] *The Times*, 30 November 1944.

made within a few days, announced by Churchill in the House of Commons and reported in all major newspapers. After outlining the "Clean Sweep", they all reported that he said "The Poles are free, as far as Russia and Great Britain are concerned, to extend their territory at the expense of Germany to the west. I do not propose to go into the exact details, but the extensions, which will be supported by Britain and Russia, bound together as they are by the 20 year alliance, are of high importance."[88] *The Times* printed the criticism that this announcement immediately evoked from a Labour MP, Mr Petherick-Lawrence who described the territorial changes as "cataclysmic." [89] The *Telegraph* noted that when Churchill "argued for the case for the transference of population it went against the grain with some of his supporters."[90] The widely reported speech unleashed a flurry of speculative articles in the newspapers in the following weeks about exactly where the frontiers might be and about which Churchill was unwilling to go into details. A map of Eastern Europe was provided showing the Curzon Line with Lvov clearly in Russian hands and on the western front the proposed border is on the eastern Neisse with Breslau still placed in Germany.[91] There was little opinion or analysis in this article, as in most others, but the printing of this map either reveals ignorance about Eastern European affairs or a belief that Niederschlesien remained German.

The Soviet Government formally recognised the Lublin Government as the new government of Poland and in January 1945 the *Telegraph* stated that theoretically Poland now had two governments ,one in London and one in Moscow.[92] On 2 January 1945, the *Telegraph* reported that the United States favoured Polish compensation in East Prussia and in German Silesia, but not farther west than the river Oder (there was no mention of the Neisse). On 6 January 1945, the *Economist*, obviously alert to the flood of speculation about frontiers and

[88] *The Times*, 16 December 1944.
[89] *The Times*, 17 December 1944.
[90] *Telegraph*, 16 December 1944.
[91] *Telegraph*, 16 December 1944.
[92] *Telegraph*, 1 January 1945.

always offering a more considered version of events along with direct opinion, gave the view that the Allies, by talking about the dismemberment of Germany and the possible loss of land as far west to the Oder would, "succeed at the eleventh hour in giving the Germans a compelling reason for fighting on – the desire to survive...terms have been laid down for Germany which will probably leave the Germans fighting to the bloody and bitter end.[93]"

Newspapers were making guesses at the direction of future events, particularly the policies of the Lublin Government. The *Economist* on 13 January 1945 said that "Its programme of land reform is popular with the peasants, and now that its fulfilment is being emphatically linked with the Oder frontier, the land hungry men are beginning to see vistas of empty German farmsteads on the western frontier."[94] It is doubtful if this view was being canvassed from anyone in Poland but it more likely came from Polish soldiers stationed in Britain. The newspaper also reported that General Rola-Zymierski had spoken to the Polish officer corps, 50,000 strong, who, it was said, were being trained to take a large part in the occupation and policing of Germany."[95]

There was more open speculation and dialogue about how far west the new frontier would be and now that the Lublin Government was recognised, their views received more coverage in the British press. As the *Economist* stated:

> The Lublin Government is busy extending its administrative authority to East Prussia and Silesia. So far, no decision appears to have been taken on the future administration of occupied Pomerania and Brandenburg, but the 'Study Section' of the Lublin government for the Western Areas has now put out a plan claiming the frontier 30 miles to the west of the Oder, so that the river may be the waterway for Silesia. In any case they add, all this territory is 'Old Slav' land.[96]

[93] *Economist*, 6 January 1945.
[94] *Economist*, 13 January 1945.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.

Reporting comments such as these in respectable British newspapers would no doubt help to bolster the claims of Polish nationalists.

The *Telegraph* reported on 27 January 1945 that Lublin Radio claimed the Oder as the Polish frontier: "Great Poland will have a free and broad outlet to the Baltic in the north and its borders will be the rivers Oder and Neisse in the west and the foothills of the Carpathians in the south" (This was on geographical principles). The paper then explained that "The Neisse crosses the south eastern corner of Lower Silesia to join the Oder 35 miles south east of Breslau. The Oder from this point runs through Breslau to Glogau to Frankfurt-on-Oder and then swings north west to a point only 35 miles north-east of Berlin, emptying into the Baltic at Stettin."[97] This is the eastern Glatzer Neisse.

## Coverage post Yalta

News about the Yalta conference and proposed territorial changes were revealed slowly by the newspapers throughout February 1945. *The Times* diplomatic correspondent wrote that "unbounded satisfaction was expressed in London last night with the results of the Crimea Conference as set out in an official statement which will rank as an outstanding diplomatic document of the war" and "the proposals for the settlement of the Polish question are regarded as one of the greatest achievements of the conference..."[98] In the same edition, it said that its participants "recognise that Poland must receive substantial accessions of territory in the north and west… and that the final delimitations of the western frontier of Poland should therefore await the peace conference.[99]" On 14 February, *The Times* wrote about responses from around the world claiming that in the Soviet Union the results were seen as "broadening and deepening the alliance, in America, Mr Roosevelt would return from Europe with popular acclaim and

[97] *Daily Telegraph*, 27 January 1945.
[98] *The Times*, 13 February 1945.
[99] Ibid.

enhance influence over Congress" while the Polish Govt-in-exile in London declared that the decisions "could not be recognised and that they could not bind the Polish nation."[100] In the same edition the diplomatic correspondent described the "hysterical reaction" of German radio commentators and picked one commentator as calling the conference "a mass murder plan, the total destruction of German industry, the mass deportation of German people by the Bolsheviks".[101] Their correspondent in Washington wrote, "The American Press is thus far singing virtually in unison its praise of the Yalta Declaration, though here and there are newspapers which interpret its terms as a "victory" for Russia, and it goes without saying that more will be heard of them." Such newspapers did not exist in Britain. Counter to the elation already mentioned, the Times reported on the issuing of a statement by the Roman Catholic Archbishops and Bishops of Scotland condemning the decisions of Yalta in the severest of terms: "they do not believe that the British nation will ever authorise or permit its elected representatives to deliver into the bondage and slavery of a godless nation of some 35,000,000 souls, yet they believe it is their solemn duty to counsel and warn his Majesty's government against what appears to be participation in the murder of a nation"[102] They were leaping to the defence of a catholic nation.

By this time the diplomatic party had returned from the Crimea and a date was set for a debate about the Yalta Conference in the House of Commons.[103] *The Times* predicted some abstentions in the forthcoming debate saying that amongst some members feelings on Poland ran deep and critics were not confined to one party or group.[104] The newspaper lauded Churchill's performance in his report to parliament about the Yalta Conference saying that "In the distinguished series of the Prime Minister's war reviews, already an outstanding

[100] *The Times*, 14 February 1945.
[101] Ibid.
[102] *The Times*, 27 February 1945.
[103] *The Times*, 22 February 1945.
[104] *The Times*, 27 February 1945.

contribution to the history of our time, yesterday's report on the Crimean Conference will take a high place."[105] Almost verbatim coverage followed.

The motion put up for debate was carried in the final vote that followed but it threw up many criticisms of the conference decisions and some of these were selected for publication in *The Times*. Mr Greenwood, the Labour MP for Wakefield, believed that, "it was really a cardinal sin for the three great powers, one of which had an interest we had not got, in the absence of a people whose lives were being bartered away to determine the future of any country."[106] W. Beveridge, MP for Berwick-upon-Tweed, said he

> supported the Curzon Line as a starting point of the eastern boundary of Poland. To take away East Prussia and Danzig from Germany and give them to Poland would be an act of poetic justice. That did not really conflict with the Atlantic Charter. He was not happy with the suggestion that Poland should be encouraged to extend westwards into territories which were now German.[107]

Major Lloyd (Renfrew East) said that,

> those who supported the amendment represented an enormous number of ordinary people in the country who were deeply disquieted at the reference in the Yalta agreement to Poland. He regarded the intentions of that agreement as downright annexation of a large part of Polish territory without the consent of her government or people. It was a very deliberate breach of the Anglo-Soviet Treaty, a very definite moral breach of the Anglo-Polish Treaty, and he was certain that they had departed once and for all from even the guidance of the Atlantic Charter, which was now being whittled

[105] Ibid.
[106] *The Times*, 1 March 1945.
[107] Ibid.

> down to a mere meaningless symbol. To break our pledges to Poland and to compel the Polish people to accept the prefabricated Lublinite government was adding insult to injury. Free elections could not be held in Poland with the Red Army in occupation. We were trustees for Poland. We dare not let her down, but we were about to do so. It would be an act of which he would always be ashamed.[108]

Alternative views were entering the national dialogue through the voices of the MPs and being reported at some length by the leading newspapers.

The Foreign Office view in the form of a speech by Anthony Eden was then included in a long and detailed article.[109] On the third day of the debate, coverage in the newspapers was again very thorough. Mr Petherick MP led the sponsoring of an amendment on Poland which expressed regret at the decision "to transfer to another Power the territory of an ally contrary to treaty and to Article 2 of the Atlantic Charter."[110] "As to the Atlantic Charter, he was glad that it did not apply to Germany. But was it not to be applied to an ally? There would be no peace in Europe, Mr Petherick declared, unless the sanctity of treaties was recognised and honoured."[111] His amendment was rejected 396 votes to 25. The following day *The Times* reported the House of Commons' approval in the vote of confidence by 413 votes to none. As it noted: "The division was challenged by two members of the Independent Labour Party who were in the House, and since they had to act as tellers, their votes, like those of their opposite numbers were not counted. ...As Mr Churchill left the House he was loudly cheered."[112]

A sizeable amount of space was then allotted to Clement Attlee, the Labour leader, and his speech about restitution.[113] He chided the whole Polish nation for their lack of political

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[108] Ibid.
[109] *The Times*, 1 March 1945.
[110] *The Times*, 2 March 1945.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.

wisdom and claimed that he received a Christmas card from a Polish friend which revealed their romantic view of the past because it had on the front a map of Poland in the seventeenth century. He went on to say that the Germans were not entitled to appeal against any decision about territorial change on the basis of moral laws they had disregarded or on pity and mercy they had never extended to others. Like many others at the time, he feel easily into the pattern of treating a whole nation as an individual. The paper reported that one of the MPs, not always noted for their own political wisdom, retorted that the Yalta plan was drawn up by three blind mice, presumably referring to Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin[114].

The *Economist* gave its verdict on Crimea on 3 March. Suggesting that although Churchill's delivery of his account was masterly, "It did not however, add very much to the official statement already published on the crucial issue of the settlement for Germany...from the remarks made both by him and by Mr Eden, it can be inferred that the chief transfers of German territory to Poland will be made in East Prussia and Silesia and not, as the Oder plan entails, in Pomerania and Brandenburg."[115] It appears that there was a great deal of ambiguity around the meaning of the diplomatic words composed at Yalta and where the boundaries would eventually lie.

Soon after, a leading article in *The Times* commented on the speech by Attlee about restitution by Germany for her actions during the war:

> There is no doubt at all that it was the Nazi rulers of Germany and those who accepted their ideas who were responsible for the movements in the last four years. He did not suggest that an indictment should be made against the whole people of Germany, but neither could they be relieved of responsibility. They could not appeal to the old

[114] Ibid.
[115] *Economist*, 3 March 1945.

> Europe... If it was found necessary to acquire certain areas in order to enable the Polish people to live a free and full life, again he would not complain, and the Germans had no right to complain.[116]

Here, Vansittart's logic was accepted and a distinction between corporate guilt and corporate responsibility was forwarded as the basis for the changes in frontiers and the removal of a large populace from their homes.

There were, on some rare occasions, articles in sympathy with the suffering of the German people as the war moved into its final stages. A report from Reuters about refugees streaming into Berlin from Breslau on packed trains in the middle of winter was published in January 1945 described "Young girls and women travelling crowded on the buffers between carriages in the bitter, biting cold."[117] The intention to intervene to help those who were bound to be vulnerable after a German defeat was also expressed.

> It is obvious that the German people, who placed Hitler in power and abetted and applauded his crimes, have richly deserved the miseries which have at last recoiled on their heads. Nevertheless, the Allies, who fight for civilization, cannot act as those did who fought against us. They clearly could not allow famines or epidemics to stalk unchecked through occupied Germany, however difficult it might be to check them.[118]

To extent of the exodus of Germans from Niederschlesien and the nature of a functioning Polish administration were features of discussions at Potsdam later on and already in January 1945 this topic was available to British readers. "Four months later, in May, *The Sunday Times* wrote,

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[116] *The Times*, 3 March 1945.
[117] *The Times*, 25 January 1945.
[118] *The Sunday Times*, 1 April 1945.

> The latest announcement from Lublin that a group of Polish settlers had been sent to Frankfort-on-Oder to take over the administration of the town is a further indication of the support the Russian Government is giving the Lublin Administration. This installation of Polish authority in a German town, although envisaged in the discussion between Marshal Stalin, Mr Churchill and the last Mr Roosevelt at Teheran, has not yet received the approval of the United Nations. It is a unilateral decision that the Russians have been able to take because they are in occupation of that part of Germany.[119]

The newspaper did not speculate on whether this was just about competent administration or if it was a statement of intention by the Lublin Government in Poland. Under the heading "Polish Resettlement" the *Economist* wrote the following, including a cautionary note:

> Confusion seems to reign along the eastern frontiers of Germany, where a tremendous Völkerwanderung is taking place. First it was the precipitate flight of the German settlers east of the Oder. Some Poles claim that 85% of the inhabitants fled. The figure must be treated cautiously in view of the Polish desire to find the western lands empty. It is nevertheless certain that the exodus was vast…On the other hand, thousands of Poles are being moved from central Poland into the lands formerly German. According to published reports, East Prussia is to accommodate 600,000 people, Silesia and the river Neisse region about 500,000, Western Pomerania 1,000,000 and the towns in the western lands are to accommodate four millions.[120]

[119] *The Sunday Times*, 13 May 1945.
[120] *Economist*, 9 June 1945.

The sources for this information were not revealed and no check can be made on their authenticity.

In May 1945, two weeks after the surrender of Germany, Churchill and Truman were trying to arrange a new meeting of the Big Three with Attlee saying that he "was in favour of European problems being settled by a peace conference and not by long distance telegram." Meanwhile the *Economist* wrote:

> As a matter of fact, the Russians have been going ahead systematically with the delimitation of frontiers in the zones under their occupation. Thus, the new Finnish frontier has been fixed: the Russian eastern frontier from Koenigsberg to the Carpathians has been limned in: the Rumanians have been allowed to restore their administration in Transylvania: and Hungary has also been deprived of sections of Slovakia awarded to her in1939. The Polish Government recognised by Russia is being established on the Oder: Czechoslovakia has been promised the return of Teschen but will have to cede Ruthenia to the Ukraine: and Yugoslavia has recovered the Volvodinia that had been taken by Hungary.[121]

*The Sunday Times* wrote that "The Polish administration meantime is taking over in territories all the way to the Oder-Neisse line." While waiting for that conference the British public were clearly told that the Soviets were sorting out the whole of Eastern Europe as they wished.

In June 1945 a general election was under way in Britain after the break-up of the wartime coalition. Lord Samuel advocated that an all-party delegation to include Mr Churchill should attend the forthcoming peace conference.[122] The newspaper reports were usually on

[121] Ibid..
[122] *Telegraph*, 7 June 1945.

domestic issues but the conference surfaced often in the newspaper coverage with the very narrow issue being about who should attend and which party would be best able to represent British interests."[123] The forthcoming peace conference was placed on election manifestos by prospective members of parliament but never with any mention of how they might deal with eastern frontiers. In reality there was nothing to choose between the rival parties with regard to foreign policy. As *The Times* put it, "On the war itself there is complete unanimity. In international affairs Mr Bevin made it plain last Friday that he accepts the present Government as heir to the policy of the late coalition for which Labour accepts full responsibility."[124] Ernest Bevin, who would eventually take part in the Potsdam Conference as the new Labour Foreign Secretary, said, looking for an edge, during the election campaign, "Foreign questions really come down to bread and butter. They are not the extraordinary things we are led to believe. The only way to deal with foreign policy is to send the best of the British people and to present our point of view. The ordinary people of Britain always desire to be fair. It is the old type of politician who has got us the name of 'perfidious Albion'."[125]

On 8 July 1945, *The Sunday Times* printed an article written by Walter Lippmann American writer and commentator, later credited with invention of the term 'Cold War', which was essentially published for an American audience. The whole article was premised on the idea that there should be one German nation which would recover its independence in the territory between the Oder and the Rhine and that "measures can be carried out to relieve the distress and to enable the people of Europe once again to be self-reliant and self-sustaining.[126]" This article was written to counter the Morgenthau Plan on the grounds that there were weightier arguments against dis-unification but the fact that it was written at this time suggests that the plan itself still had some traction. This plan, named after the American Treasury

[123] *The Sunday Times*, 17 June 1945.
[124] *The Times*, 25 June 1945.
[125] *The Sunday Times*, 24 June 1945.
[126] *The Sunday Times*, 8 July 1945.

Secretary, which advocated the promotion of a pastoral postward German economy, had been discussed amongst the Allies since the summer of 1944 but fell into disfavour as time progressed.[127] The *Economist* argued that "a peace policy to have a chance of enduring must be based on leaving the German Reich substantially intact."[128] It continued: "There is no proposal to set up Silesia as an independent unit; it will be absorbed into the Polish economy, which in its turn will be more and more orientated towards the large unified market of the Soviet Union."[129] They were in essence suggesting a moderate policy of dismemberment with no frontier changes in the west but only the seizure of eastern territory. Traditionally, Eastern Germany provided the foodstuffs for a very industrialized country. If the German Reich were to remain intact and for a peace policy to endure then the Germans would have to be fed. This was an issue that the three diplomatic delegations would have to consider when re-drawing boundaries and in advance of this, the following year the *Economist* judged that

> It is possible that part of the surplus is now being diverted from Germany to the devastated lands in the Ukraine and White Russia. Moreover, it is difficult to say what the term Eastern Germany now covers. If the Russian Command treats the areas east of the Oder and the Neisse as part of Poland then it is obvious that the food resources of those areas are not used to feed the Germans who live west of the Oder and the Neisse. The "food surplus" of eastern Germany might then vanish.[130]

The article did not identify whether the reference was to the eastern or western Neisse but clearly the split was being regarded as a fait accomplit.

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[127] Llewellyn Woodward, *History of the Second World War: British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (Stationery Office Books, 1962), pp. 471-472.
[128] *Economist*, 24 March 1945.
[129] Ibid.
[130] *Economist*, 14 July 1945.

*The Times* on 3 July announced the venue for the conference as Potsdam, calling it the shrine of German militarism. It appeared buoyant about the prospects of settling the Polish issues, saying "fortunately, if all goes according to plan, the conference will be able to approve the Polish settlement without much discussion." The new National Unity government of Poland had asked for an exchange of ambassadors and the "three governments will now make any further inquiries they desire – concerning, for example, the arrangements for free elections – and will then grant recognition."[131] There was no mention of frontiers, possibly because it was no longer regarded as problematic. Eight days later, the *Telegraph* published the names and official positions of all the main American delegates who were preparing for the discussions in Potsdam as well as mentioning that Churchill had been seen painting on a beach at Saint-Jean-de-Luz wearing a broad brimmed hat.[132]

Under the title "Poland's western move," *The Times* printed an extract from a Polish proclamation: "Together with the Red Army, the Polish soldier has set the boundaries of the new Poland on the Oder and the Neisse. Our dreams are coming true. The ancient lands are returning to the motherland."[133] The printing of this proclamation without commentary in Britain's foremost newspaper, just before the conference, both propped up Polish nationalist sentiment and buillt further support for Stalin's vision of eastern Europe. The article then went on to describe the planned immediate transfer of Polish people to each of these new areas. It explained that the Soviet Military has already given permission to Polish units to take over the administration in the new territories and that the main job for conference would be a matter of asking Churchill and Mr "to agree to what has already been done."[134] Two days later, and within days of the opening meetings at Potsdam, *The Times* for the first time considered the possible total numbers involved in the transfer of Germans from Eastern territories:

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[131] *The Times*, 3 July 1945.
[132] *Telegraph*, 11 July 1945.
[133] *The Times*, 14 July 1945.
[134] Ibid.

> The Polish frontier claims, generally supported by the Soviet government, and the Czechoslovak government's desire to expel most of the Sudeten Germans bring up another urgent problem. How soon can the Germans from Poland and Sudetenland be received into Germany? If the plans go forward they will number 7,000,000 or 8,000,000 taking into account many thousands who have already crossed over. Regulation of this problem will have to be discussed at Potsdam.[135]

There was no question of revocation here, and no hint of moral indignation.

The conference was about to get under way and had moved out of the reach of serious investigative journalism. The possibility of further influence on affairs and decision-making by the press had now passed. Three days before the conference began *The Times* wrote that "While the western leaders have wished to leave discussion on frontiers over for the peace conference and while the western European neighbours have done little possible towards building up a regional arrangement, the Soviet Union has gone ahead behind the forward posts of the Red Army, now standing at 800 miles into Europe from her former frontiers. Soviet Russia can now look upon territorial changes made in her favour…"[136]

## Conclusion

Churchill, known for reading a selection of papers in bed every morning, "read all the newspapers he could lay his hands on—from *The Times* to the *Daily Worker*."[137] For him, this was the essential daily thread between the domestic and the foreign. He was both a maker and a receiver of news and influence. The war-time arrangements allowed the leadership unusual

[135] *The Times*, 16 July 1945.
[136] *The Times*, 11 July 1945.
[137] Richard M. Langworth, 'Winston Churchill's Favourite Newspapers', 21 June 2023 *Hillsdale College Churchill Project*, https://richardlangworth.com/newspapers [accessed 10 March 2026].

powers to control information and manage national thinking but this was never total and all were exposed to some degree of alternative thinking. In that era there was, especially in *The Times*, a clear determination to split the factual reporting in the main body of the newspaper from the subjective comment and analysis in the leader column. This does not mean that there was a higher level of objectivity to be found therein, simply because the very selection of particular factual accounts betrayed the editor's bias. There was also a very notable absence of moral indignation even when reporting on issues of major human suffering and with likely significant consequences. Most of the stories about the large-scale movements of people in Eastern Europe were short and little more than perfunctory.

The writing practices, the shortage of paper and limited word-space in the newspapers in those days meant that there were few in-depth stories of the kind that later publications were able to provide for their readers. There was an absence of thoroughness, thoughtfulness and conclusions with considered judgements, particularly when dealing with humanitarian issues, perhaps with the exception of the *Economist*. This was to some extent related to the shortage of newsprint and may also be related to the intention of the Ministry of Information to toughen up the population to the challenges they faced. There may have been emotional titles with regard to military coverage and German atrocities but very little about the daily suffering of the populace in Eastern European countries. There was an obvious absence of real detail about the geography and politics of Eastern Europe and a lack of empathy about the effect that decisions about it might have on ordinary people.

The press, not without occasional exceptions, could in essence be trusted to monitor and censor itself within a D Notice framework. The British establishment had more power than at any other time over the construction of the shared public views of foreign affairs and the key institutions within the establishment constructed them together, the newspaper industry and the foreign office being part of the establishment. They had a common culture, and ties through

families, schools, and clubs. This meant that the public discourse which they controlled was with some exceptions a mirrored version of the official diplomatic discourse.

The main narrative on the Germans within the shared public discourse was captured fairly early on by those who characterised the Germans as militaristic, especially Vansittart's widely promoted *Black Record* and the Minstry of Information and Anger campaigns. The portrayal that all Germans were responsible and should be held responsible continued right to the end of the fighting and this allowed for a hard settlement. There was an alternative two Germanies narrative (and it was argued out often in the letters' pages), but it faded away as the war progressed and after the revaltions of Stalag Luft 3, Katyn and Belsen such stories disappeared. If you wish to abuse your enemy first demonize him and dehumanize him.[138] After five years of such treatment a hard peace would not be unexpected.

The newspapers played a big role in the selling of Russia to the British public from 1942 onwards and their outlook and Stalin's motives were played down. The public had been encouraged by the papers to take a more positive view of the Russian character and intentions. This was not achieved solely by overt support but also by lack of critical comment. There was a surprising amount of exposure to Soviet thinking on diplomatic matters, something which undoubtedly was not reciprocated in the Soviet Union. There was even some positive, or at least uncritical, coverage of Soviet behaviour in captured territories. The reallocation of lands in Eastern Europe figured very little in the British election campaigns just before the Potsdam Conference and the topic was not present in the papers at that point. They were focused mostly on domestic issues, and political parties did not take significantly different stands on foreign policy. The major concerns were the best way to pursue rebuilding Britain after the war and about Attlee's status and his ability, should he win, to step into the shoes of Churchill.

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[138] For further examination of the four stages involved in the process of demonisation, see, Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (Andre Deutsch, 2003).

In the lead articles, especially in *The Times*, there were strategic, federalist, economic factors involved in discussions about the placement of the future borders in Europe, usually of interest to the various governments-in-exile in London. But they were all secondary. The main argument was about punishment, preventing Germany from rising again and giving Russia a secure western border. The papers gave little focus to the possible humanitarian consequences of the frontier changes alongside population transfers.

Peace aims and future frontiers were not directly addressed by the papers until very late in the war for various reasons, one of which was the notion that it might encourage the enemy to fight fiercely to the end. The newspapers gave little space to the topic of which particular pieces of land that Germany would lose until the Moscow conference in November 1944. Niederschlesien, as a separate parcel of land was not given much attention even at the very end. The distinction between the Western and Eastern Neisse and the sizes of the territory and population therein held little interest for these newspapers' editors.

# Chapter 3: The War Cabinet

This chapter will examine the work of the British War Cabinet with particular reference to its preparations for the various meetings with the Soviets and Poles on the complex issue of the Polish borders. It will also inquire into the performance and views of the two people who concluded the Potsdam discussions on behalf of Britain. There was never a constant view taken on the most appropriate stance to take on frontier settlement and how to promote it, and the politicians involved were often responding to actions and circumstances over which they had neither control nor influence. War Cabinet discussions and agreed views about Poland's western frontier developed in a piecemeal fashion in response to military and political developments across a very broad field. The topic cannot be understood without examining how the War Cabinet attempted to develop policy and manage the complex and ever-changing relationship. A commitment was given to Poland in the Agreement of Mutual Assistance Between the United Kingdom and Poland on 25 August 1939 before the outbreak of hostilities but that did not include any guarantee of Poland's frontiers.[1] Little thought was given to Poland's eventual frontiers then or at the time of the Dunkirk retreat when Britain was fighting alone, as it was difficult to conceive of an endgame position. As soon as Operation Barbarossa happened and Churchill and his War Cabinet instantly started courting Stalin, all the parties concerned started envisioning, reimagining or promoting new national boundaries. In the discussions leading up to the Anglo-Soviet Treaty of 1942, Stalin was promoting the notion of the repeal of the Treaty of Riga and the restoration of the Curzon Line. Britain began hosting a number of European Governments-in-Exile and each of them were already pressing their case for a return to pre-war boundaries. Although the British did not concede anything initially on

[1] 'The British War Bluebook: Agreement of Mutual Assistance Between the United Kingdom and Poland', London, 25 August 1939, *The Avalon Law Project*, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk19.asp [accessed 17 March 2026].

this in the negotiations with the Soviets, the topic hung in the air. From the very start of the war to its end, the identity and future of the short-lived independent Poland would be tossed around and discussed by diplomats and political leaders.

This chapter maps out these discussions and the decisions of the War Cabinet leading to a policy on Poland's eastern and western frontiers and the stance that the prime minister and his team took in their portfolios to Potsdam in the summer of 1945. The case will be made that despite the War Cabinet being drawn from two competing parties, their foreign policy commitment with regard these frontiers developed in a co-operative manner on foreign policy, and with broad agreement that Niederschlesien would remain German, as the eastern Neisse would be Poland's western frontier. The role that Clement Attlee, the deputy Prime Minister and active member of the War Cabinet, and the person who led the British team in the final stages of the negotiations at Potsdam, will also be examined.

Winston Churchill chose his first War Cabinet on 11 May 1940 in the heat of the immediate German threat, the day after the German attack on Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. It was a coalition of prominent Labour and Conservative men, including Labour's leader Clement Attlee as Lord Privy Seal, and its membership was amended and expanded later in the year with the inclusion of Anthony Eden as Foreign Secretary and Ernest Bevin as Minister of Labour and National Service. Attlee's role was later changed to deputy Prime Pinister in 1943. They remained part of the Cabinet team from Eden's appointment on 22 December 1940 until the general election was called in May 1945, and they participated as British leaders at the Potsdam Conference almost four and a half years later. Together this key foursome took part in the most intimate deliberations about wartime action, the setting and promotion of policy, and leadership of the nation.[2] Churchill placed himself in the new post of Minister of Defence and this enabled him to be permanent chairman of the Cabinet Defence

[2] Except two months of Conservative Caretaker Government – June and July 1945.

Committee. This committee which had direct oversight of the military war efforts, included the three service ministers, the three Chiefs of Staff and other ministers, and experts when needed, along with Clement Attlee. Churchill's main focus was always the war effort, but Attlee, the key mover in domestic policy, had his foot in both camps and was a key decision-maker in all the main parts of government. The cabinet was later expanded to eight people, but in practice meetings were routinely much larger with the addition of representatives of the armed services and others when their presence and expertise was essential.[3] Two very regular attendees were Alexander Cadogan, Eden's permanent under secretary at the foreign office and Sir Edward Bridges, the cabinet secretary. The core members of the cabinet made the journey over to Potsdam carrying their portfolios of shared knowledge and agreed final positions after many years of discussions of foreign policy as its circumstances changed on the back of military losses and gains. Churchill himself liked to steal the limelight on the crucial War Cabinet announcements to Parliament but generally Anthony Eden spoke in the House of Commons on foreign policy and on behalf of the War Cabinet. Attlee did not remain silent on foreign affairs but mostly fronted up on domestic issues, planning for post-war Britain and the management of Commons' business.[4]

The bureaucratic and functional language of the War Cabinet minutes may hide more than they reveal. There are clipped sentences and neat conclusions, and are not designed to capture wider discourse, but they do clearly describe the decisions taken and assign responsibility. There is a heavy reliance on cabinet minutes in this chapter and therefore it will inevitably be a partial view as it is impossible to capture the informal elements within a cabinet relationship. Given the strong characters usually in the room it can be safely assumed that many

[3] Schneer, *Ministers at War*, pp. 131-133.
[4] Ibid., pp. 209-212.

differences of view or nuanced opinions were not recorded.[5] The topics were introduced into the meetings with the production of a memo or a paper or perhaps a long sometimes rambling preamble delivered by Churchill. After discussion the topics were eventually either noted or acted upon. More considered detail about complex topics, which probably became the substance of the discussions, can be found in the reports and tabled papers which are annexes to the cabinet papers at the National Archives. In this paper the limited foreign policy references represent only a tiny part of the whole business of the War Cabinet. The volume and range of business was enormous and sometimes as many as a dozen separate issues were dealt with in a single meeting, with people arriving and leaving at different times. Despite their varied political backgrounds, there appear to be no major irresolvable policy differences within the team with regard to how to deal with the aftermath of the German defeat and how to handle affairs with Stalin.

The War Cabinet was where all the major British war-time decisions were made. Attlee told Parliament in 1945 “Our foreign affairs are carried on by the Foreign Secretary. Sometimes, the Prime Minister intervenes, sometimes other Ministers, but I assure him that major decisions on foreign policy, all important decisions, are decisions taken after due consideration by the War Cabinet. I think it is important to remember that.”[6] This chapter will reveal that there was not as much discussion as perhaps MPs or members of the public might have expected. The substance of the policy creation and management was centred on the relationship between the Foreign Secretary and his department and not in the War Cabinet where the broad principles and major decisions were signed off. Ministers usually defended and promoted their own brief in Parliament with the exception of Churchill and Attlee who

[5] Ibid. In this book the author claims that the details included by some minute takers, in particular Lawrence Burgis’s handwritten notes, have allowed him to form his views about ongoing conflicts between ambitious and competitive Labour ministers who he describes as a “team of rivals”.
[6] Hansard, HC Deb, 1 March 1945, vol. 408, cc1579-676, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1945/mar/01/crimea-conference [accessed 17 March 2026].

could comment freely on all areas of government. Bevin, for instance, never spoke about foreign policy in the House of Commons while he was a member of the War Cabinet. Everything fed into and nurtured the decision-making at the War Cabinet, be that through the political parties, the military, the media, numerous committees, or the foreign office. The prime minister could use the royal prerogative in relation to foreign treaties and at meetings with Roosevelt and Stalin. However, Churchill and later Attlee, although both willing, able and licensed to adapt the British position when in situ, received their steer from the War Cabinet before departure.

The workload was severe and unrelenting, with members of the War Cabinet attending sometimes twice a day and also running or attending subsidiary committees. Attlee and Bevin attended more often than Churchill himself and Attlee's management of committees was very efficient.[7] Churchill made many journeys abroad while Attlee had only one long absence when he represented Britain at the San Francisco conference in April 1944. There were usually discussions about frontiers in the War Cabinet before, during, and after Churchill's and Eden's visits to the other two allies. Issues related to the new Polish western frontier were raised at the British face-to-face meetings on many occasions from the Anglo-Soviet negotiations held at various venues in 1941, right through to the dissolution of the War Cabinet on the calling of the general election in June 1945. The minutes taken at cabinet meetings reflect serious consideration being given to at least six main events on a path relating to Niederschlesien and these will be examined here.

The pertinent War Cabinet meetings over a period of 4 years, were centred around the Sikorski/Maisky agreement of 1941, the consent to Benes' plan for German evictions from Czechoslovakia, the discussions around the Tehran Conference, the Moscow talks in 1944,

[7] Jerry H. Brookshire, 'Clement Attlee and Cabinet Reform, 1930-1945', *Historical Journal*, 24.1 (1981), pp. 175-188.

known as Tolstoy, and the Crimean Conference at Yalta in February 1945. The War Cabinet did not set up discussions in the period from May to July 1945 in preparation for the Potsdam Conference. The stream of information from eastern European affairs the Foreign Office came through Cadogan, Eden and Churchill and key issues were filtered through to the core group of four members of the War Cabinet and Edward Bridges, the cabinet secretary. When required to address relevant issues, a whole range of other politicians, military men and others were squeezed at various times into the stuffy underground cabinet room in Whitehall. With regard to East European policy issues, the War Cabinet was never in a dominant foreign policy position where they could work towards a positive and advantageous scheme. In the precarious wartime conditions, they were often reacting to events determined by others.

## Soviet-Polish Agreement – Sikorsky/Maisky

It could be argued that a British view on the most appropriate layout of Polish frontiers failed right from the start, when Curzon's plan was pushed aside by Polish victories leading to the Treaty of Riga in 1921. From then on, as far as Poland was concerned, the British policy was always reactive, with the government of whatever colour attempting to rescue something from the over-assertive plans and actions of others. When Operation Barbarossa began in June 1941 and Britain suddenly had the possibility of a major ally, Churchill's instinct, resting on his own long experience and involvement in affairs on the eastern front, made him aware of the likely claims being made by the Soviets for territory in their west, even in the face of the overwhelming German onslaught. Stalin and Churchill were old adversaries stretching back to over twenty years earlier. In 1921, Churchill was in the same cabinet as Curzon, who was then in charge of British Foreign Affairs. Churchill was then Secretary for the Armed Forces and then Colonial Secretary while Stalin for a short period was leading Red Army soldiers against Poland. Keen to capture Lvov, he had refused to send some of his troops to support the Red Army attack on Warsaw. When this attack failed he was recalled to Moscow where Lenin and

Trotsky blamed him for his contribution to the failure to defeat the Polish forces. Historian Robert Conquest suggests that his failure in the field against the Poles was one reason why Stalin developed antipathy towards the Poles.[8] It was perhaps inevitable that this was one of the first suggestions included in Stalin's negotiations when the Russians and the British first entered into discussions about working together against the Germans and it also figured in the talks between Poland and the Soviet Union when they eventually got started.

The British War Cabinet knew that the German attack on the Soviet Union was coming in 1941 and they discussed it at a meeting the week before the event on 22 June. They had been monitoring the growing concentration of personnel and equipment along the eastern border and Sir Stafford Cripps, the British ambassador in Moscow, had returned to London and reported that he expected that Germany would deliver an ultimatum to Russia when their military buildup was complete.[9] The War Cabinet agreed that Anthony Eden should tell Maisky, the Soviet ambassador in London, that they would try to use air attacks in the west to draw off German forces when they launched their attack.[10] When Operation Barbarossa did happen on 22 June, the British response to the news was immediate. Without War Cabinet consultation beforehand, Churchill talked to the British public on the BBC on the same evening of the attack and told them that he had "offered to the Government of Soviet Russia any technical or economic assistance which is in our power and which is likely to be of service to them," and promised to "bomb Germany by day as well as by night in ever-increasing measure."[11]

Fr om this point on, logically the main British aim was to start to build and cement a relationship with Communist Russia. As Wojciech Stanislawski  puts it, "Government and

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[8] J. Arch Getty, review of Robert Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (1991), *Slavic Review*, 52.4 (1993), pp. 914 -915.
[9] W. M. (41) 59th. CONCLUSIONS, MINUTE 8. Confidential Annex. (12th June, 1941, 5.0 p.m.).
[10] W. M (41) 58th CONCLUSIONS MINUTE 2. Confidential Annex (9th June, 1941, 5.0 p.m.).
[11] 'Winston Churchill's broadcast on the Soviet-German War, 1941', 22 June 1941, *America's National Churchill Museum*, https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/winston-churchills-broadcast-on-the-soviet-german-war.html [accessed 17 March 2026].

presidential annals confirm that the first British suggestions for the Polish authorities to start talks with the Soviet side appeared on the same day."[12] But there is no record of the details of these suggestions crossing the table at War Cabinet discussions. No diplomatic channels had existed between the Poles and Soviets since the Russians on the eve of their invasion in 1939, their last contact being when the Polish ambassador in Moscow, Wacław Grzybowski, received a note on 17 September 1939 saying: "The Polish government collapsed and shows no signs of life. This means that the Polish state and its government have actually ceased to exist. As a result, the treaties concluded between the USSR and Poland are no longer valid."[13] Thus, the British under the management of Eden and Cadogan had to oversee the contacts and talks in July 1941. Poland had been absent from War Cabinet agendas for many months, and with Britain under huge military threat, Polish affairs were very low on its priority list. From June 1941 on this changed and a mark of its sudden elevated importance was that the Soviet-Polish discussions appeared on the agenda seven times over the next three weeks. The War Cabinet was very keen to build up as many alliances as possible and the absence of an arrangement between Poland and Russia could interfere with the setting up of a successful one between Britain and the Russians.

Eden told the war cabinet on 7 July that both sides were in full consultation and that "from the Russian point of view, the most difficult item was perhaps the proposal that the large number of Polish prisoners in the Soviet Union should be released at once."[14] Agreement on some issues—the resumption of diplomatic contact, each nation to work jointly for the defeat of Germany, and the creation of a Polish army— was straightforward. However, the borders

[12] Wojciech Stanislawski, 'The Sikorski-Maisky agreement: A tactical success but a strategic defeat. The Treaty between the Soviet Union and Poland', trans. by Alicja Rose and Jessica Sirotin, *Polish History*, https://polishhistory.pl/the-sikorski-maisky-agreement-a-tactical-success-but-a-strategic-defeat/#:~:text=The%20Sikorski%2DMaisky%20agreement%2C%20creating,beginning%20of%20a%20free%20fall [accessed 17 March 2026].
[13] Ibid.
[14] W.M. WAR CABINET 66(41). Conclusions of a Meeting of the.War Cabinet held at 1 0 , Downing S.W. 1, on Monday. July 7, 1941, at 6 P.M.

issue led to deadlock on 11 July with Maisky, now the Soviet ambassador in London, only willing to recognise Poland within its ethnographic boundaries and Sikorski insisting on a return to the pre-1939 situation. [15] Eden and the British foreign office terminated direct contact and pressed for a compromise. There were differences within the Polish camp, which was very divided on political grounds, with strongly opposing views on how to deal with the Russians. Some members of their government-in-exile had been in Pilzudski's foundational administrations, which were set up after the Russians were defeated twenty years earlier and hence harboured strong anti-Russian views. They threatened to resign. The British insisted that the issue of the border had no significance at a moment when the German troops had left the territory far behind them and were half way through Ukraine and on their way to Moscow. Cadogan threatened that if Poland now withdrew from a possible agreement then it would "undermine Poland's position in the western world".[16]

Eden reported again to the War Cabinet on 14 July that:

> Maisky had shown him that morning the Russian draft of a proposed Agreement with Poland. This draft contained four points: First, the Russo-German Agreement of 1939 was denounced, and Poland undertook to stop anti-Russian measures. Second, there should be an exchange of diplomatic representatives. Third, a Polish army should be constituted in Russia and should come under the Russian High Command. Fourth, agreement for joint action against Germany. (In fact, Poland had never declared a state of war with Russia.) The outcome of these negotiations was uncertain." [17]

[15] Wojciech, 'The Sikorsky-Maisky agreement'.
[16] Ibid.
[17] WAR CABINET 69 (41) Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Monday, July 14, 1941, at 5 P.M.

The topic was again on the agenda on 17 July: “The negotiations between the Russians and the Poles had not made encouraging progress. At the moment the main obstacles were that the Poles wanted the Russians to recognise their pre-war frontiers, both in the east and the west. The question of Polish prisoners in Russia now offered rather less difficulty, the Russians having released a certain number.”[18]

Four days later on 21 July, “*The Foreign Secretary* said that these negotiations were still proving difficult, the main trouble being the Poles’ wish to get from Russia an undertaking to restore their former frontiers. General Sikorski was having difficulty with some members of his Cabinet for having gone some way to meet the Russian point of view.” [19] On 24 July, Eden read to the War Cabinet the latest draft of the Polish-Soviet Treaty and an accompanying Protocol. This draft had been agreed by the Soviet Government, but had not yet been accepted by the Polish Government. He asked whether the War Cabinet would authorise him to write on their behalf to General Sikorski to say that, in their view, the conclusion of a Treaty on these lines would be in the interests of Poland. The War Cabinet agreed. If agreement was reached and a Treaty was signed, he also proposed to give to the Polish Government, at the time of signature, an assurance, for which they were pressing, that His Majesty’s Government did not recognise territorial changes affecting Poland made since August 1939. As he put it, “This went no further than what we had already so often said, namely, that we did not recognise changes made by force.” [20] The protocol had an ambiguous clause, “the various reciprocal claims of a public, as well as a private nature, will be considered in the subsequent negotiations between the two governments.”[21] This appeared to be a kind of promise that Britain would treat Poland

[18] WAR CABINET 69 (41) Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Thursday, July 17, 1941, at 5-30P.M.
[19] WAR CABINET 69 (41) Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing S.W. 1, on Monday, July 21, 1941, at 5 P.M.
[20] WAR CABINET 73 (41) Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held in the Prime of Commons, S.W. 1, on Thursday, July 2 4 , 1941 , at 12 NOON.
[21] Ibid.

kindly in the future, without spelling out any definite commitments. The Polish leadership were being pressured to sign. On 28 July they said that a Polish Cabinet crisis had occurred on the question and three Ministers, including their Foreign Secretary, had resigned. The Polish President was also against the Treaty and this was significant because if a deal was reached his signature was required to ratify it. Eden reported that Sir Stafford Cripps had, however, secured two helpful concessions from the Russians (Telegrams 859 and 860 from Moscow) and that he was seeing the Poles again that evening, when he hoped that these concessions would resolve the Polish difficulties. The Polish Foreign Secretary, who was violently anti-Russian, had resigned, and at that point it seemed that the President might adopt the same course. On 31 July, the War Cabinet congratulated the Foreign Secretary on his part in having brought about the conclusion of this Agreement, which had now been signed.[22]

Poland had rarely been discussed by the War Cabinet before Operation Barbarossa. For a few weeks after that, it came along as a routine topic and was under constant monitoring. The reason for this might lie in the inadequate attention they had paid to it right from the beginning or perhaps it was the consequence of their urgent need for a Polish/Soviet accommodation at a moment of great need. The resulting agreement created a diplomatic headache for the British all the way from Barbarossa to Potsdam. At that point, in late June 1941, the three countries involved had three different sets of perceived needs. The British were looking to develop their cohort of anti-Nazi allies and signed a raft of treaties to formalise these. The Poles were in a desperate rush to do anything to confirm their boundaries, symbolise their national identity, and confirm their continued existence. The Russians, now in full retreat military, were also garnering support from anywhere but not prepared to retreat from old territorial claims. The Polish historian Wojciech Stanislawski summed up the Polish viewpoint as follows:

[22] WAR CABINET 76 (41) Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held in the Prime of Commons, S. W. 1, on Thursday, July 31, 1941, at 12 -15 P.M.

> The Sikorski-Maisky agreement, creating the possibility of liberating more than a quarter of a million Polish citizens from prisons and labour camps and organising armed forces, which in the future played a significant role in the Middle East and Italian theatre of war, was also the beginning of a free fall. The transitory nature of the formula it contained created the ground for subsequent agreements in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam, which deprived Poland of sovereignty and made it dependent on the Communist empire for a long time. However, it is extremely difficult to answer any question as to whether there was any real alternative to this unfortunate agreement in 1941.[23]

In the agreement, the Soviets recognized "the Soviet-German treaties of 1939 as to territorial changes in Poland as having lost their validity. The Polish Government declares Poland is not bound by any agreement with any third power which is directed against the U.S.S.R". [24] In return the Polish citizens detained as prisoners on Soviet territory were granted amnesty and the Poles were given the right to set up a Polish army within Russia but under Soviet command. Before the negotiations and Britain's intervention, the country's largest neighbour had not recognised its existence. Now Poland's right to exist was recognised and Sikorski had taken the chance to save the lives of many Poles. However, from that moment the leadership of the London Poles was split.[25] Three key people in the leadership resigned, including the President Wladyslaw Raczkiewicz, who refused to grant power of attorney to sign the final agreement, along with a batch of deputies in the National Council. It was a conflicted decision made by Sikorski. He did not achieve what he set out at the start and he had to deal with the fact that key members of his government resigned over his decision. The Russians were giving no commitment regarding Poland's eastern border with Ukraine or

[23] Wojciech, 'Sikorsky-Maisky agreement'.
[24] 'Polish-Soviet Union Agreements', 30 July 1941, *The Avalon Project*, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/polsov.asp [accessed 17 March 2026].
[25] Terry, 'Poland's Place in Europe', pp. 62-65.

Byelorussia. The Polish signing of the agreement with the Soviet Union allowed Britain out of any obligation, perceived or legal, to guarantee any Polish border and if Poland lost a huge swathe of territory in the east, the option was open to replace it by taking land from the Germans in the west. The seeds for the restructuring of the Polish western frontier, and thus the future of Niederschlesien, were thus sown by this agreement.

With the job done as far as the British were concerned, the topic of Poland's borders disappeared from the agenda for many months. The problems of a minor country currently being occupied by a third power would not interrupt relations with one of Britain's two possible main allies against Germany. A key point here is that this was not just managed by Eden but the whole team, including Attlee and Bevin, who were fully aware of what happened and gave their approval and support. Poland was a minor issue at the time when national survival and enkindling the strongest rapport with the Russians was far more important. It was a time of great uncertainty and although there was the possibility that Britain could have played a more supportive role with the Poles, they judged that their new bond with Stalin was much more important in the struggle against Hitler. The decision made in the Soviet Polish agreement, pressed on the Polish by Anthony Eden and Alexander Cadogan, was one that it was difficult to recover from.[26] They would be hamstrung by this for four more years but no-one had a clear view of how the war would develop and what complicated diplomatic issues lay ahead.

## Benes and transfers

The concept of solving Europe's problems by the transfer of populations had been gaining favour in political circles for many years.[27] Mark Mazower suggests it arose out of the failed minorities policies set out after the Treaty of Versaillesthat that was then ineffectively managed

[26] *Diaries of Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 392.
[27] Frank Matthew, *Expelling the Germans: British opinion and post-1945 population transfer in context* (Oxford University Press, 2008). This is the best book on this topic.

by the League of Nations.[28] Edvard Benes, the leader of the Czechoslovakian government-in-exile, was busy throughout 1941 and 1942 gathering support for his ideas on borders and evictions of Germans. Benes' initial idea involved particular border changes which would mean that the total number of Germans in his country would drop by two thirds of their total.[29] Benes already knew that Stalin, who had himself practised population eviction, was in favour of this action at the war's end, and he spent many months promoting this plan in Britain and America. Anthony Eden, who already discovered in Moscow that Stalin expected Germans to be removed from Polish lands at the end of the fighting brought the topic to the War Cabinet table in July 1942.[30] "The Foreign Secretary also proposed that, in discussions with Dr. Benes and the Sudeten German representatives, he should indicate that His Majesty's Government approved in principle the transfer to Germany after the war, in appropriate cases, of German minorities in Central and South-Eastern Europe." The War Cabinet with no absentees on that day, "(1) Approved in principle the proposals put forward in W.P. (42) 280. (2) Authorised the Foreign Secretary to proceed forthwith to discuss the position with Dr. Benes on these lines."[31] The War Cabinet were not willing at that time to agree to a change in frontiers in Czechoslovakia but nodded through the principle of population transfer. By succeeding in this concession, Benes had set in place a foundation that would be built upon by himself and others, as they witnessed the tide of war turn in their favour and as Russia encroached on their territory. There was no noted dissent at the War Cabinet meeting that made this first concession and no consideration of the likely wider consequences of this decision minuted at that meeting. Despite the certainty, members of the War Cabinet would have read the Foreign Research and Press

[28] Mark Mawozer, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (Penguin, 1998), pp. 201-202.
[29] Zbynek Zeman with Antonin Klimek, *The Life of Edvard Benes 1884-1948: Czechoslovakia in Peace and War* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 182.
[30] A. F. Noskova, 'Migration of the Germans after the Second World War: Political and Psychological Aspects', in *Forced Migration in Central and Eastern Europe, 1939-1950*, ed. by Alfred Rieber (Routledge, 2001), p. 98.
[31] WAR CABINET 86 (42). Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W.1, on Monday, July 6, 1942, at 5 - 3 0 P.M.

Service Report on the Transfer of German Populations, which Eden and the Foreign Office had commissioned and had been published six months earlier. It had suggested that widespread abuse would happen and the Germans involved would be sent back with "little but light clothes on their back". The report went on to advise it was likely that such an event would take five to ten years for completion and great suffering would be involved. They approved Eden's proposal anyway. In the progress of the war, the Russians had rebuffed the Germans at Moscow and were holding out at Leningrad but the Germans were on the offensive with their next targets being Stalingrad and the oilfields at Baku. The concession on population transfer in Czechoslovakia was not obviously related to the military position of the allies. No qualms were raised, or at least none were recorded. The numbers of Germans in Czechoslovakia were much smaller than in Poland, and at that stage they were less likely to be involved in significant border changes than Poland. The numbers of evictions from Poland on the other hand, if there were border changes in the west, would be huge. The War Cabinet, uncertain about the future military outcome, did not find the time or inclination to discuss that prospect. This reluctant attitude lingered right up to the Potsdam two years later when the British asked the Americans to raise the topic at the conference.[32]

Benes' plans on German eviction expanded after Lidice and as he realized the doors were open. Before going to visit Roosevelt in May 1943, Benes, along with Jan Masaryk, his foreign minister and likely successor, met with Winston Churchill. According to a record kept by Masaryk, Churchill said at that meeting "Many Germans will be killed in your country as well – it cannot be helped and I agree with it. After a few months we'll say "that's enough", and we shall start on the work of peace; try the guilty men who stayed alive."[33] Retribution

[32] Memorandum by the Director of European Affairs (Matthews), Memorandum of Conversation, [Subattachment] Revised List of Suggested Topics, 3 July 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Diplomatic Papers, The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference), 1945 [herafter *FRUS* Potsdam] volume I, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv01/d179 [accessed 17 March 2026].
[33] Zeman, *Edvard Benes*, p. 185.

against the Germans was a normal part of conversation and the concept of German evictions went unchallenged amongst the emigre governments. The issue of borders, although always closely related to the eviction of populations, was not fully perceived and thus not settled.

## Foreign Ministers' Conference

The Foreign Ministers of the three main allies met together for four weeks in Moscow starting on 18 October 1943 and the War Cabinet prepared Anthony Eden for this challenge. The meeting of Churchill with Stalin and Roosevelt at Tehran had already been fixed for late November 1943 and the Foreign Ministers meeting was preparatory. So, starting in early October, the War Cabinet had a number of discussions on papers dealing with issues likely to be raised at the forthcoming conference. At the first of these on 4 October, Churchill said that he thought the upcoming meeting in Moscow would be of "an exploratory character" and it would not "be appropriate or necessary that we should attempt at this stage, before we had learned the Russian views, to crystallise our final opinions on the many issues of far-reaching importance which would have to be settled after the war."[34] Nonetheless, in the memorandum that the War Cabinet prepared, the decision was made to disapply a key feature of the Atlantic Charter from any decisions about Russia's frontiers: "We reaffirm the principles of the Atlantic Charter, noting that Russia's accession thereto is based upon the frontiers of the 22nd June, 1941. We also take note of the historic frontiers of Russia before the two wars of aggression waged by Germany in 1914 and 1939." [35] The Atlantic Charter, whose framework was written by Alexander Cadogan at short notice, was only a statement of principle and did not have the status of a treaty or other form of international agreement. Its easy adaptation by one of the signatories evidences the capacity of leaders and diplomats to live with their own personal ambiguities. In essence, Eden's memo was inferring was that that in order to achieve "the right

[34] W.M.134th Conclusions. War Cabinet CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Monday, 4th October, 1943, at 7 P.M.
[35] W.M.(U3) 137TH CONCLUSIONS, Minute 4 Confidential Annex (8th October, 1943 - 11.30 a.m.)

of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live", one had to remove from some groups of people "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live". In the first instance this accommodation by the British was being made with regard to the Polish population east of the Curzon Line because Stalin wanted that territory. It became conjoined with the removal of Germans in other areas west of that line. If the principle was abandoned and the first concession was made to accept the Curzon Line, the natural impetus was towards compensation to the Poles for the land lost and decisions would then need to be made about exactly the size and location of that land. The lifting of the commitment to the terms of the Atlantic Charter gave a license to both the Russians and the Poles for all these possible changes.

In the first instance, the Curzon Line had to be successfully expedited and at this point in October 1943 the Soviet forces were on the front foot after victories at Stalingrad and Kursk and the progress of the armies was monitored at the start of every War Cabinet meeting. There was recognition that the British had no power to force the reluctant Poles to accept the loss of this large piece of territory, but "we would urge them to come to a settlement on the ground that this was in their own best interests."[36] The tide of the war had turned in favour of the Russians and as their armies moved westwards they would have more of a say in the position of that frontier. Earlier in that year, they had broken off diplomatic relations with the Polish Government in London after it had asked for a Red Cross investigation into the Katyn Massacre. Their relationship had lasted just two years. At the following meeting on 8 October, the War Cabinet returned again to the topic of Polish borders. There were no Poles due to attend this forthcoming meeting in Moscow and Eden said that the Poles had asked him not to talk about frontier matters at the conference.[37] Nonetheless, Eden would also be taking to Moscow

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

the British policy on their western frontier "to take the line that if they ceded a frontier in the East approximating to the Curzon line, they should receive compensation by the cession to them of East Prussia and part of Silesia."[38] This was the first formal appearance on the War Cabinet agenda of this new shape of Poland's border with Germany. There was no mention of the Oder or any of the three of the Neisse rivers. The War Cabinet approved Eden's memo as a guide to be used in conversations at the conference. From this point on, the frontiers to the east and west of Poland were always being considered in conjunction with the make-up of the new government after the German defeat, the route towards democratic elections to follow.

On 1 November 1943, news came back from Moscow that although agreements were made by the three allies on a number of other areas, there was no progress on the Polish problem.[39] On the same agenda there were military reports on all fronts in the war including the progress of Bomber Command tonnage of explosives dropped over German cities. On Eden's return, he made efforts to act as an intermediary between the Russians and the Poles with no success and the Russians, on 17 January 1944, rejected further negotiations with the Polish Government in London on the grounds that they had not accepted the Curzon Line and did not wish to have neighbourly relations.[40] At this point, the possibility of any agreement between Poland and the Soviet Union, no longer in communication with each other, was rather remote, and Britain, if unable to forge a compromise between them the War Cabinet would have to choose which side's stance would represent Britain's best interests.

## Tehran Conference

After his Moscow trip Eden spent only two weeks back in London, and, just before leaving for the Tehran Conference, he submitted a memo to the War Cabinet dated 20 November 1943. In

[38] W. M. (45) 135TH CONCLUSIONS, MINUTE 4 Confidential Annex (5th October, 1943 - 5.50 .p..m.).
[39] W. M. 148 (43).CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S. W. 1, on Monday, 1st November, 1943, at 5 - 3 0 P.M.
[40] Eden, *Memoirs*, p. 506.

it, he advocated the promotion of the Curzon Line rather than the Molotov/Ribbentrop Line as the future eastern frontier of Poland, and in return the Poles could be offered in compensation East Prussia, Danzig, and the Oppeln district of Upper Silesia along with "transfers of population if this were considered desirable …. so far as possible racial minorities from each side of the frontier." There was no mention of Niederschlesien or even the Oder. The territories mentioned in the memo played a substantive part in discussions with Roosevelt and Stalin just a week later. The War Cabinet would see the Foreign Office minutes of the formal meetings in due course, but on Eden's return from Tehran they received a report from Eden himself on 20 December 1943. There had been much informal discussion at Tehran, the details of which may have been relayed on a private basis to the War Cabinet, and more was to follow many years later on the publication of books by Eden and Churchill.[41]

Eden said during his report at that meeting, chaired by Attlee, that the three leaders only got down to serious discussions about Poland on the last day. After explaining that the Russians wanted to revert to the Curzon Line as Poland's eastern frontier and maps had been reviewed in the discussion about this, he then relayed some details of the discussion that followed. "Discussion then had ensued at the Tehran Conference as to the Western frontier of Poland - Stalin had said that this should be the Oder. This was, of course, a rather extreme step and would bring Poland within 60 miles of Berlin. It was also clear that he was agreeable to the Poles getting the Oppeln area of Silesia."[42] There is no mention of Churchill's and Eden's consent to this arrangement in Eden's report. Nor did it mention Niederschlesien or any river Neisse. The state of knowledge held by the participants on the geography of the area at the War Cabinet is not known. It is worth pointing out that the Oder goes straight through the middle of Opole and the Oppeln province, but the province does not include Breslau and is a long way

[41] Ibid., esp. Chapter 11.
[42] W. M. (45) 169TH CONCLUSIONS, MINUTE 2 (13th December at 5.50 p. m.).

from the Lausitzer Neisse. There is no minuted record of discussion on this report by the War Cabinet and one may assume that it was just noted. Minutes do not record everything and nuances easily slip by, but given the importance of this issue, it is surprising that the report is so thin. Some historians are inclined to the view that Eden and Churchill stepped outside their War Cabinet brief at Tehran and were informally more generous in their suggestions for dispensing of east European territories than the War Cabinet expected. The Polish historian Anita Prazmowska suggests that at this point Britain had to chose between humouring the Polish Government in exile and accepting the demands of Stalin, and that Churchill did more than just accept, he expressed the intention of pressing the Poles to accept Soviet demands on his return.[43]

The official record of the Tehran Conference was not publicly available for many years, despite attempts by MPs to discover, as early as March 1944, if any secret deals with Stalin had been done.[44] Eden's answer was vague enough to suggest that there was perhaps much more to the discussions and resulting understandings than appeared in the minutes and final communique. In the following days, Eden's first attempt to convince the Poles failed, as he reported to the War Cabinet a week later, and that was to remain the case for many months. He had talked over the frontier ideas with the Poles telling them they were personal to himself and Churchill, but was rebuffed. They were unwilling to give up Vilna and Lwow, although they were keen to have compensation in the west.[45] The War Cabinet wanted the Poles to be told at his next contact with the them that the War Cabinet supported the view taken by Eden and Churchill."[46] They were therefore all working to support Stalin. At this point the Poles knew nothing about the Tehran conversations and neither did anyone outside the War Cabinet and

[43] Anita J. Prazmowska, *Britain and Poland, 1939–1943: The Betrayed Ally* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 196.
[44] Hansard. Volume 411: House of Commons Thursday 7th June 1945.
[45] WAR CABINET 172(43).Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 1 0 Downing S.W. 1, on Monday, 20th December, 1943, at 5 - 3 0 p.m.
[46] W. M. 43 172nd Conclusions Minute 2 Confidential Annex 20th December 1943, 5.30 p.m.

the diplomats involved. There was no agreement about the eastern frontier and without that there would be no clear agreement on the delimitation of Poland's western border. The War Cabinet were prepared to accept and promote their versions of both frontiers but the Poles were not willing to accept, and at Tehran President Roosevelt was not willing to commit to the topic of frontiers because of electoral considerations.

In January 1944, Polish armies were fighting at Monte Cassino and the London Poles were hoping that their gallant performance would allow them to have a say in the post-war settlement. However, that was far from their own borders and would not be involved in liberation of their own territory. The British foreign office and Anthony Eden continued to meet the London Poles throughout 1944 but for the War Cabinet it was a long interregnum before the topic appeared again. The split amongst the London Poles, which existed at the point of Sikorski's signature on the Polish-Soviet agreement remained and became even more entrenched after his death, the Katyn Massacre and under the new leadership of Mikolajczyk. The next tranch of War Cabinet activity with regard to frontiers was towards the end of 1944 in preparation for the Tolstoy meeting in Moscow.

## Tolstoy

The War Cabinet returned again to the topic of Polish frontiers late in 1944. The influence of their London Government commensurately waned the nearer the Soviet armies came to Warsaw and by August 1944 they were inside Poland. They had reached the Vistula river and were on the outskirts of Warsaw. Despite British diplomatic efforts, the Poles were still split with regard to their acceptance of the Curzon Line and Churchill decided upon another trip to Moscow to discuss Poland, the Balkans, and war plans.[47] They set off on 7 October 1944. The War Cabinet had no preparatory discussion about this visit. After their first meeting with Stalin

[47] Eden, *Memoirs*, p. 555.

it was decided to invite Mikolajczyk, Romer and Grabski, the most conciliatory Poles, to Moscow, in Eden's words, "to have another try" to settle Polish affairs.[48] There were opportunities for Mikolajczyk to talk over the frontiers issue with both Stalin and representatives of the Lublin Poles, but he was not in a position to give consent and he returned to London to try to persuade his colleagues there to accept the Curzon Line as part of a final settlement. Meanwhile Churchill and Eden continued their meetings with Stalin and Molotov during which they worked on the percentages deal and the "naughty document," notionally dividing out their influence in the various Balkan countries.[49] The message here was that Churchill felt free and able to step outside normal cabinet processes and make agreements on his own. This topic never appeared on a War Cabinet agenda and presumably never gained its opinion or consent.

On their return to London, the Polish Foreign Minister in London, Romer, on the basis of the earlier conversations in Moscow, came to see Cadogan with a set of questions for the Prime Minister, the same version having been sent to Roosevelt. These appeared on the War Cabinet agenda on 1 November 1944. The Poles were looking for guarantees. The first question was "Was the attitude of His Majesty's Government on the territorial compensation which Poland had been promised in he west so decided that even though the United States might not agree to the territorial changes in question, His Majesty's Government would still consider themselves bound to advocate these at the peace settlement?"[50] The War Cabinet agreed with Churchill that an affirmative answer should be given to this question and that even if the United States was unwilling or unable to stand by this commitment then there was no reason why the Russians and British should not. The War Cabinet then agreed that a guarantee should be jointly given by the Soviet Union and by Britain, and that the United States should be invited to

[48] Ibid., p. 558.
[49] Ibid., p 559.
[50] W. M. 44 143th Conclusions Confidential Annex, 1st November 1944, 5.30 p.m.

associate itself with this guarantee in due course. This guarantee would exist in the short term and then be subsumed into a larger agreement through the new United Nations Organisation once established.

Romer's second blunt question was also answered in the affirmative by the War Cabinet. He asked if the policy of His Majesty's Government was definitely in favour of extending he Polish frontier up to the Oder. Cadogan, the permanent under-secretary of foreign affairs had already spoken at length with the London Poles stated that he thought Mr Mikolajczyk was under pressure to secure as much territory as possible from Germany but that if it became known then this might stiffen German resistance. Romer's stated that a transfer of populations would be involved in such boundary changes but the difficulties were not insurmountable. Other points were made around the table on the issue of population transfer, but not by Attlee or Bevin, who had expert knowledge as they had sat on APW and in the previous weeks had discussed in detail the official report on this topic.[51] Two significant points are worth raising here. Firstly, Churchill spent some time linking the frontier issue with the setting up of a satisfactory new Polish Government expressing doubt that its composition "could not be solved on satisfactory lines until the frontier question had been got out of the way."[52] Agreement could be made on one of these issues and yet all could break down if the other was not solved at the same time. The frontier issue causing the most difficulty at this stage was not the one in the west but the Curzon Line in the east which the London Government would not accept. The second point is that in this conversation, the term "up to the Oder' was not defined. The key issue at stake was not just the definition line of the Oder itself but how that line was to continue southwards towards the Czech border. There were four possible routes and therefore the response delivered full ambiguity. The meeting ended with the statement that

[51] W. M. 44 143th Conclusions Confidential Annex, 1st November 1944, 5.30.p.m.
[52] W. M. 44 143th Conclusions Confidential Annex, 1st November 1944, 5.30.p.m.

no territorial change should be made before a peace conference and without an agreement no new frontiers should be set up before then. This may have been the last failed attempt within the Polish camp to come to a consensus. Despite the War Cabinet's responses, or maybe because of them, Mikolajcyzk resigned on 24 November. He had decided that no progress could be made if he remained with his hard line London colleagues and would look for another way to serve Poland.

With that resignation, the Polish question moved fully into the public arena because Churchill, apparently without any further discussion with the War Cabinet made a long speech about the Polish question in the House of Commons on 15 December 1944.[53] He wanted to "bring home to them the grim, bare bones of the Polish problem."[54] Churchill referred to Tehran and his earlier speeches about Polish frontiers and brought his audience up to date with the resignation of Mikolajczyk and the uncertain repercussions of it. He highlighted the two main issues needing to be settled as the frontier problems and the relationship with the Lublin government being promoted by Stalin. He did not mention the Oder or the Neisse directly, saying "The Poles are free, so far as Russia and Great Britain are concerned, to extend their territory, at the expense of Germany, to the West. I do not propose to go into exact details, but the extensions, which will be supported by Britain and Russia, bound together as they are by the 20 years' Alliance, are of high importance." [55] In what became known as the "Clean Sweep" speech he also said, "Expulsion is the method which, insofar as we have been able to see, will be the most satisfactory and lasting. There will be no mixture of populations to cause endless trouble. A clean sweep will be made. I am not alarmed by these transferences, which are more possible in modern conditions." There was not necessarily always a tight and automatic link

[53] HC Deb, 15 December 1944, vol. 406, c1478, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1944-12-15/debates/ed4bc80b-ceac-4156-ad8c-28c0e679b227/Poland?highlight=clean%20sweep#contribution-17d41e1b-8234-49b0-97ae-491b2f453719 [accessed 17 March 2026].
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

between the War Cabinet and Churchill on foreign policy issues, because he had tendency towards expansive rhetoric in different venues. However, the House of Commons certainly had opinions with a number of MPs from a range of arties speaking out both about the frontier changes and the transfers being proposed.[56]

## The Crimean Conference

The next conference of the three allied leaders was set for early February 1945 and the western border of Poland was on the War Cabinet agenda on 18 January in advance of that. [57] The speech made by Churchill a month earlier had obviously enkindled some disfavour in some quarters as Bevin explained to the War Cabinet. He said there was disquiet in Labour and other circles about the line of the Oder becoming the western frontier. “It was likely to create an unstable internal position in Poland owing to the size of the German minority which would have to be absorbed, while the task of transferring the German population of so large an area was, on the face of it, so great as to be almost insoluble. He felt that we should be extremely careful how we committed ourselves to this matter. “[58] He had been aware of all these issues having received two official reports on them in the previous eighteen months, but here he was forwarding the views of his constituents or from within the wider Labour Party. Churchill responded with the kind of arguments that had been used for years by those promoting German evictions and also that, in trying to convince the London Poles to accept the Curzon Line in the east, Britain had been supporting the idea that the Poles could have “as much territory as they could digest” up to the Oder limit. He insisted that those areas to be given to Poland must be cleared of “characteristic German elements” and no territory should be given to Poland where this was not going to happen.[59] Eden “drew attention to the signs that the Lublin Government

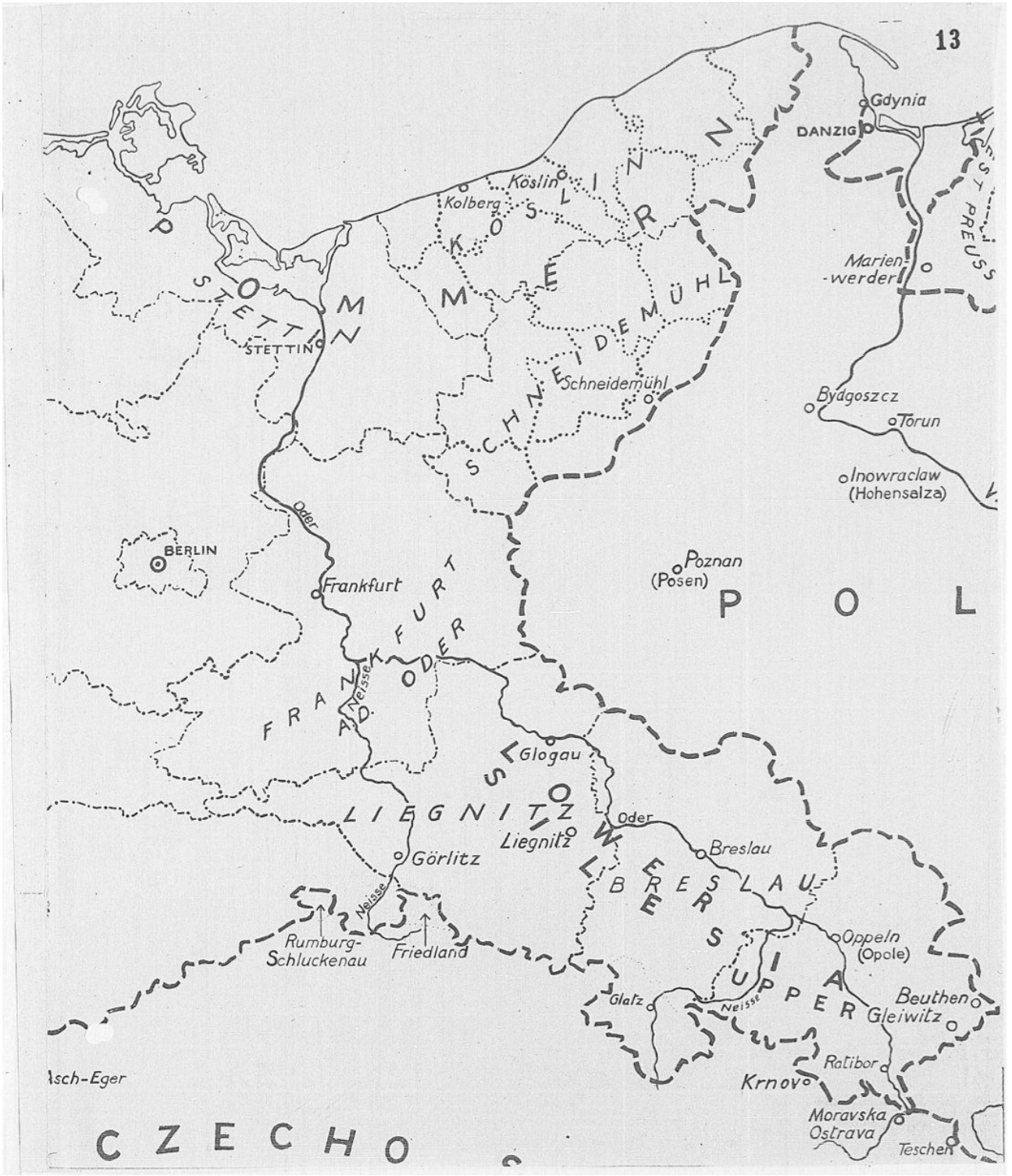
[56] Ibid.
[57] W. M. 45 7th Conclusions Minute 4 confidential annex, 22nd January 1945, 5.30 p.m.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

were now opening their mouths still wider, and were asking for additional territories in Pomerania, together with Lower Silesia. He felt himself considerable hesitation as to the justification for conceding the Oder Line, and held strongly that we should not allow ourselves to go beyond the undertakings on this matter which we had already given." [60] These were all concerns that would appear later at Potsdam.

Before Churchill and his team departed for the Crimea, Eden presented a memorandum dated 23 January 1944 with a supporting map to the War Cabinet reviewing all the previous commitments given to the Polish Government on their future western frontiers.[61] This counters the historian Michael Neiberg's statement that "Being 'of it'…did not stop several senior British leaders from misunderstanding the difference between the eastern and western branches of the Neisse River."[62] They were all present at the War Cabinet meeting in January 1945, six months earlier, and discussed the issue in detail with the aid of a map. Eden's memorandum stated that these undertakings were given to the London Poles at the time as an inducement to get them to accept the Curzon Line as the key to a settlement on their eastern border with the Russians. And tsince it looked likely that future dealings would be with the Lublin Poles, who already accepted the Curzon Line, there would no longer be a need for the British government to be so generous in conceding so much territory in the west. It also suggested that the time had come to inform the Soviet Union and the United States that Britain should not commit itself to the exact nature of the future settlement on this issue and would not wish it to be taken that she was willing to endorse a settlement involving "any annexation by Poland beyond those of East Prussia, Danzig and the Oppeln District". This appears to be a qualified reduction on statements give to Parliament a month earlier by Churchill saying that the Poles were free, so far as the

[60] Ibid.
[61] W. P. (45) 48. 23rd January 1945. No 36. War Cabinet. Memorandum. Poland's Western Frontier.
[62] Neiberg, *Potsdam: The End of World War II and the Remaking of Europe* (Basic, 2015), p. 220.

Soviet Union and Great Britain were concerned, to extend their territory, at the expense of Germany, to the West.




The memorandum stated that up until then the Lublin Poles had not made it clear whether it was the eastern or western Neisse to which they referred, and if they meant the western, then

that meant giving away the whole of Silesia. If it was the eastern then just a bit more of the Oder valley was involved. It stated: “In the former case, an additional 3 million Germans would have to be reckoned with. The Foreign Office felt that it would be a very heavy strain on Poland to accept this additional burden, and a frontier represented by the Western Neisse would go far beyond any commitment which had ever been made either by the Prime Minister or by myself.” After some discussion, the War Cabinet came to a consensus and the minutes of that meeting record Churchill’s summing up “….we should oppose the Western Neisse boundary. It would be no small matter to arrange for the removal of 5 to 6 million Germans from the territories which we were in any event prepared to see Poland acquire if she so desired. But a total figure of 8 or 9 millions would, in his judgement be quite unmanageable. Nor could we be certain that the reduced Germany, would be able to absorb so large a figure.”[63] At this point, the London Poles had still not accepted Stalin’s plans around the Curzon Line and the War Cabinet resolved to continue encouraging them to compromise on that issue and in discussions with Stalin to continue “to remain adamant on the question of ensuring a free, sovereign and independent Poland, coupled with arrangements for free elections.”[64] This was the memorandum in the portfolio when Churchill and Eden arrived at Yalta and at that stage the British were intending to keep Niederschlesien west of the frontier. The Soviet armies occupied practically all of Poland and were approaching Berlin and the London Poles were still now willing to concede Lwow Russia. Polish fighting forces were in Italy, under the leadership of the British and not in a position to enter their homeland. Their influence on decisions about their frontier was almost completely diminished, and the position of the frontiers would soon be decided solely in the interests of the Soviet Union and Britain.

[63] W. P. (45) 48. 23rd January 1945. No 36. War Cabinet. Memorandum. Poland’s Western Frontier.
[64] Ibid.

During the discussions at Crimea, reports were being sent back to London including a proposal on Poland's western frontier that Eden was presenting at the conference. The War Cabinet wrote that "public opinion, both in Parliament and in the country, was increasingly critical of the exaggerated territorial demands which had been put forward by the Lublin Poles. It would be preferable if possible to avoid tying our hands at this stage more than was actually necessary, and to leave the final decision to the peace conference." The War Cabinet then suggested a change to the draft being submitted to the conference substituting the words "and the lands desired by Poland to the east of the line of the Oder" with "and such other lands to the east of the line of the Oder as at the Peace Conference it shall be considered desirable to transfer to Poland." [65] They were still holding out for the eastern option.

The final communique from Yalta stated:

> 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 in 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 of the extent of these accessions and that the final delimitation of the western frontier of Poland should thereafter await the peace conference.[66]

With this communique, the London Poles finally lost their case and the Curzon Line became the international accepted eastern border of Poland. The War Cabinet's suggestion was also rejected and they way was open for discussion about the Poles gaining land west of the Oder.

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[65] W. M. 45 16th Conclusions 8th February 1945 5.30 p.m. and 10.30 p.m.
[66] 'Protocol of the proceedings of the Crimea Conference, February 1945', 24 March 1945, *The Avalon Project*, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/yalta.asp [accessed 17 March 2026].

A Neisse river was not mentioned but there were now three possible natural river boundaries available, one of which would eventually be chosen as the western delimitaton of Poland.

When he got back, Churchill thanked the War Cabinet for their full support and the latitude in negotiations that they had given him during discussions at Crimea. “Whatever criticisms there might be of the arrangements that had been reached he felt no doubt that they were on any broad and statesmanlike view the best practicable and that they were truly in the interests of Poland.”[67] From then on, right up until the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, the western frontier might have been talked about elsewhere but not at War Cabinet meetings.

There was a three day debate in the House of Commons on the motion “This House approves the declaration of joint policy agreed to by the three great Powers at the Crimea Conference.” On this occasion Attlee showed War Cabinet solidarity and also made a lengthy speech, revealing a very tough line on dealing with the Germans and he offered his justifications for German evictions.

> There is a little piece of Flintshire which is detached and I do not think that there would be serious trouble if we moved those people from Wales. One thing is quite certain. If you ask who is responsible for these movements, this terrible thing that has smitten Europe, there is no doubt at all that it is the Nazi rulers of Germany, and the people of Germany who actively supported them, and, in a lesser degree, those who have acquiesced, and who have been quite satisfied as long as things went well. I do not suggest that you can draw an indictment against a whole people, but neither can you relieve of responsibility a whole people. You have to recognise fairly and squarely that this terrible thing which has come upon Europe is the responsibility of the German leaders and of the German people—and I am afraid that there are a great many who

[67] W. M. (45) 22nd Conclusions (Minute 1), 19th February 1945, (6.30 p.m.).

> accepted those ideals. They have broken down the old barriers, and therefore I say that they cannot appeal to the old Europe. If they have to yield, to make restitution, they are not entitled to appeal on the basis of the moral laws that they have disregarded or the pity and mercy that they have never extended to any others. I do not believe in treating them as they have treated other people, but I cannot admit that they have a claim to appeal to rights and moral principles which they have utterly disregarded. Therefore, if it is necessary to take some German soil, to make it up to the entirely innocent Dutch people who have seen their land destroyed, I shall not complain; if it is found necessary to take certain areas in order to enable the Polish people to lead a free, full life, I shall not complain—and I do not think that the Germans have a right to complain. I shall judge all these changes, not by whether they fit into past history or whether they are performing an act of revenge, but entirely as to whether they will make for a peaceful Europe in future. The shifting of population at the present time may be very, very painful, but it may be far better than a long drawn out sore of populations under peoples whom they hate. It may be that a single adjustment will be better.[68]

In this speech Attlee had mustered an argument for the collective guilt of all the Germans regardless of age, gender, race or religion, who had already fled their homes or in the future months would be chased out of them. It is his personal justification for all the cruelty and inhumanity that would follow but he was also delivering a commonly held view across Britain. On this occasion it was delivered in the House of Commons, which British people often claim is the home of democracy. The minutes of the War Cabinet, perhaps because of their terse and functional style, never revealed this level of animosity towards the Germans. Churchill and

[68] HC Debate, 1 March 1945, vol. 408, cc1579-676.

Attlee's speeches generated both support and some very passionate criticisms of the attitudes shown and the decisions made at Yalta.

## Post Yalta politics

The issue of frontiers was a key focus for the Foreign Office right up until the Potsdam Conference but it did not appear on a War Cabinet agenda after March 1945. Both Churchill and Attlee wanted to continue working in coalition until the end of the war with Japan. However, Labour Party members held different opinions and after their National Executive Committee (NEC) rejected that plan, Churchill called a general election and Parliament was dissolved on 15 June 1945. The previous general election had been held ten years earlier. The election would take place on 5 July with counting being somewhat delayed until 26 July to allow for service votes from abroad to arrive. In the run-up to the official voting a caretaker conservative government was in charge of the country with many of its cabinet members being previous portfolio holders in the wartime government.

Churchill arranged a party for all the ministers who were leaving the cross party government. He praised Attlee for his wartime work and the following morning Labour and Conservative members were back to politics in the House of Commons.[69] Just a few days later, and after working together with Attlee during the previous five years, he made an infamous election radio broadcast in which he said that the manifesto that Attlee and his party were advocating "could not be established without some form of Gestapo to enforce it."[70] Normal politics was back.

The date and venue for the forthcoming conference was settled by this time and given that the election results would not be delivered until after it started at Potsdam, Churchill invited Attlee to attend just in case the results favoured the Labour Party and Britain's

[69] John Bew, *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee* (Quercus, 2016), p. 332.
[70] *Daily Mail*, 5 June 1945.

representation at the conference would need to be concluded by Attlee. Churchill told the House of Commons on 14 June "There will be my right hon. Friend, and we have always in these last few years thought alike on the foreign situation and agreed together. Then there will be an opportunity for it to be shown that, although Governments may change and parties may quarrel, yet on some of the main essentials of foreign affairs we stand together. That is, I am sure, doing no disadvantage to the party opposite;" [71] Just after Churchill announced this, Harold Laski, the Labour Party Chairman wrote in the *Daily Herald* it was "essential that, though Mr Atlee should attend the three power talks, Labour and he should not accept responsibility for agreements which on the British side will have been conducted by Mr Churchill as Prime Minister. It is essential also that Mr Churchill, Marshal Stalin and President Truman should be fully aware of this position." The suggestion was then made by political enemies that Attlee's foreign policy decision-making was under the control of the NEC of the Labour Party. Churchill and the conservative press were able to make political capital out of this for weeks. In an exchange of public letters, Churchill wrote that "…the constitution (of the Labour Party) would enable the Executive Committee to call upon a Labour Prime Minister to appear before them and criticise his conduct at the Peace negotiations. How could he defend his actions without the disclosure of confidential information I fail to see." Attlee responded by writing "Much of your trouble is due to your not understanding the distinction between the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Party. This leads you to confuse the organisational work of the Party with the actions of the Parliamentary Labour Party. Despite my clear statement you proceed to exercise your imagination by importing into a right to be consulted a power to challenge actions and conduct." In other words Attlee would, as any other Prime Minister,

[71] HC Deb, 14 June 1945, vol 411, cc1782-90, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1945/jun/14/foreign-situation [accessed 17 March 2026].

including Churchill, would be making his own decisions at international peace conferences, should he ever be elected to that position.

## Attlee's role

The common view of Attlee is that he was an unprepossessing figure with a very modest character. One of Churchill's comments was that he was" a modest man that had much to be modest about". An Attlee biographer, John Bew, points to two versions of Attlee. "The orthodox version was a decent man but a dry and rather colourless functionary: a good chairman, reliable colleague and capable administrator. The unorthodox version was a more romantic figure; passionate, patriotic ethical and visionary."[72] Yet another version that may be relevant to his performance in the wartime cabinet and at Potsdam is founded in his basic toughness as a politician and ability to press forward on his own terms. Before his post war reforms and successes, at the point where he was soon to become prime minister, he was already a formidable performer and always willing to take responsibility to face up to challenges, although many people underestimated him.

He took oversight of the arrest of Gandhi and the Congress members in India who were unwilling to bow to Britain's wishes during the war. He, in Churchill's absence, gave the order to bomb Dresden. He made the decision in 1940 which led to the fall of the Neville Chamberlain government. He was unafraid in standing up against Churchill in the War Cabinet, even on one famous occasion criticizing his performance and lack of method in proceedings in the War Cabinet: "'I consider the present position inimical to the successful performance of tasks imposed upon us as a Government and injurious to the war effort.' The prime minister was charged with showing scant respect for his colleagues' views on civil affairs. Frequently a long delay intervened before reports of cabinet committees could be taken and even then it was

[72] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. xxix.

'very exceptional' for Churchill to have read them."[73] Attlee was a person of substance. John Bew also wrote that "This was a flash of that crude anti-German sentiment that Attlee was not immune to using at various points in his career." and evidenced this with reference to an instance that happened earlier in his career.[74] This may have been the accepted behaviour in the post orld War I era but it may also have a relevance during his war-time decision-making.

Attlee was effective at managing people and in Bevin he had a very effective colleague. Attlee once said "If you've got a good dog, you don't bark yourself and Bevin is a very good dog."[75] In meetings, Bevin often took the lead and Attlee was content with that all the way through their political relationship. Cadogan, who had worked with Bevin throughout the War Cabinet years wrote in his diary at Potsdam in August 1945, "Bevin will, I think, do well. He knows a good deal, is prepared to read any amount, seems to take in what he does read, and is capable of making up his own mind and sticking up for his (or our) point of view against anyone. I think he is the best we could have had."[76] Attlee, along with Bevin carried full responsibility for their parts in all the War Cabinet decisions. Just as important is the fact that they had a full understanding of the negotiations on Polish/Russian frontier issues, a much greater long-term understanding than some of the American delegates who had only recently been appointed to their posts. President Harry S. Truman and James F. Byrnes, the new Secretary of State, in particular were very recent arrivals, whilst Attlee and Bevin had been dealing with the issue directly since at least 1941. Not only were they well versed in the frontiers problem but they were experts on the issue of German evictions. Britain was the only one of the three allies to have invested time and expertise in planning for the eventuality of the eviction of populations on a large scale. No-one should have been surprised that they were both

[73] Dairies of Sir Alexander Cadogan, ed. by Dilks, p. 697.
[74] Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. 130.
[75] Mark Stephens, *Ernest Bevin: Unskilled Labourer and World Statesman* (Transport & General Workers' Union, 1981), p. 122.
[76] Dairies of Sir Alexander Cadogan, ed. by Dilks, p. 778.

able to instantly identify and pick up the key matters when Attlee arrived at Potsdam. It was not a second class team that arrived back there after the general election. The question would be whether or not they would pursue the same policy as Churchill and Eden and bring the Conference to an end in the same way.

None of the War Cabinet members were outside of the influenceof their own political parties. Policy for the Labour Party was made by a committee which reported to their NEC. By 1945 Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin had been Labour Party members and then leaders for many decades. Before the war, during the period of the growth of dictatorships, they were in the maelstrom of domestic and international politics and during a time when the balance of the party moved away from from strong advocation of internationalist principles. As R.M. Douglas states: "The collapse of Wilsonianism in the face of Axis aggression generated a sharp reaction on the left wing of British politics in the direction of national exceptionalism and a great power dominated new world order."[77] Against this background, and as Nazi behaviour on the continent gained more coverage as the war progressed, more Labour politicians began to believe that separation of ethic groups was one important way of reducing friction between nations. By the end of the war eviction on ethnic grounds was part of official Labour Party policy and expressed within much of their documentation.[78] Hugh Dalton, President of the Board of Trade during wartime, prepared the report for the National Executive Committee and it was accepted by the Conference in June 1945 and his introduction to the report clearly said that Germany had been responsible for the war and its persecution and it would not be able to avoid its Nemesis: "It is very easy for us in this uninvaded, unenslaved, relatively unscorched, island to preach to others, less fortunate than ourselves, that they should entertain no feelings of revenge or hatred towards their torturers. It is less easy for these pitiful victims to forgive

[77] Douglas, *Orderly and Humane*, p. 29.
[78] The Labour Party, 'National Executive Committee, The International Post War Settlement', Annual Conference, London, May/June 1944 (London 1944), p. 5.

and forget" [79] Picking up on their leader's speech in the House of Commons earlier in the year the party was in a mood for revenge and keen to teach the Germans a lesson. It would appear that the contents of Vansittart's *Black Book* had reached across all parts of the political spectrum.[80] But the Labour party has never been a unified church and there were many alternative voices. Some of them had spoken out after Attlee's and Churchill's promotion of the Yalta Conference results and at the Labour conference in June 1945, exactly what was adopted before they set off. Attlee and Bevin were firmly immersed in this discourse and the onus was on them to translate policy into practice, although of course they did not know that they would be doing so within two months. There was little guidance from the National Executive Committee about boundary changes. Dalton's document outlines three aims: "First, the frontiers should be so drawn as to reduce to a minimum and inconvenience, geographical or economic, in the transit of persons or goods. Second, the frontiers, once drawn, should be regarded as definitely settled, and all the agitation for frontier revision should be discouraged. Third, we should seek such international arrangements as will make frontiers less and less important as economic or cultural barriers…"[81] He perhaps was envisioning the shortest boundary between Poland and Germany, in other words the Lausitzer Neisse as the frontier and a Europe where countries were well disposed and co-operative towards each other. This advice from an opposition party theoretician in a declining imperial power was unlikely to be considered useful at the world's power tables. Attlee would perhaps leave that advice well behind him, especially when meeting people at Potsdam who were operating on very different principles.

[79] The Report to NEC.
[80] Vansittart Lord, *Black Record*.
[81] Lucien M. Ashworth, *International Relations and the Labour Party: Intellectuals and Policymaking from 1918-1945* (I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 182.

## Conclusion

The examination of issues addressed in this chapter allows a few judgements to be made. The War Cabinet was pursuing Britain's interests first and foremost, and their first goal was not the defence of old boundaries of Poland. As soon as Barbarossa happened, the War Cabinet set its sights on setting up a strong relationship with Stalin in order to defeat Hitler. Everything else with regard to their east European policy was secondary. The Poles, despite the fact that their armies were engaged in full combat with the enemy, were a diminishing force diplomatically as the war progressed and they ended up just doing as they were told. No one element of Poland's difficulties should be seen as being capable of being be singled out and managed separately.

The War Cabinet was pursuing multiple goals throughout the war period. In order to achieve their main aim while others would be jettisoned. The three issues discussed in tandem throughout were the two frontiers, the make-up of the new Polish Government and future electoral arrangements. It was inevitable that compromises would be made and whatever form they took would mean that Poland would be disadvantaged.The three main allies behaved as if it were in their gift to rearrange frontiers of smaller countries and that this could be done on the battlefield and with pressure and subterfuge. The War Cabinet was complicit in this in the way they dealt with Poland. In British foreign policy there were always three actors, the Foreign Office, the War Cabinet, and the Prime Minister, each offering a complementary role. The royal prerogative which gives a license to the Prime Minster in foreign affairs means that unscripted and sometimes disadvantagous results appear. This may have been the case at Tehran and at the Tolstoy conferences where informal understandings were reached that were outside the usual democratic controls. The War cabinet did not supply the future negotiators with a clean stance which they should advance in their forthcoming confrontation with their allies. There was uncertainty about the exact extent of the territory that should be offered to Poland or that

Poland should be allowed to have. German evictions were taken for granted by the British acting or standby representatives, especially the Labour members. The British team was not weaker in personnel after the change of government in July 1945 and the new leaders, who had played their full part in the War Cabinet for four years, were capable, experienced and had full agency.

# Chapter 4: Negotiations at Potsdam – July/August 1945

Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under Secretary at the British Foreign Office, wrote the following in his diary on 31 July 1945: "That's the way most conferences go: all the difficulties pile up over a number of days, and then something suddenly loosens, and the whole thing breaks free."[1] It was the fourteenth day of the conference and Stalin was ill. Between midday on 29 July and 4.30pm the next day, the American Secretary of State, James Byrnes, had two bilateral meetings with Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the core of a three part package deal offered by Byrnes was confirmed between them.

A British election took place part way through the conference and the new leaders Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin, who had only attended one formal meeting at Potsdam had been "bounced by the Americans." This comment was made in a record minuted in the Foreign Office and sent to the British Ambassadors in Warsaw, Moscow and Washington by C.F.A. Warner. "Am I right in thinking that, as a result of being bounced by the Americans, we have agreed to the Oder-Neisse frontier without receiving any assurances from the Polish Govt. regarding either free elections or what is more important freedom of speech & meetings for the parties not represented in Govt."[2] Byrnes presented the British and Russians with a package deal containing three main elements of the bargaining at the tenth Meeting of Foreign Ministers on 30 July and hinted that if they were not agreed as a package then the conference might finish with all parts unsettled.[3] President Truman had already expressed impatience to leave Berlin.[4] The following day Cadogan wrote in his diary "Then the Big 3 at 4, where we jumped all the big hurdles – reparations, Polish frontier &c."[5] Stalin returned from illness and the deal was

[1] *Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 778.
[2] *DBPO Potsdam*, p. 1068.
[3] Ibid., p. 1019.
[4] Ferrell, *Off the Record*, p. 54.
[5] *Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 777.

refined over the next two days. Consequent to the decisions made in the final settlement, some arrangements were made for the "humane and orderly" transfers of remaining German populations westwards across the Oder-Neisse line.[6] The protocol of the proceedings was then completed and Truman could go home. Niederschlesien, the land between two rivers, was left under Polish administration and Soviet control, with the final delimitation to be settled at a future peace conference, which never took place.

According to his doctor, Churchill said "After I left Potsdam, Joe did what he liked. The Russians western frontier was allowed to advance, displacing another eight million poor devils. I'd not have agreed and the Americans would have backed me."[7] In his book about World War Two, Churchill provided an ambiguous set of comments about the western Polish frontier arrangements that was agreed by them. "To say this, is not to blame the Ministers of the new Government, who were forced to go over without any serious preparation, and who naturally were unacquainted with the ideas and plans I had in view, namely, to have a show-down at the end of the Conference, and if necessary to have a public break rather than allow anything beyond the Oder and the Eastern Neisse to be ceded to Poland."[8] He continued: "…neither I nor Mr Eden would ever have agreed to the Western Neisse being the frontier line. The line of the Oder and the Eastern Neisse had already been recognised as the Polish compensation for retiring to the Curzon Line, but the overrunning by the Russian armies of the territory up to and even beyond the Western Neisse was never and would have never been agreed by any Government of which I was the head."[9] Churchill implied that his replacement failed to get the best agreement.

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[6] Two useful books examine such transfers within a broad context are: *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe 1944-48*, ed. by Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); *People on the Move : Forced population movements in Europe and the second world war and its aftermath*, ed. by Pertii Ahonen, et al. (Routledge, 2008).
[7] Lord Moran, *Churchill: The Struggle for Survival 1945-60* (Constable, 1966), p. 6.
[8] Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy*, p. 77.
[9] Ibid., p. 581.

Attlee had given Churchill permission to allow his research assistants access to all the war documents on condition that they were not used for party political purposes andpart four of *Triumph and Tragedy* was published in 1953 eight years after the conference. But in it Churchill clearly implies that the Labour politicians at Potsdam made the wrong decisions. It was not possible for Churchill to be detached on the matter. The American version of the settlement was pushed through and Attlee and Bevin either did not wish to stop it or felt they could not do so. Attlee said in a recorded conversation years afterwards that

> …the Polish frontier the line of the Oder and Eastern Neisse had been agreed at Yalta, but now they wanted the Western Neisse. We never agreed to that, but there was a kind of vacuum from which the Germans had been driven between the Eastern and Western Neisse and they'd already occupied it. We couldn't escape from that. We refused to agree to a final line, we told them it must wait until the peace conference. But of course when it came to the point we were faced with a fait accompli and nothing could be done about it."[10]

We can try to search for a rational interpretation of some kind but the main actors themselves, caught up in their own personal and political circumstances, may not provide convincing interpretations, particularly after the event.

This chapter has the character of a traditional diplomatic interpretation with a focus on what is found in the official written records of the participants' conversations. It is difficult to achieve a completely compelling account. As Thomas Otte writes "the mind is an elusive phenomenon" but "there are traces and footprints, sometimes the merest whiff of a suggestion"

[10] Francis Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers: The war and post-war memories of the Rt. Hon. Earl Attlee* (Heinemann, 1961), p. 76.

and “it is in the private letters and diaries of ……diplomatists, and in the official minutes and memoranda, that these footprints can be found.”[11] Also, this kind of interpretation, referenced by David Reynolds, “as supposedly dedicated to the objective analysis of documentary evidence”, suffers from the impression that just a few powerful individuals were able to carve the world up between them based on various trades and the winning of logical arguments across tables.[12] Therefore, the interpretation provided in this chapter benefits from the enrichment offered in chapters six and seven.

The structure of the conference mirrored that of the previous one at Yalta earlier in the year. The main decisions were made by the Heads of Government group sitting the top table in the largest room at Cecelienhof. They set up the Foreign Ministers group whose task it was to manage the order of business and prepare agendas for the top table and to study issues in depth. The British Chiefs of Staff also attended and had their own separate meetings. Various committees were set up to examine topics, such as reparations, economic committees, and the writing of the protocol, as required and these were reported upwards to the two senior groups. Supporting all of this was a selection of advisers from the Foreign Office led by Alexander Cadogan along with teams of administrative staff supporting them. Britains’s diplomatic aims for the conference were laid out in a memorandum by Orme Sargent three days before the event started. They included co-operation with major powers but not being afraid of having a policy independent of the other two great partners, even if the Americans gave no help and adopted a policy of appeasement towards Soviet domination, and to grapple with the economic crisis in Europe.[13]

[11] Otte, *Foreign Office Mind*, p. 5.
[12] Reynolds, ‘International History’.
[13] *DBPO Potsdam*, pp. 180-187.

None of the parties knew the route through the conference in advance.[14] It is not possible to discuss Niederschlesien's future placement in isolation. It is intimately conjoined with many other matters, which must be simultaneously considered, as indeed they were by the delegates. In retrospect, it is possible to construct narratives along three strands of discussion involving all the parties that appear to accommodate the surviving evidence. This chapter will firstly trace the development of these three strands of the package deal up until the point when the British met them, led by the new Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin on 29 July 1945. Following that, it will examine how the new leaders responded to Byrnes' package deal and how they managed Britian's declared aim to set the Polish frontier along the eastern Neisse.

The three elements that arrived at that point in the discussions were complex constructions that had been thoroughly worked over by the various committees and the plenary group, but at the risk of reductionism, they can be neatly summed up as follows. The first was how to set up Italy and the defeated satellite states for their future and whether or not they should be allowed entry to the United Nations organisation. The second was how the victorious Allies would deal with the reparations that they all agreed at the Yalta Conference in February that Germany would have to pay directly or indirectly. The third was where the eastern border of Poland should be delimited against a new German border as the country's geographical profile was shifted westwards. This was of course a very artificial construction ripped out of an intertwined and complicated series of events and understandings, which in itself could never be fully described in words.

The way the British conversations and actions developed in the conference rooms to some extent depended on the people's perception of their opponents and their views on the

[14] 'The Last Interview with Hannah Arendt, 1973' *YouTube*, 6 November 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FkoMm1hs1g&t=984s [accessed 18 March 2026].

nature of political power, and a judgement about their foreign policy aims. Gladwin Jebb took the time to give his view on the nature of power politics at Potsdam. He wrote that "until such a time as the Great Nations are prepared voluntarily to renounce their sovereignty, or at any rate an essential part of it, until such a time in fact as a world State has been created, international politics can only be an expression of power. Marshal Stalin said this in so many words during his present talks at Potsdam, and however much we may deplore it, it is impossible to contest the truth of his observation."[15] Earlier in the conference when referring to Italy and Bulgaria, Stalin had spoken as if power related to the number of military divisions each country could present for action. It seems that some in the British team took the same view of power as simply an instrument of coercion and not the one espoused by analysts such as Foucault, who thought power was everywhere, embodied in knowledge and discourse, and Bourdieu who felt that power lay with those who could apply various forms of capital deployed in fields of struggle. Jebb's judgement was that the Russians would be estimating their opposition and that their action would turn on whether or not they believe that it would be likely to lead to a real break with Britain and America.[16] A common view now taken by historians is that Stalin's foreign policy view was less influenced by communist party ideological factors and more related to deeply entrenched historical roots stretching into early Tzarist times and that the Balkans always featured in this.[17] The British Foreign Office view at the time was also that the Soviet wanted for their own security a band of countries along their western borders.[18] Churchill appeared to have taken these long views of Soviet interests when he met with Stalin and made the percentages agreement, often notoriously referred to as the

[15] *DBPO Potsdam*, p. 991.
[16] Ibid., p. 993.
[17] Gabriel Gorodetsky, 'Geopolitics in Russian foreign policy and strategy'in 'Return of Geopolitics: A Global Quest for the Right Side of History, ed. by Alexander Linklater and Kurt Almqvist (Bokforlaget Stolpe, 2021); *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933-49*, ed. by Ivo Banac (Yale University Press, 2003), p. 136; Gabriel Gorodetsky, review of Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin. Waiting For Hitler 1929-1941* (2017), *H-Diplo/RJISSF*, 17 March 2019, https://issforum.org/roundtables/h-diplo-roundtable-xx-30-on-stalin-waiting-for-hitler-1929-1941 [accessed 18 March 2026].
[18] *DBPO Potsdam*, p. 250.

"naughty document," at the Fourth Moscow Conference in October 1944.[19] It essentially involved the two leaders splitting the Balkans into spheres of influence. The Red Army had invaded westwards into the Balkans, taking Romania in August and Bulgaria in September of that year. The British sent troops to Athens in October 1944 as soon as the Germans retreated from Greece, and worried that communist resistance fighters would take over, they set about restoring the former King as head of state.[20] Churchill suggested that Britain would have 90% influence in Greece while the Russians would have 90% influence in Romania and 75% in Bulgaria, and he wrote this suggestion down on a scrap of paper. Stalin read it and after further discussion it was amended to 100% in Romania.[21] This arrangement between Stalin and Churchill lay underneath all the bargaining within two strands of the Potsdam discussions. The British diplomats, always unsure whether they were acting as nationalists or communists, never developed a fixed view of the Soviet stance, methods and propensities. During February 1945 in the House of Commons, Churchill had said, "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."[22] However, events in Eastern Europe in the spring and summer of 1945 had changed some minds to the extent that Anthony Eden felt it was necessary to canvas his staff for examples of Soviet bad faith in preparation for the upcoming conference. This they duly supplied, and it included Russian activities in Romania and Bulgaria and Implementation of the Yalta Prisoner of War Agreement, amongst others.[23]

[19] PREM 3/66/7 (169).
[20] Jenkins, *Churchill*, pp. 734–737.
[21] Ibid., pp. 759-760.
[22] HC Deb, vol. 408, cc1267-345, 27 February 1945, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1945/feb/27/crimea-conference [accessed 18 March 2026].
[23] *DBPO Potsdam*, pp. 803-805.

## First strand

The first line of discussion was the admission of Italy and the Balkan States to the United Nations and the treatment of Italy had been offered by Truman as a topic on the first day of the conference.[24] There were a few interrelated topics here, with the three allies not being able to bring them together, so each had their own interpretation of the problem and the solution. The crux of the matter was that the British and Americans were attempting to treat Italy as an ally and gain her swift entry to the United Nations after a peace treaty, while Russia was trying to achieve the same with the Balkan States. Stalin hoped to win the argument by suggesting equivalence and the other two could not recognise that. Truman stated that one aim of the conference with regard to Italy was "to promote her political independence and economic rehabilitation and to ensure the Italian people had the right to choose their form of government." He suggested that Italy was in an anomalous situation, given that she had been both a belligerent and an ally, and the way to achieve the aim was to ask that the Council of Ministers be given the task of drafting a peace treaty. He also wished to have the terms of Italy's surrender annulled and replaced by a number of obligations first. These were to include such things as a fair settlement of their territorial disputes and allied oversight of their air and naval forces. The topic was placed on the agenda and the Foreign Ministers invited to discuss the topic in advance of its appearance again on the leader's agenda. They had their discussion about this topic the day before and reported back to the fourth sitting of the Plenary on 20 July 20. Their opinion was that they should carry out the task of drawing up of peace treaty with Italy and that France should be a signatory to the Italian terms of surrender. Alongside this, there would be treaties with Romania, Bulgaria Hungary and Finland. Spain's membership would not be supported while it was being led by the Franco regime, which had supported Hitler and was not regarded as democratic. From this point onwards Italy's membership of the United Nations was linked

[24] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences,* p. 149.

with that of the above countries with regard to the nature of their electoral systems and the possibility of having full and fair elections.

Stalin said that he did not object to Truman's suggestion of "the creation of some kind of intermediate state between the surrender terms accepted by Italy and the future peace treaty."[25] He noted that both Britain and the United States had re-established diplomatic relations with Italy and asked that the allies should also set up diplomatic relations with the East European satellite states (or 'Germany's other accomplices' as Stalin called them). He said that there may be an objection that they do not have freely elected governments but he pointed to the fact that this was also the case in Italy, France and Belgium. This linkage of diplomatic recognition with the carrying out of free elections would go on to plague the possibility of an agreement about Truman's plan for Italy and its membership of the United Nations. The topic of Italy's membership was passed on to the Council of Foreign Ministers to see if they could find an agreement. This was just a mechanism for delay.

The topic came back unsolved to the eighth sitting of the leaders on 24 July. Molotov had said that the Soviet delegation would not take part in the discussion because the document on which they were working did not contain any mention of the admission of Finland, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. After the Heads of Governments had heard a report about the discussions between their foreign ministers they began to talk again about Italy, this time with the foreign ministers in attendance. The Americans had produced a document as a basis for agreement and this, apart from a re-wording request by Anthony Eden, placed the western allies on a different side to the Russians. This document proposed that the five states mentioned should be supported in their application to become members of the United Nations after they held democratic elections and then after they had received diplomatic recognition.

[25] Ibid., p. 194.

Stalin felt that Italy was being treated differently by the United States and Britain to the other satellite states saying that her only merit was that she was the first to surrender and that she had in fact behaved worse than the others and had inflicted greater harm on the allies. He also argued that Italy could not be regarded as being more democratic than the others. The response from Truman, supported by Churchill, was that diplomatic relations with Italy were established on the basis of information obtained from her and the knowledge that there was free movement and freedom of information in that country. He said the situation was different in the other countries in question, where representatives were not able to obtain the necessary information but diplomatic relations could be restored if access to this information could be obtained and requirements were satisfied. Stalin predictably said, "I assure you that the Government of Bulgaria is more democratic than the Government of Italy" and claimed that the Government of Argentina, already a member of the United Nations, was even less democratic than Italy. The discussions reached an impasse. Stalin objected to the use of the word "responsible" as a descriptive term for the status of Italy's government and a condition for a successful application for membership. There followed a tangled exchange about the difficulties that the British had in setting up any kind of contacts in the countries occupied by the Russians with Stalin comparing that to the problems the Soviets were having in Italy. The root of the matter was that the British and Americans were not prepared to budge on the issues of recognising the satellite countries without their conditions being met, in other words that they were both responsible and democratic, allowing elections, free movement and freedom of information. The British had already received a message from Molotov saying that the Russians were not interested in taking part in the any level of supervision of Greek elections. [26]

The search was now for a form of words that would enable each party to show that it has made some progress. James Byrnes, the American Secretary of State, suggested the use of

[26] *DBPO Potsdam*, p. 456.

the word “recognised” instead. Stalin accepted that but on condition that a further sentence be added after that stating, “The three Governments agree to examine, each separately, in the near future, the establishment of diplomatic relations with Roumania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Finland.” There was a further squabble between Stalin and Churchill about wording and after the word “with” was changed to “for”, an agreement was reached to pass the relevant document back to the Council of Ministers for refinement of the wording. This long wrangle over a period of 12 days had not resolved itself by the time Churchill and Eden left Berlin and became one of the parts of the package deal proposed by Byrnes. The common theme of democratic elections also applied elsewhere in Europe, especially in Poland, but the different interpretations of its nature and likely implementation amongst distrustful allied partners meant that agreement was impossible. It was sent off once again for the Foreign Ministers to discuss and they returned to the tenth Plenary sitting on 28 July with minor alterations. By this time Churchill and Eden had been replaced by Attlee and Bevin.

## Second strand

Reparations were mentioned formally at the first meeting of the Heads of Government where it was placed on the agenda by Stalin. The Yalta conference had left the allies with the task of setting out clear details of arrangements for the delivery of German reparations and a commission had been discussing these in Moscow in the weeks leading up to Potsdam. Part of these reparations was to be in the form of forced labour, and the rest would be in the removals from the national wealth of Germany in the form of equipment and materials. The final communique from Yalta states that these should be to the value of 20 billion dollars and that 50% of it would go to the USSR, but “The British delegation was of the opinion that pending consideration of the reparation question by the Moscow Reparations Commission no figure of

reparations should be mentioned."[27] Edwin Pauley, a close associate of Truman, led for the Americans and the former Soviet ambassador to Britain Ivan Maisky led for the Russians.[28] The British team was led by Sir Walter Monckton who was at that time the British Solicitor General. No firm resolutions had been made by the middle of July and so the discussions teams moved to Potsdam. Pauley gave advance notice to the American Delegation that the reparations issue would not be solved without counting the whole of Germany as it existed in 1937 in the equation and that there was a fundamental relationship between the reparations and the amount of territory that would be ceded in the east.[29]

The British delegation received an account of the negotiations up to the point of departure of Monckton, Maisky and Pauley for Terminal, summing it up neatly by saying, "the negotiations had been proceeding for nearly a month, without making very much progress."[30] The writer, a suitably named Mr Playfair blamed Pauley for looking for a quick result and Maisky for using delaying tactics. The summary revealed that they Commission had not got even as far as an agreed statement of general principles and pointed to the need for definitions of "reparations", "restitution" and "War Booty". The Soviets were sticking to a contention that an a priori fix of a total figure of 20 billion dollars. Playfair's final statement on the matter was that, "The whole question is in a state of unsatisfactory suspense."[31] At the same time, Pauley recommended to Byrnes that reparations be added to the agenda at Potsdam and by 17 July, in situ at Potsdam and ahead of the British, the Americans had ready a proposal. It included seven basic principles of reparations, proposed definitions of the key terms mentioned above and the percentages of distribution (after capitation) for each ally, with the Russians being granted 56%

[27] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences*, p. 144.
[28] Mee, *Meeting at Potsdam*, pp. 183-188. For a clear outline of Pauley's business pedigree and his take on the importance of the settlement of reparations in America's favour, see Chapter 14.
[29] The Representative on the Allied Commission (Pauley) to Secretary of State, 16 July 1945, *FRUS* Potsdam, vol. II, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv02/d893 [accessed 18 March 2026].
[30] *DBPO Potsdam*, p. 327.
[31] Ibid., p. 165.

and the other two allies 22% each. For the purposes of the reparations plan, one of the principles was that Germany was to be treated as a single economic unit. The Commission continued its work alongside other committees at Potsdam feeding into the Foreign Ministers meetings and plenary sessions.

Byrnes claims in his book *Speaking Frankly* that after discussions with Joseph E Davies, former American ambassador in Moscow, and the President, he arranged a private interview with Molotov on 23 July, and asked him to consider the possibility of each country taking reparations from its own zones.[32] Molotov said that he would. It was the start of full bilateral discussions between the two major powers. In the American record of the meeting, it states that "The Secretary wished to make it plain that the United States did not intend to pay out money to finance imports to Germany and thus repeat the experience after the last war when in fact United States funds were used to pay reparations for others".[33] This was a firm aim of the American delegation and by this time they had formed the view that it could only be achieved if each ally were to take reparations from their own zone.

There was an informal meeting of the Foreign Ministers later in the day, this time with Eden in attendance. The British records show that Byrnes's suggestion led Molotov to say it, "might be a basis for discussion"[34] He then accused Byrnes of reversing a decision made at Yalta about a 20 billion dollar total for reparations. The topic came to the Heads of Government agenda at their seventh sitting on July 23rd later in the day when three drafts on reparations were forwarded and rejected by one party or another and the topic was passed to the Foreign Ministers for further discussion. The sticking point, as Pauley had alerted Byrnes about days earlier, was whether or not, when considering the calculation and distribution of reparations, the whole of Germany within its 1937 borders should be considered, which came back on 25

[32] Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*, p. 83.
[33] Byrnes/Molotov Meeting, 23 July 1945, *FRUS* Potsdam, vol. II, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv02/d710a-69 [accessed 18 March 2026].
[34] *DBPO Potsdam*, p. 580.

July. This linkage between the reparations and the German borders had great significance in the final determination of the frontiers and the future of Niederschlesien. Nothing was resolved by the foreign ministers and it was passed back to the reparations committee for further discussion. They were still not ready to report at the next Plenary on 24 July, the last one to be attended by Winston Churchill before he returned to London for the election results. He thus he missed one major strand of the conference altogether. The ally who was able to define the terms had control over the proceedings and could exert dominance and in the absence of the British leadership and the Americans were making the running.

With Alexander Cadogan standing in for the Anthony Eden, the Foreign Ministers continued their work and at their ninth meeting on 27 July. Here, Byrnes stated that "President Roosevelt had not agreed at the Crimea Conference that reparations should be extracted from Germany to the extent of 20 billion dollars." What he had done was accept the figure as "a basis for discussion" and detailed study by the Moscow Reparations Commission"[35] He went on to say that in the circumstances currently existing, a figure of 20 billion would not be practicable saying that a) the invading armies had destroyed much property, b) it now looked as though large areas were to be turned over to Poland and c) the Russians in pursuit of 'war booty' has seized and removed large amounts of plant and equipment from Germany. Alexander Cadogan felt that at this point he could not add anything substantial to the discussion and the topic should be discussed again at the next meeting of Foreign Ministers and then passed on to the next Plenary. The British were following and not making the discourse.

This issue finally appeared in a substantive form on the tenth meeting of the Heads of Government on 28 July. By that time it had been thoroughly worked over by the economic committee and the Foreign Ministers via the Soviet delegation reported and they that they considered the work done on this topic by the economic committee was unsatisfactory. They

[35] Ibid., p. 927.

reported that they had read out clause 4 of the Yalta protocol and asked the American Foreign Secretary if they continued to uphold the decisions made at Yalta or if they had altered their decision. The American delegation explained that they believed there was a misunderstanding. They said that at Yalta the delegations had agreed to the figure of 20 billion dollars as a basis for discussion.[36] This marked a reframing of the whole issue and only a dominant player would have been able to do this successfully and carry it through. The British had not yet made any proposals. The three ministers agreed to take on the discussions themselves and report later to the Heads of Government. The election results were due in London and that meeting would only happen when a new British Government arrived.

## Third Strand

The British delegation had composed a lengthy brief on Poland's western frontiers, probably prepared on 12 July.[37] It included a brief synopsis of historical British commitments on the matter as well as a response from Andrey Vyshinski, former state prosecutor at the Show Trials in the 1930s and by then deputy foreign minister, about the status of Niederschlesien. It included the comment "The Polish administration in former German territory is operating under the direction of the Polish Provisional Government and is not responsible to the Soviet Government."[38] In the light of that, the British brief circulated to the whole delegation, pointed to the difficulties facing them on this issue. If the Polish administration was condoned then, "the passage of time will only assist the Poles, with Russian support, in consolidating their hold over all territory to the east of this line", and "we shall be permitting the Soviet Government to flout the authority of the Allied Control Council over Germany".[39] It was further suggested that if this situation remained unchallenged it might be perceived as a sign of weakness and

[36] 'Protocol of the proceedings of the Crimea Conference', https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/yalta.asp .
[37] *DBPO Potsdam*, p. 219.
[38] Ibid., p. 221.
[39] Ibid., p. 221.

encourage other excessive demands from the Russians and also the British public may seriously object to a settlement that would involve the removing of 20% of German territory containing ten million inhabitants possible leading to an obstacle to keeping peace in Europe.[40] They concluded that the best stance for the delegation was not to step back and go on record as withholding consent, but to agree to the transfer of Danzig, East Prussia, south and west of Koenigsberg, Oppeln Silesia, and the most eastern portion of Pomerania, and a reasonable western frontier for Poland but not as far west as the claims being made by the Poles. If this could be agreed then they should allow the Poles to administer all of it subject to ratification at the final peace settlement. Should the Russians not agree with this stance then they advised that the British must insist they reduce the Soviet share of reparations proportionately and if necessary refuse to deliver any materials from the British and American zones. This was not very different to the American stance outlined earlier by Pauley.

Perhaps as an indication of its importance to him, Stalin mentioned the Polish western frontier on the first day of the conference. The agenda's order meant that it was not seriously touched upon until the fifth sitting of the Heads of Government on 21 July, when Truman made a strong statement about the Russian handing over of the administration of Niederschlesien to the new Polish government. This was the biggest encounter at the conference so far. It could be counted as a breach of good faith, but was not stated directly as such by Truman, and most of the meeting was spent discussing it. Truman pointed out that the Yalta Agreement established that German territory was to be occupied by soldiers of the four allies, including France, and that the final decision about Poland's frontiers was to be made at a peace conference. "But it now appears that another Government has been given a zone of occupation and that has been done without consulting us. If the intention was to make Poland one of the Powers which is to

[40] Ibid., p. 222.

have a zone of occupation, this should have been agreed upon beforehand."[41] Stalin had a ready response. He said, "the German population had gone to the west in the wake of the retreating German troops. The Polish population for its part, advanced to the west, and our army needed an administration in its rear, on the territory which it occupied. Our army cannot simultaneously set up an administration in the rear, fight and clear the territory of the enemy. It is not used to doing this. That is why we let the Poles in."[42] He went on to say, "We were also inclined to do this in the knowledge that Poland was getting an accretion of land to the west of her former border. I don't see what harm there is for our common cause in letting the Poles set up their administration on a territory which is to be Polish anyway." He said, "It is very hard to restore the German administration in the western strip, everyone has run away." Truman pointed to the difficulty of agreeing a just decision on reparations if part of Germany was under the control of a fourth power. This argument had been supplied to him by Pauley at the very start of the conference. Truman offered that "If the Soviet Government wants to have help in re-establishing the German administration in these territories, this question could be discussed." With the American armies moving out of Europe throughout the summer and a switch in emphasis towards the war against Japan, this was an offer which of course Stalin ignored, and one which was unlikely to be followed up by Truman. Stalin said, "The Russian concept during a war, in the occupation of enemy territory, is as follows…if the army is to move on it must have a tranquil rear…In such a situation the army naturally desires to have an administration in its rear which sympathizes with it and helps it."

Churchill brought up the question of food supplies for the whole German population saying that "these areas were chief source of foodstuffs." Stalin's response was "Who in that case will work there and raise the grain? There's no-one to do this except the Poles." He

[41] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences*, p. 206.
[42] Ibid., p. 207.

continued, “On paper they are still German territory; actually, de facto, they are Polish territory.” When asked directly by Truman “What has happened to the local population. There must have been some three million of it.” The response was “The population has gone.” Churchill pursued this topic a little further saying that “According to Russian data, Germany’s pre-war population in these areas totalled eight and a quarter million. …There is other information to the effect that two or two and a half million Germans have after all stayed behind. Of course, these figures should be checked.” Stalin agreed stating, “Of course they should be checked.” His idea of a check was perhaps to be in the form of an invitation to a Polish delegation which he was to offer the following day. The British records credit Stalin as saying a few moments later, “Not a single German, therefore, remained in the area from which it was suggested that Poland should get her accessions of territory; there only remained the Poles. The Germans had quit their lands between the Oder and the Vistula, and the Poles were cultivating them.”[43] The Soviet version states, “I agree there are some difficulties with Germany’s food supply, but the Germans themselves are chiefly to blame for it. The war has brought about a situation in which virtually none of the 8 million Germans have remained there. …In the area between the Oder and the Vistula, the Germans abandoned their fields, and the Poles are cultivating and harvesting them. The Poles will hardly agree to give the Germans what they have cultivated. That is the situation that has arisen in these areas.”[44] The Poles were to provide the answer to this question during their forthcoming visit.

Churchill said that the British did not “want to be saddled with a large German population without any food resources.” He also stated, “If, as Generalissimo Stalin has said, the Germans have abandoned the land east and west of the Oder, they should be encouraged to return there”.[45] There would have been few people in the room who thought that they were

[43] *BDPO Potsdam*, p. 509.
[44] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences*, p. 210.
[45] Ibid., p. 210.

likely to return in the short term. When Stalin later said that the Germans should buy their grain from Poland, Truman pointed out that the grain was actually being produced on territory that was still German. Churchill said that he had been told that the Poles were selling coal to Sweden and doing so at a time when Britain had a shortage of coal and would have to face a cold winter in that position. He said that the allies should start from the general principle that wherever possible the Germans should be able and expected to provide their whole population with food and fuel produced from within their own 1937 borders regardless of zone. Stalin asked who was to mine the coal in Silesia as "The masters have all runaway from there." [46] This talking heads description of that plenary meeting ends with the connection between the border and reparations, with Truman pointing out that the Americans could not agree to the Russian/Polish action because it had a bearing on the supply of food and coal to the whole of Germany.

They returned to the topic on the sixth session on 22 July. By then they had all read and studied a letter from Bierut and Osobka-Morawski about the Polish Government's claims with regard to the Polish western border.[47] Churchill said that their proposal was, "absolutely unacceptable to the British Government" and gave a number of reasons to support his comment, most of which were contained in the aforementioned brief.[48] The territory would not benefit Poland. It would tend to undermine Germany's economic position and saddle the occupying Powers with an excessive burden in respect of supplying the western part of Germany with food and fuel. In addition, they had doubts of a moral order concerning the desirability of such a great displacement of population. This was the first-time morality had been mentioned at the conference. Given the magnitude of the ethnic cleansing that was happening it might have been mentioned more often. Words like "transfer" "moved' "displacement" "abandoned" "an opportunity for new social developments" were used in the Potsdam lexicon. As James C. Scott

[46] *BDPO Potsdam*, p. 508.
[47] Ibid., p. 456.
[48] Ibid., p. 535.

notes: “Whenever one encounters euphemism in language it is nearly an infallible sign that one has stumbled on a delicate subject. It is used to obscure something which is negatively valued or would prove to be an embarrassment if declared more forthrightly.” [49] Bourdieu would say that the doxa of the dominant appears in the guise of euphemisms. It was the case that there was unanimity amongst most of the European nations that the Germans would be evicted from many of their eastern territories and perhaps, after everything that had happened during the war, only a few people, in an arena devoted to diplomatic business, would wish to comment on the inhumanity involved in this. Now and then Churchill seemed to find a few words in public to denote the suffering. Joy Hunter, a clerical assistant in the British team, and outside of the negotiating arena, expressed her distress at the sight of refugees on the streets of Berlin only a short distance away from Cecilienhof, in her diary entries between 14 and 28 July 1945.[50]

Churchill then questioned the judgements given about the numbers of people involved saying that the British believed the figure to be eight or nine million whereas the Russians were saying these people had all gone.[51] He said that so far, the British had had no opportunity to check what was going on in these territories. Stalin’s response was to say that the Germans had enough coal for their purposes in the Ruhr coalfields and that in the territories being discussed the people were either drafted into the army or were killed. He then offered the same lie that he had offered the previous day saying that very few Germans had remained and even these fled when the Russians approached, and said these figures could be checked. There was no follow up on this possibility of checking the numbers. The unsaid is often important in the analysis of such interchanges. Churchill and Truman would have known this and so Stalin was able to breeze through this without accountability. Churchill had already counselled his two

[49] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 53.
[50] Hunter, *Joy’s Journey*, pp. 93-94.
[51] *BDPO Potsdam*, p. 535.

peers about the danger of delay and so he would not have been willing to launch a study into the reality on the ground in Niederschlesien because it could take many weeks.

Stalin then asked: “Is it possible to arrange to hear the opinion of the Polish representatives concerning Poland’s frontier?” Stalin was even content to have the Polish representatives deliver their presentation to the Foreign Ministers’ Council which would meet in London in September 1945. He said that if they were not heard then the Poles might say that the question of the frontier was settled without their case being heard. With Truman saying very little on this topic, Churchill was adamant that if the settlement of the question was deferred then the status quo would be fixed. The Poles would start exploiting this territory, they would settle there, and if the process continued it would be difficult to adopt any other decision later. He then asked Stalin to accept a compromise solution until the final peace conference’s decision was to be taken. He felt that if the issue was simply passed on to the Council of Foreign Ministers discussions might be dragged on and a decision may not have been made before the oncoming winter or even later. He said, “If we do not settle this question, it will mean a failure for our conference.”[52] His proposal was that a provisional line be drawn “east of which the territory would be occupied by the Poles as a part of Poland until the final settlement of the question at a peace conference; to the west of the line, the Poles, if they find themselves there, could act as representatives of the Soviet Government in the zone made available to the Soviets.”[53] This suggestion by Churchill was completely ignored by the other two leaders.

The leaders then discussed what may or may not have been meant when the topic was discussed with Roosevelt at earlier conferences. Churchill reminded Stalin about their discussion at Tehran and claimed that they agreed in general terms that the new Poland should move her borders west to the Oder River but that this was not a simple question. He said that

[52] Ibid., p. 536.
[53] Ibid., p. 536.

the British and Soviet governments had differing views and that "the British Government, while allowing that Poland should extend her territory, does not wish to go as far as the Soviet Government does…we spoke two years ago at Teheran when there was no question of any precise demarcation of the frontier."[54] Stalin did not give a direct response to Churchill's proposal. Truman, who knew little about those two events, read an extract from the decision made at Yalta which included a sentence about the opinion of the new Polish Provisional Government of National Unity being sought about the substantial accessions of territory. Stalin followed up by stating that the Polish Government had already offered its views and then offered two options, either to endorse the Polish Government's opinion on the frontier or to hear directly from the Polish representatives and then make a decision. He then referred to the difference in viewpoints at the Yalta conference saying "Mr Churchill spoke of Poland's western frontier line along the Oder beginning from its mouth, then running along the Oder all the time, until the confluence of the Oder with the River Neisse, east of it. I stood for a line west of the Neisse. According to the scheme of President Roosevelt and Mr Churchill, Stettin and also Breslau and the area west of the Neisse were to remain with Germany." Here, he pointed to a map.[55] A map is not mentioned in the British or American accounts. Both Truman and Churchill then agreed to have the Poles invited to give a presentation to the Foreign Ministers who would then report back to the Heads of Government. Truman agreed to issue the invitation. The meeting then moved on to other matters. Churchill's proposal for a provisional line, had been ignored by both Truman and Stalin.

The topic returned to the Heads of Government agenda on 25 July, after the Polish Government of National Unity's representatives had met with the Foreign Ministers and made their presentations.[56] Indeed, at least four meetings with the British at various levels, including

[54] Ibid., p .537.
[55] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences,* p. 223.
[56] Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers,* p. 76.

a private one between Bierut and Churchill had taken place. The Curzon Line, with a few deviations, had already been agreed by the three allies as the demarcation between Poland and the eastern neighbours and now even Mikolacjzyck, who had previously argued strongly for the Riga Line, was arguing for a border pushed as far west as possible and that it should run from the Baltic Sea through Swinemunde, including Stettin as part of Poland, and further on along the Oder River to the Western Neisse River and along the western Neisse to the Czechoslovak border."[57] A similar delivery was made to the Americans and later another one to Bevin and Attlee who commented about the delegation that, "I never saw such a collection of shifty-looking individuals in my life." Supporting arguments were then explained during these presentations.

This frontier line would mean the shortest possible border and therefore it would be easier to defend. The area included had been the main producer of German armaments and its removal from the German state meant the removal of a staging area for expansion. Given that the Germans had tried to destroy Polish culture and exterminate their population, it would allow the setting up of a strong Polish state. An ethnic state without non-Polish minorities would be created. The acquisition of the industrial areas would enable Poland to discontinue their habit of exporting labour and employment for these workers and those currently living abroad would be provided at home. Behind the main scene, Mikolacjzyck was also pressing in private meetings with British diplomats for quick decisions on granting the Lausitser Line and Stettin to the Poles and the removal ofSoviet soldiers in order to improve the chances of achieving a democratic Poland.[58] Sir Alexander Clark Kerr in a report on one of his conversations with Mikolacjzyck explained that the Polish deputy was keenly interested in independence for Poland based mainly on future free, fair and speedy elections and that this was dependent upon

[57] *BDPO Potsdam*, p. 221.
[58] Ibid., p. 904; Ibid., p. 704.

fixing the western frontier and the removal of the Red Army. Clark Kerr advised his colleagues to be as fluid as possible about Polish claims. He took the view that however much of Germany territory the Allies give to the Poles they would be creating a 'Germania irredenta' and "if you take a big bite out of the living flesh of Germany, which is what we are doing, it does not much matter if the bite is a bit bigger than we have foreseen."[59] The British clearly regarded Mikolacjzyck as their best bet in achieving a more westward looking and more independent Poland and when Clark Kerr asked him how the British might help, he answered by offering a trade agreement. Is was one of the last briefs about the frontier that Eden received before his return to London for the election results.

At this Heads of Government meeting on 25 July, Churchill noted that the Polish delegation had told him that there were in fact 1.5 million Germans still in the area. They then went on to have a discussion about the transfers of population in particular the Germans who were being forced out of Czechoslovakia and Poland, with Stalin saying that Polish and Czech Governments were carrying out these transfers without consulting the Soviets.[60] The discussion on the topic of the western frontier was also connected with that of reparations and the four zones of occupation in Germany. Truman delivered a prepared statement about the limitations that he faced as President when making treaties with other countries, with particular regard to the Poles having been given a fifth occupational zone of Germany. Any assent the president gave to proposals would have to be ratified by the Senate on his return. This can be interpreted as an attempt to get the Russians and Poles to moderate their demands. The Senate would be judging the final protocol according to their own standards and may have rejected the agreement that Truman took back to them.

[59] Ibid., p. 704.
[60] Ibid., pp 690-691.

Churchill knew that this would be his last session at Potsdam before his return to London for the British election results. He was keen to talk about the Polish movement westwards and claimed that the success of the whole conference depended on this question. If the issue of feeding German population could not amicably settled then the whole conference would have failed, he said.[61] He went on to suggest that the British who controlled the Ruhr would be prepared to exchange their coal for food from Silesia. When Stalin said that the whole topic needed careful consideration before a decision could be made, the topic was passed on again to the Foreign Ministers and they were invited to establish the facts. All parties knew that an impasse had been reached. The next meeting was set for two days later, but Churchill never returned. The next time it was on the agenda was on the eleventh sitting of the Heads of Government on 31 July, the day Byrnes announced a package deal.

There were some discussions about yielding going on at lower levels of the British delegation. Twelve days into the conference they were still deliberating over the same issues being expressed in their original brief on the topic of the western frontier.

> It is therefore for consideration whether we should gain anything by continuing, now that our warnings and doubts have been placed on record, to withhold our acquiescence in a situation which we shall have to recognise sooner or later. If we maintain our present position we shall stand little chance of striking a bargain with the Russians such as will bring alleviation of our practical supply difficulties in Germany. Nor will any half-way measure, such as agreeing to the transfer of the Polish administration of Upper Silesia only, help us in this respect. Only if we indicate now our readiness to fall in with

[61] Ibid., pp 692.

> Polish ideas, shall we be in a position to demand a price for our acquiescence. The longer we wait the less chance of getting anything in return.[62]

Behind the scenes, the British were softening their stance.

Stalin expected Churchill and Eden to win the election and return in a couple of days. While they were away, Truman boarded the 'Sacred Cow' to Frankfurt to meet General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander of Allied Forces in Europe, and inspect the American soldiers at their headquarters.[63] The membership of some of the diplomatic teams were flagging but now they had a little time to regroup and make some tentative plans on how to overcome the significant hurdles facing them before any completion of their business.

## During the interregnum.

In London, Attlee learned of the electoral landslide in favour of his Labour Party and after being invited by the King at Buckingham Palace to form a government, he attended a victory rally at Westminster Central Hall and hurried to appoint his cabinet so that he could return to Potsdam as soon as possible.[64] Ernest Bevin was his new Foreign Secretary, and Attlee wrote later "Bevin at once gave proof of his remarkable ability by the speed with which he picked up all the threads of the subjects under discussion and appreciated what were the attitudes of our American and Russian Allies".[65] He also remarked that the Americans were surprised that there would not be a change in the official British advisers while he guessed that Molotov was surprised that Churchill and Eden had not fixed the election results in their favour.[66] While waiting for the new British leadership to arrive, James Byrnes was very active. This period

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[62] Ibid., p. 941.
[63] Mee, *Meeting at Potsdam*, p. 241.
[64] Attlee, *As it Happened*, p. 171.
[65] Ibid., p. 172.
[66] Ibid.

marked the turning point of the conference and in the absence of the British leadership bilateral discussions started.

The allies had earlier agreed to publish a proclamation to the Japanese Government inviting them to surrender to avoid serious consequences, and on 26 July the American did so by radio without consulting the Russians. The following morning Molotov visited Byrnes at the "Little White House," the residence of the President at the conference, to complain about this lapse of protocol. He was told that a Russian request only arrived with him that morning and by that time the Proclamation had already been sent to the press at 7.00 pm the previous evening. Clearly, the Americans who were at war with Japan, and taking heavy casualties, wanted to be the power that asked Japan for unconditional surrender and Byrnes went on to say "...we did not consult the Soviet Government since the latter was not at war with Japan and we did not wish to embarrass them."[67] This inaction can be construed as an assertion of American dominance. Their discussion turned to other matters and Byrnes took the opportunity to raise the topic of reparations.[68] This was the second time at the conference that genuine bilateral discussions got under way. A key issue was to be discussed without the British being there. Byrnes explained that he had shortened the discussion that had happened earlier in the day at the Foreign Ministers meeting because there was not much chance of progress on it until the new British team arrived. He asked Molotov what he thought of the Americans' earlier suggestion that each of the Allies should take reparations from their own zone as well setting up arrangements for the exchange agreed, amounts of suitable goods and equipment from other zones. Molotov questioned whether the Americans still held the view, agreed at Yalta, that as many reparations as possible should be extracted from Germany. Byrnes stated that the American view on this had not changed but the circumstances had changed since Yalta.

[67] Byrnes-Molotov Meeting, 27 July 1945, FRUS Potsdam, vol. II, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv02/ch9subch2 [accessed 18 March 2026].
[68] Ibid.

Molotov would have left that meeting knowing that the Americans were specifically asking for an exchange of reparations between the zones.

Byrnes later wrote that "As soon as Mr Attlee and Mr Bevin returned I visited them and, after several hours discussion, obtained their agreement in principle to our proposal."[69] There is no evidence of this unusually long meeting anywhere to be found and it was unlikely that such a meeting could have been squeezed in amongst other commitments. He had visited Cadogan late that evening just to let him know that the Americans were only thinking so far about reparations by zones plus the Eastern Neisse as part of a proposal, something that might take just a few minutes.[70] There is no note of any agreement in Cadogan's summary of the meeting. Attlee had made short courtesy visits to Truman and later the same evening at 10.00 pm he visited Stalin.

The tenth meeting of Heads of Government on 28 July was Attlee and Bevin's first formal meeting.[71] It addressed the issue from the first strand of the package deal, the admission of neutral and enemy states to the United Nations Organisation (UNO). This last element of the remaining strand needed some close attention. Stalin was still trying to equate Italy with the Balkan states in terms of their democratic features. They could join the UNO when they were proper democracies, but what counted as a proper democracy? Stalin said that it was wrong for the Foreign Ministers to reverse the earlier decision made by the leaders and he wished to keep the word "recognised" rather than use the word "responsible". After a complicated discussion about who said what and to whom, it was agreed again to keep the word "recognised" and the next area of dispute was over Clause 3 of the proposed agreement on this topic which was about whether the three governments would agree to "discuss" the question of resuming diplomatic relations with Finland, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. The Americans were willing to accept

[69] Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*, p. 84.
[70] *BDPO Potsdam*, p. 944.
[71] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences*, p. 259.

the word “examine” in its place. These words mattered for perhaps two reasons. The first one was that their final agreement would have to be sold to the various audiences back home, not so much in the Soviet Union but certainly in the democracies where opposing parties, media organisations, and the knowledgeable public would be looking for weaknesses. Secondly, the three parties, at some future point, may have wished either hold their opposite numbers to account or to find their own way around commitments they no longer wish to keep. Cadogan, invited to speak by Attlee, said that the British were unwilling to have this clause included because they could not establish full diplomatic relations with countries with which they were technically still in a state of war. Stalin made considerable effort to try to persuade them otherwise, saying that they were not being asked to make a commitment to recognise them, “only to take up the opportunity of studying the situation in these countries”[72] Attlee stood his ground saying that “This proposal does not correspond with reality” and “a change of words does not alter the substance of the matter. One question in Parliament will give the whole thing away.”[73] This is a most illuminating point. He understood that he would have to go back home and justify any agreed outcome and possibly be challenged by Eden or Churchill in the House of Commons. At this point Bevin suggested that the settlement of the question be postponed. There was no mention of the key issues of reparations and the western frontier during this meeting and at this stage the British had no knowledge of Byrnes’ advanced plans.

Stalin had a cold on 29 July and Molotov visited the Little White House at lunch-time and a second bilateral meeting got under way with the Americans. The new British leadership was now back in Potsdam but they were not invited. Sir Llewellyn Woodward wrote that “Mr Churchill and Mr Eden had left the Potsdam Conference at the stage – familiar to participants in international meetings of this kind – when disagreement on the main issues was almost

[72] Ibid., p. 268.
[73] Ibid., p. 206.

complete and before the final bargaining had begun." [74] Molotov visited again and only had his interpreter with him, and Truman, Byrnes, William Leahy, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Charles Bohlen from the State Department were on the American side.[75] They spoke firstly about when Russia might declare war on Japan but then got down to discuss reparations again. Byrnes stated that the Americans were willing to agree to a frontier for Poland along the Eastern Neisse and he again asked Molotov about the Russian view on his proposal that reparations should be taken from each ally's own zone and the reparations could also be exchanged between the zones. This time Molotov's response was different in that he said it was in principle acceptable. After a long period of deadlock this was a breakthrough and now that the whole issue had been reframed a new route could be found to a solution. It was now the Americans who should respond to Molotov's gift. There followed close discussion about the amounts of reparations to be considered with the Americans trying to reduce the amounts to be exchanged and the Russians trying to maximise their take. The meeting ended with Molotov asking for two billion dollars' worth of industrial equipment from the Ruhr while the Americans were suggesting either 25% of the available reparations from the Ruhr or 12.5% from the British, American and French zones together. Byrnes' offer would include a requirement to exchange all this equipment for coal and food from the Soviet zone. Byrnes did most of the talking at this meeting and he did not want to to deal in dollar values in this discussion but only in percentages. There are three significant judgements to be made about this encounter. Firstly, the British were absent and yet in their absence the Americans were bargaining about what was to happen in the British zone (the Ruhr). Secondly, the shift in the framing of the whole issue represented the separation of Germany into two parts, east and west. The Soviets were not to have influence over or access to the western zones and the Americans have would no practical reason to have

[74] Woodward, *History of the Second World War*, pp. 560-561.
[75] Mee, *Meeting at Potsdam*, pp. 255-257.

access to the east. Thirdly, the Americans had earlier linked the topic to Polish borders and at some point, in order to reach an accommodation, that link would either now have to be broken or firmly bonded.

So far, the British were not included in these new developments. In the British camp however, just before Attlee and Bevin arrived, there is evidence that discussion was also going on about both the linkage to the Polish western frontier with the payment of reparations and the possibility of yielding on the frontier, but not at the top level.[76] A possible basis for a bargain was outlined to include no short-term evictions. At the first Staff Conference with Attlee and Bevin on the morning of 29 July, the western frontier of Poland took up most of the meeting. Bevin's introductory statement was that he had been "considering whether the Soviet Government's proposals regarding the western frontier of Poland might afford an opportunity to reach a simultaneous settlement of a wide complex of problems which had been raised in discussions at the conference." He said that he preferred a line running along the Eastern Neisse. The whole team then spent some time working towards their plan of action. Cadogan, having had recent contact with his American counterparts reported that they would resist Polish claims to land west of the Eastern Neisse. Ambassador Clark-Kerr reaffirmed that the Poles and Russians would be pushing hard for the Western Neisse and suggested that, as the Russians would allow the Poles to occupy that land anyway, Britain should support their full claim along with a settlement rather than be forced to accept a fait accompli. Attlee, neatly pointed out the key dilemma for the new British leadership by saying "there was a difference between our accepting a fait accompli or becoming accessories before the fact."[77] "Accessories before the fact" is a telling phrase. It has connotations with justice and the law, and aptly sums up the the notion that Britain might be as guilty of a crime as the person who commits it. Its use in such

[76] *BDPO Potsdam*, p. 941.
[77] Ibid., pp 968-969.

distinguished company may have just been a subtle piece of rhetoric or it may have slipped out as a revelation of some inner angst. Later in the conversation there was much conversation about the benefits of yielding Niederschlesien as a concession as part of a general settlement. The participants mulled over a suggestion that a decision on the frontier could be delayed while some experts visited the area and assessed the merits of both options for the frontier. This would give the British public some time to get used to the idea of giving the Poles such a large area of Germany, but it would then give the Poles a long time to settle in and consolidate their position. Finally, Bevin summed up, and wanted to consider what the Soviets would be willing to offer in return for the Western Neisse as the frontier. "He thought we might aim at getting in return, a favourable settlement on the reparations issue and an agreement on supplies and food and fuel from the eastern areas including the territories claimed by Poland from Western Germany."[78] On his first diplomatic venture Bevin made his mind up swiftly; a straight swop of Niederschlesien for reparations plus supplies. The team then agreed that this should be talked over with Truman and Byrnes first before taking it to Stalin and Molotov.

At about 4.30 pm that day Attlee, Bevin and Cadogan visited Truman and Byrnes but no records, either British or American, has ever been found for this meeting. Perhaps the most important meeting of the conference, it was either not recorded or lost. Cadogan is reported to have said that "the discussion was in very general terms".[79] It came the day after Bevin was considering trading Niederschlesien for a reparations plus supplies settlement, and just three hours after the Americans had directly discussed the frontier with Molotov at their second bilateral meeting. Truman, many years later recalled that the British were told about the discussions that the Americans had held with Molotov the previous day. None of the British attendees have ever confirmed this. It is difficult to imagine that when the bargaining was now

[78] Ibid., p. 968.
[79] Ibid., p. 980.

being pursued in earnest, that the discussion was general, and Niederschlesien, the keystone in the arch, was not discussed in some detail. Sir D. Waley wrote to Sir W. Eady in an internal memo on the same day, that "Pauley told me that the next move would lie with us, Byrnes had a talk with Molotov without prior consultation with us."[80] This is some corroboration of Truman's later statement, but it does not reveal content about the exact positions about both parties at that time. It is unknown whether the Americans were informing or consulting the British, and at this point the British may not yet have yielded on Niederschlesien. It is worth noting here that Truman never reciprocated by visiting Attlee at Potsdam. The pecking order in world dominance was being established or reaffirmed.

Mikolajczyck, the former leader of the London Poles but by July 1945 deputy leader of the new Provisional Polish Government of National Unity, came to visit Bevin on 31 July. Alexander Clark Kerr, Britain's ambassador the Soviet Union, in a report to Bevin about this meeting wrote that "He put special stress upon the importance of our meeting Polish territorial claims for the additional reason that his communist colleagues from Russia would use our hesitation as an instrument of propaganda to show that all good things come from Russia while we and the Americans were unsympathetic and niggardly."[81] He went on to say that whatever the British did, the Russians would make sure the border ended up on the western Neisse and be credited for it.[82] If it can be assumed the Russian actions at the conference were primarily motivated by worries about their national security then the exact location of the western Polish frontier had little significance. A short distance to the east or the west would have little impact for the purpose of Russian self protection, but decisions can rarely be pinned down to a single driving motivation. Stalin may have been using this to reduce the rage engendered amongst

[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., p. 1059. A formal note exists with regard to the meeting and this report by Clark Kerr was pinned to it.
[82] Ibid., p. 1058.

many Poles by his taking ancient Polish land in the east. This gift was perhaps one more way of bringing the Polish consciences into his fold. He wished to have friendly neighbours.

On the same day, Mikolajczyck left a note in his diary for 29 July, that is the day that Byrnes made the offer of the Eastern Neisse to Molotov.

> [Babelsberg,July 29, 1945.] In the evening Mr. Bierut was invited to see Marshal Stalin, who informed him that the Americans had presented their boundary proposal based on the Lower Neisse and the line of the Oder, including Stettin. Marshal Stalin asked whether, in view of the fact that the Americans had gone farther, the Polish side would not agree to certain concessions, e. g., the line of the Queiss [*Kwisa*] instead of the Lausitzer Neisse. After consultations with experts it was decided that we should possibly agree, not to the Lower Neisse, but only with regard to the watershed line between the Queiss and the Lausitzer Neisse. That would deprive us of some water installations but would not affect the industry of Silesia.[83]

If this diary entry is reliable, then Stalin did not have a fixed aspiration for the exact location of the western frontier and was prepared to accept alternative options in order to satisfy his overall interests. This position by Stalin could be interpreted as a simple trade and/or part of something much broader. As Otte notes, “That negotiations are ‘about trading concessions’ is the underlying assumption of Kissingerian diplomacy. To succeed in their endeavours the negotiating parties must strike ‘a balance of mutual concessions”. The sequence in which these are made, therefore, is of crucial importance; and they have to be seen “as part of a mosaic”.[84] Stalin’s decision can open up the possibility of differing interpretations. Arendt’s view is that

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[83] Diary Entry by Polish Deputy Prime Minister, 29 July 1945, *FRUS* Potsdam, vol. II, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv02/d1391 [accessed 18 March 2026].
[84] T.G. Otte, ‘Kissinger’, in *Diplomatic Theory from Machiavelli to Kissinger*, ed. by G.R. Berridge, Maurice Keens-Soper and T.G. Otte (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 198.

it is a step into the future, without Stalin fully knowing his motivations, questions the artificial separation of intention and action.[85] Others might say he was a very calculating individual. These theoretical positions are as yet unsubstantiated whereas it can be shown that Stalin was a person with a disposition that seemed very able to deal with ambiguities and who was able to make apparently counter judgements in order to reach his major goal. There are many examples of this quality, for example his behaviour over the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact or the Shanghai Massacre. One historian extends this story about Stalin's request of the Polish Government by claiming that they "decided to accept a boundary of the administration zone at 'somewhere between the western Neisse and the Kwisa' and that later that day the Poles changed their mind: 'Bierut, accompanied by Rola-Żymierski returned to Stalin and argued against any compromise with the Americans. Stalin told his Polish protégés that he would defend their position at the conference."[86] These behind the scenes discussions, carried out while Stalin was too ill to attend a plenary with the other world leaders, turned out to be immaterial anyway because the next day James Byrnes offered the Poles exactly what they wanted. However, we can take away from this event is that it might have been a clever way of Stalin building further their dependence on him or it may illuminate the possibility that the British and the Americans may have achieved their stated aims on the western frontier of Poland if they had not yielded so quickly.

There were five important meetings on 30 July, the day of denouement for the British. The first was a team meeting for all the senior British diplomats with Attlee and Bevin. They talked briefly about reparations, in particular where the Soviet share of reparations would come from and then a number of other topics including the German fleet and consultations with the French. There was no discussion of the Polish western frontier. This suggests that the British

[85] 'Last Interview with Hannah Arendt', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FkoMm1hs1g&t=984s.
[86] Lukas Richard, *Bitter Legacy: Polish-American Relations in the Wake of World War II* (University Press of Kentucky, 1982), p. 17.

did not yet know about Byrnes' changed plans. If they had the flavour and content of the meeting would probably have been very different. The second meeting involved the Polish delegation again. Seven of them went over to the Prime Minister's house at 11.30 am and answered questions from Attlee and Bevin about their proposed new constitution, elections and the return of Polish soldiers still stationed in Britain. Again, there was no talk about Poland's western frontier.

The third important meeting happened later that afternoon. At 4.00 pm, Byrnes visited Bevan, who after the topics of reparations and the Poland's western frontier were introduced to him, took him along to speak with Attlee. There is no surviving record of the content of this meeting. Alexander Cadogan recorded in his diary that, "Jimmy Byrnes called on Bevin and we took him over afterwards to see Attlee. Mostly about Reparations – a very complicated subject which I find almost unintelligible – and the Polish western frontier. Jimmy B. is a bit too active, and has already gone and submitted various proposals to Molotov which go a bit beyond what we want at the moment."[87] Attlee may not yet have realised it but he was just being informed about what the Americans intended, as he was not being consulted. The fourth important meeting of the day was just half an hour later when Byrnes was back at his third recent bilateral meeting with Molotov. This time the three elements of a package deal were being brought together. Byrnes started by telling Molotov that "…in regard to the Polish western frontier, we were prepared as a concession to…put Polish administration up to the western as against the eastern Neisse." Byrnes also told Molotov that the British would agree to a form of words about the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations with Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and Finland. The central pieces of the whole conference mosaic were now in place. From now on, the end was in sight and as long as suitable words could be found to bind in all three parties, and if Byrnes could get the last concession from Molotov on

[87] *Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 777.

reparations, then the conference could conclude. Byrnes and Molotov spent the rest of the time at this meeting haggling about the details on that. Molotov left saying that he would need to report to Stalin. One must assume that the above British comment about "going a bit beyond" referred to the American acceptance of the Western Neisse. The Potsdam meeting had met an impasse and, as Henry Kissinger later warned, leaders might feel the temptation to make quick decisions to save the conference.[88] With Truman keen to return home and with the British in a state of transition, Byrnes, used to making deals back home in Washington, may have been treating this as just another fix and thought he could now just move on to other things. Germany was to be divided into sectors and Niederschlesien was to be given to Poland, all for the purpose of reparations. Truman had met his own earlier stated aim. The Secretary of State wished to make it plain that the United States did not intend to pay out money to finance imports to Germany and thus repeat their experience after the last war, when United States' funds were used to pay reparations for others. Bohlen's opinion of Byrnes was that "he used strategy he learned in the cloakroom of the Senate" to achieve that.[89]

The fifth and the last of the important meetings of the day, lasting four hours, was a formal one and the occasion when everything was out in the open. At 5.00 pm during the full Foreign Ministers' meeting that evening, Byrnes announced formally the new American position on the Western Neisse.[90] Molotov was still trying to garner a fixed dollar value amount of reparations from other zones but Byrnes, preferring percentages instead, would not concede on that suggestion saying that such an amount was impossible to set. At the start of the conference the Russians wished to hold the parties to a fixed amount of $20m as had been mentioned at Yalta, but now Molotov found himself accepting the zonal solution and was asking for $800,000m in "available" exchanges from other zones. The Americans were not

[88] Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years*, (Phoenix, 2000), pp. 128, 142, 769, 781; Abba S. Eban, *The New Diplomacy: International Affairs in the Modern Age* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983), p. 363.
[89] Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929-69* (W.W. Norton, 1973), p. 232.
[90] *BDPO Potsdam*, pp. 1014-1031.

even willing to agree to that and even further were unwilling to say in advance what would be "available" but wanted to leave that decision to the zone commanders in each case. Byrnes argued that zone commanders rather than the Control Council should make such decisions because they were the ones who were in charge of maintaining the economy in each zone and therefore the power of decision had to rest with them. Obviously, he said, some commanders may have said there was no "available" industrial equipment. The Russians must have come to the realisation that they may end up getting 25% and 12.5% of zero. Furthermore, if the Russians were not to agree to the exchange for coal and food, then the percentages would be 12.5% and 7.5%. The meeting ended without agreement and with Byrnes saying that the concession on Poland's western frontier that was made on the Americans' part was a much greater concession than the ones so far made by the Soviets. Byrnes went to to see Molotov the following morning for a forth bilateral meeting. He wrote later in his memoir, "I told Mr Molotov there were three outstanding issues… I told him we would agree to all or none and that the President and I would leave for the United States the next day."[91] They agreed to pass the whole topic back to the Heads of Government for a decision. The trade with the Russians was a simple one. The Americans were willing to condone the continuance of the Polish administration in Niederschlesien and support their request for it to be ceded to Poland at the upcoming peace settlement, alongside an agreement towards a path to recognition of the satellite countries. In return they were accepting the division of Germany and reparation payments on their terms. The British still had not made up their minds. Nonetheless denouement had been reached. On 30 July, Stalin wrote a note to Truman that he was feeling better and would attend the plenary the next day. He had stayed out of the way while the key issues of the conference were settled.

[91] Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*, p. 85.

At this point in proceedings, it was just a matter of tying up all the loose ends at the conference. The core of a settlement was in place and no-one wished to return home with no agreement on the three strands in the package deal. Churchill was back at his home in Britain and making plans for a long rest in the Mediterranean. On his departure from Potsdam, he knew nothing of the package deal and of the way that Byrnes would go about gaining assent for it, first from the Soviets and then the British. He, too, would have wanted to go home to London with a result of some kind to show the electorate and conservative party. If nothing was in place with regard to borders, elections, and reparations, then Europe would be left wide open for further communist encroachment ands the Russians would continue to help themselves without any sanction. He had already expressed his worries about chaos and unemployment in Europe creating the conditions for unrest and revolution. If indeed he were to decide to create a scene, then that was probably all that it would be, and by doing so he would have revealed Britain's lack of potency on the world stage. The Operation Unthinkable report from 1945 imaginign potential future was scenarios had already shown that Britain was no longer in the first rank in military terms and without American involvement, any British challenge in the field would fail. Churchill had tried hard to get the Americans to continue even longer with Lend Lease, and failed. So while he had successfully taken his country through the war all the while its cultural and economic capital was being depleted by its chief rival. He had led the country steadily towards bankruptcy and she was in no position to keep large numbers of soldiers posted on European soil while British armed forces and the public were looking forward to the end of war and would not offer support. In choosing Attlee and the Labour Party they had shown that they were looking forward to peace and the social reform that they were offered in the election campaign. It is easy for political leaders long after the event to make bellicose claims but not in the existential time and place of decision.

Tidying up.

The Heads of Government met on 31 July and Stalin was back. Despite Attlee's endorsement of Bevin's abilities, he was new to international affairs and was stepping into a complex and alien diplomatic gathering with almost no preparation. In a sequence that was almost completely played out by savvy opponents, there was in reality very little he could do with regard to Britain's original diplomatic aims. Taking his cue from discussions at the team meetings, he endeavoured to accept the American positions on both the western frontier and reparations, and to pursue the objective of getting Germany treated as a whole economic unit and to gain some concessions from the Poles with regard to free elections.[92]

Bevin was due to report on the discussions that had taken part at the foreign Minister's meeting but he decided that no report was needed because almost all the items would be on the day's agenda. Truman mentioned the three topics to be discussed; US proposals on German reparations, Poland's western frontier, and its admission to the United Nations Organisation. Byrnes then took the lead in the discussions. He stated that the three topics were outstanding without agreement after two weeks discussions were interconnected, and the US was prepared to make concessions on Poland's western frontier and admission to the new United Nations Organisation if the parties were willing to reach agreement on all three questions. He said agreement on reparations was the main question. He then announced American concessions on the sticking points with regard to the western frontier and the admission to the United Nations before the main business of trying to settle on a details of an agreement on the reparations.[93]

The Soviet delegation, still keen to deal with items separately, read out their five proposals on reparations and next couple of hours was spent debating them. It had taken at least six weeks of talks to get this far on the topic but now the tension was raised because without

[92] *BDPO Potsdam*, p. 1053,
[93] Ibid., p. 1073.

an agreement there would be no package deal. The work done behind the scenes by Byrnes and Molotov had restructured the perception of the matter. The $20,000 million figure had been conceded by the Russians and their reparations for the main part were to be taken out of their zone of Germany. The rest would be taken out of equipment and materials available and assigned for transfer from the British and American zones. It was agreed that is was to be decided upon by the zone commanders, a big concession by the Russians because it was effectively an unknown amount. They would spend the rest of the meeting attempting to maximise the value of the amounts of equipment and materials to be taken from the British and American zones.[94] The British and American would try to keep them at bay. Bevin was keen to show active British input in this discussion and proposed that the Russians should have 17.5% against exchanges and 7.5% without exchanges. The exchange would be in the form of food and coal to be supplied by the Russians. After a great deal of to and fro the three allies decided on 15% and 10%. The Americans had got what they wanted, in other words a percentage of an unknown amount, all depending on how future relations developed with the zone commanders, and there would be no cost to the American taxpayer. However, the obvious cost of all this was that Germany would have a split economic structure, not a unified economy. They then finished off the conference with an agreement that despite the split economic arrangement, Germany would have a centralised government structure. It would remain to be seen if such a country could exist.

The American concession on the western frontier was that the Americans would agree to the Polish Government of National Unity being given the right to set up a provisional administration over the whole area they had requested. Bevin reported that the British had had a meeting with the Polish delegation earlier in the day and they had assured the British that they would be holding free and unfettered elections on the basis of universal suffrage and a

[94] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences,* pp. 277-80.

secret ballot and that this could now be defended in the British Parliament on return. He then gained the promise from Stalin that Soviet soldiers were being removed from Niederschlesien except for a main supply route through to the Russian Zone in Germany. Saving face is an important concept in diplomacy and this was a perfect example of Britain doing it and the other two parties going along with it just to rescue the agreement. [95] There was no way of enforcing the vaguely described promises elicited from the new communist controlled government of Poland. Nonetheless, it allowed the appearance of positive action which would in turn permit the British delegation to finish the last few days of the conference with some dignity. It could be promoted by them to a domestic audience on return to London.

Most of the remaining items on the agenda went through without much difficulty. Their concession on future UNO admission of Finland, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, involved their acceptance of a change in the wording of the agreement to read: “The three governments express the desire to examine each separately in the near future, in the light of the conditions then prevailing, the question of establishing diplomatic relations with Finland, Roumania, Bulgaria and Hungary, to the extent possible prior to the conclusion of peace treaties with these countries.” There was no possibility of enforcement of this vague statement. Byrnes then proposed the supporting clause: “The three governments express the desire that, in view of the change of conditions as a result of the ending of the war in Europe, members of the Allied press should enjoy complete freedom in reporting to the world the events in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Finland.”[96] Stalin’s suggestion that these words be altered to read “do not doubt” instead of “express the desire that” was accepted. This was even more vague than the previous statement. All the delegates must have known that such wording meant that there was no guarantee of press freedom, and serious action could be evaded in the months and years to

[95] Michael Keevak, *On Saving Face: A Brief History of Western Appropriation* (Hong Kong University Press, 2022).
[96] *BDPO Potsdam*, p. 1081,

come, but they all wished to go home to their electorates with the main part of the deal. They then made some changes on the wording of their agreement about the satellite states and made some resolutions on the disposal of the German Navy. Most other items passed through very quickly. Agreements were made about the exact boundaries around the Konigsberg region and Swinemunde and also Truman's idea about freedom of travel on inland waterways.

The twelfth sitting of the Heads of Government at 3.00 pm on 1 August dealt with a long list of items for the preparation of the protocol which would be signed by the leaders.[97] During that meeting Stalin said that the representatives on the Provisional Government had called upon him that morning and he had given them the news about their western frontier. They had asked him to convey their thanks to all three governments. At the end of the meeting, Attlee wrote to Churchill. The content was solely about the Polish western frontier. He wrote:

> When the conference was suspended it was clear that the vital points were the reparations and the Polish Western Frontier. We were firm on the need for supplies of food etc from the Eastern zone for the rest of Germany and on not allowing reparations to have precedence of maintaining a reasonable economy in Germany. On Poland the Russians insisted on the Western Neisse and eventually the Americans accepted this. We were of course powerless to prevent the course of events in the Russian zone.[98]

The thirteenth and last Plenary took place at 10.30 pm later the same day.[99] Stalin and Bevin were both still insistent on a few minor changes to statements in the protocol, but the meeting was short and the three leaders made their agreement about the final communique and signed it in the order; Stalin, Truman, and Attlee. It would be released at 9.30 pm GMT on

[97] Ibid., p. 1125.
[98] Ibid., p. 1143.
[99] Ibid., p. 1146.

Thursday, 2 August 1945. There were a few short congratulatory speeches, with Stalin saying, "I would personally wish to thank Mr Byrnes, who has helped our work very much and has promoted the achievement of our decisions"[100] Thank you messages were sent to Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden.

So, how did the two new British leaders handle the position in which they found themselves? Byrnes had effectively confronted them with a fait accompli on all three strands of the package deal. They understood the same context in which Churchill had been placed just before he left. Very different personalities, they were very capable people who had both served in different capacities in the war-time government. Just like Churchill, they had watched Britain slip down the international pecking order during every year of the conflict, buffeted by American economic and social capital. They fully understood the financial difficulties faced by the country and had been considering how to fund their new plans for major social reform for months before the summer election. The politicians had different responsibilities and would now have to face going back to London and presenting their achievements in as positive as manner as possible. Churchill and Eden, given their habitus with attachments and long imperial associations with the country's elites may have felt the demotion rather more deeply.

In international relations, any interpretation using a rational person presupposition normally focuses on the acquisition of goods, territory, defensive gains or items of some value within diplomatic negotiations. The trades and deals that are done can be witnessed or at least recognised. It is often possible to see these trades clearly. In this scenario, Truman and his Secretary of State achieved his expressed material aim of making the Germans pay this time in contrast to what happened at the end of World War One. He probably understood that, as some

[100] Mee, *Meeting at Potsdam*, p. 281.

of his advisors put it to him, “as a well-known Missouri horse trader, the American people expect you to bring something home to them.”[101]

In a cultural interpretation in chapter six, using the schemata provided by Bourdieu, I argue that it is not always possible to make manifest the application or use of any kind of capital within discussions or exactly when decisions, individual trades or concessions happens. It is not always easy to attribute the use of a particular form of capital to a particular concession or subjugation in a field of play.

After he returned home, Truman made a positive upbeat radio speech letting the American public know about the details of what was agreed at Potsdam. Iin that speech, he said the following:

> How glad I am to be home again! And how grateful to Almighty God that this land of ours has been spared! We must do all we can to spare her from the ravages of any future breach of the peace. That is why, though the United States wants no territory or profit or selfish advantage out of this war, we are going to maintain the military bases necessary for the complete protection of our interests and of world peace. [102]

American interests had been advanced exponentially during the war and now Truman was intent on protecting and developing them. This was so natural and unconscious that it did not need to be elaborated upon. It may have been misrecognised by some of its adversaries who may have taken the view that the USA was expanding democracy for the benefit of others. It

[101] The Federal Loan Administrator (Snyder), the President’s Special Counsel (Rosenman), and Mr. George E. Allen to the President, 6 July 1945 *FRUS*, Potsdam, vol. I, p. 228, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv01/d192 [accessed 18 March 2026].
[102] Harry S. Truman, ‘Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference’, 9 August 1945, *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-report-the-american-people-the-potsdam-conference [accessed 18 March 2026].

is also worth noting that many of these military bases mentioned in his speech were gained at the expense of Britain in the years leading up to Potsdam.

The part of his speech about the Oder Neisse Line was presented as follows:

> In this instance, there is much to justify the action taken. The agreement on some line--even provisionally--was necessary to enable the new Poland to organize itself, and to permit the speedier withdrawal of the armed forces which had liberated her from the Germans. In the area east of the Curzon line there are over 3,000,000 Poles who are to be returned to Poland. They need room, room to settle. The new area in the West was formerly populated by Germans. But most of them have already left in the face of the invading Soviet Army. We were informed that there were only about a million and a half left. The territory the Poles are to administer will enable Poland better to support its population. It will provide a short and more easily defensible frontier between Poland and Germany. Settled by Poles, it will provide a more homogeneous nation.[103]

In modern parlance, this was a description of his condoning of ethnic cleansing being presented by a president to his democratic country, itself mostly created in a not dissimilar manner during earlier times. The decision to be complicit in the arrangements for Niederschlesien further exacerbated the terror and known suffering of the German population.

The British delegation did not meet their stated intentions, as described by Orme Sargent, of not being afraid of having a policy independent of the United States, and they also failed in their aspiration to grapple fully with the economic crisis in Europe. The reparations arrangements did avoid some of the need for the British to spend money and resources in

[103] Truman, ‘Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference’.

addressing the need of Germans in their zone but the inclusion of Niederschlesien in Poland and the additional exodus of millions of Germans in a desparate state made matters much worse for them. Attlee avoided the kind of public statement made by Truman over the radio but there was much disquiet in the House of Commons debate some days after his return from Potsdam.[104]

[104] Hansard, vol. 413, 'Poland', 24 August 1945, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1945-08-24/debates/acf64ea9-6a98-4728-86e1-e4c25887972c/Poland [accessed 18 March 2026].

# Chapter 5: A Bourdieuian Interpretation.

For those who wish to decide whether Stalin and Molotov were acting as Russian Nationalists or Bolsheviks during their discussions at Potsdam, the first two sentences of Molotov's book suggests that they were both. "It's good that the Russian tsars took so much land for us in the war. This made our struggle with capitalism easier…My task as minister of foreign affairs was to expand the borders of our fatherland. It seems that Stalin and I coped with this task quite well."[1] The Russians, both as nationalists and communists, were in pursuit of international recognition and they could achieve this by accumulating as much capital as possible, control over territory being a form of economic and military capital. Britain and America were also in that struggle for recognition and this impacted the decision to cede Niederschlesien to Poland.

Earlier chapters have examined the decisions at Potsdam in a more conventional way with primacy being given to an analysis of diplomatic documentation against the geopolitical context. This chapter offers an alternate way of interpreting the same decision-making event, but with a pronounced cultural orientation. The chief aim is, using Bourdieu's schemata, to show how America used its cultural weight to advance its dominance over Britain before and during the conference at Potsdam, thus allowing Britain to acquiesce over the package deal which was set up by Secretary of State James Byrnes during the negotiations. The allotting of Niederschlesien to Polish control was a consequence of this acquiescence. Bourdieu's concept of 'misrecognition' is key in Britain's move towards becoming the dominated partner in its relationship with the USA.

When a new ambassador is sent to represent their country, the receiving state sets up a formal recognition ceremony. This is a normal part of western diplomatic protocol, in place long before the Vienna Convention of 1960 which set out the currently accepted practices and

[1] *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin politics: Conversations with Felix Chuev*, ed. by Albert Resis (Ivan R. Dee, 1993), p. 8.

principles in detail. Newcomers have to present their credentials and abide by a strict set of behavioural conditions. When the Soviet state came into existence after the 1917 revolutions, the Soviet leadership decided that in their relations with other countries, their representatives would all have the same status as "polpred".[2] This is just a contraction of polmochnyi predstavitel and means plenipotentiary representative. When first introduced, they intended to also treat all foreign diplomats equally regardless of rank.[3] They tried to force their version of diplomacy on others and dispose of the ritualistic traditions and secrecy, claiming that recognition from capitalists was not required.[4] As time went by, after encountering difficulties in setting up formal relations abroad, they slowly adapted a less ideological and more realistic approach. External trade was needed to sustain the new state and relationships became more necessary for security. They had to conform and they entered the international system at a low level of recognition, a long way down the international pecking order. As the new state matured and as the possibility of short-term world revolution receded, the importance of recognition grew. Higher recognition had many benefits in the international community, but progress was slow for the anti-capitalist state with such resistance from others and it was not until 1924 that Britain offered recognition, with the Usa doing so even later in 1933. The Soviets were chasing international recognition for the first 20 years of their existence.

The British met Russia's double track presentation of themselves firstly through their diplomatic service and then also through Comintern, which promoted world revolution. Perhaps this compounded their difficulty in determining on various occasions whether they were facing Russians, or Communists, or always both. How they were recognised may have impacted how the British viewed the Soviets particularly in Eastern Europe in 1945, either as

[2] Alastair Matthew Kocho-Williams, 'The Culture of Russian and Soviet Diplomacy: Lamsdorf to Litvinov, 1900-1939' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Manchester, 2006), p. 83.
[3] David Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: The revolutionary state in international society* (Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 244-272.
[4] Kocho-Williams, 'Culture of Russian and Soviet Diplomacy', p. 84.

the expansion of communism or just the latest manifestation of long held assumptions about Russian's insecurity about defence to their south and west. The nomenclature used by the British at the time may have just been habitual, the diplomatic papers throughout the war period certainly refer to the Soviets but the term Russians was in more common usage. For instance, in the official British record of the first plenary meeting the word 'Russia or Russian' is used six times whereas 'Soviet' only appears once and in a footnote.[5] At a party in the Kremlin on 7-8th November 1943, when the British Ambassador Clark Kerr asked Stalin why the huge photographs of Marx and Engels usually over his desk had been taken down replaced by oil portraits of victorious Russian generals, Stalin replied "well, after all, they weren't Russians'.[6] This event happened between the Moscow Foreign Ministers' Conference and the meeting of the allied leaders at Tehran and when the relationship was in a positive phase and on this occasion the hosts were being Russian rather than Soviet.

Recognition is a key starting point in the use of Pierre Bourdieu's toolbox. He endows human beings with the ability to use signs and symbols in both a conscious and subliminal way. Their lives are set in an intersubjective environment with their actions contingent upon many events and influences, and they always look for recognition from others. This provides them with a sense of purpose and a rationale for existence. They are constantly using their signs and symbols in their quest for recognition, as in a pared down version of a country's diplomatic search for recognition of their character and position in the world. On that basis, application of Bourdieu's toolbox with its conceptual similarity would appear to be particularly suitable for any examination of diplomatic events. What matters in the talk amongst diplomats is not so much the power built into the language itself, but the kind of authority or legitimacy and authority with which it is supported. Misrecognition happens when something "is attributed to

[5] *BDPO Potsdam*, pp 340-345.
[6] Frank Costigliola, 'Archibald Clark Kerr, Averell Harriman, and the fate of the wartime alliance', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 9.2 (2011), pp. 83-97 (p. 83).

another available realm of meaning, and, in the process, interests, inequities or other effects may be maintained whilst they remain concealed."[7] In any society where there are dominant elites, there is always some level of misrecognition by the dominated, who are complicit in this arrangement.

The suggestion being presented here is that decisions, including the one about Niederschlesien, are made not only for geopolitical reasons. They are not simply the result of successful arguments based on facts, but many other cultural and psychological factors enter the arena. The schemata devised by Pierre Bourdieu can embrace all of the above and offer valuable insights, not usually considered by others who have written about Potsdam. Trust and familiarity between the British and Americans, made it easier for British diplomats to accept misrecognition at Potsdam and go along with the package deal being presented by James Byrnes. The British diplomats had little trust and familiarity with the Soviet diplomats but much closer bonds with the Americans. The future of Niederschlesien was at the crux of the conference and was the last part of the deal to be proposed and bilaterally agreed privately in outline by the Americans and Soviets. Attlee and Bevin, at short notice, were faced with the decision to refuse or accept. In Bourdieuian terms, they misrecognised, and complicitly continued a subjugation which had been happening for a long time beforehand. They took on America's view of the world. Their choice was between the whole deal or no deal, and Niederschlesien, which was one element within the package, was sacrificed when they chose the deal.

For the most part, the thinking of historical actors is usually sought in the words that they utter before, during, and after the action, and also in the comments of others. At Potsdam, many of these words were formally recorded in the official minutes of the three allies and can

[7] David James, 'How Bourdieu Bites Back. Recognising Misrecognition in Education and Educational research', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 45.1 (2015), pp. 97-112.

be supplemented by the formal and informal written and verbal records of Foreign Office business that was going on outside the Schloss Cecilienhof. This however, can only ever be a partial revelation of their thoughts, even if they were honest and credible. Even with a thick description and set in context, it always falls well short of total coverage.[8] People's actions are also grounded in their behaviours, non-conscious thoughts, in faulty thinking and in the common practices around them, which requires psychological and sociological perspectives. The unwritten is not commonly available as evidence, and the non-conscious is often left out by historians because it smacks of natural science and there appears never to be the possibility of verifying anything. Pierre Bourdieu has devised a set of tools that when applied to historical thinking and events, allow for some degree of access to the non-conscious and otherwise invisible elements of evidence that are often overlooked by historians. A full reliance on the rationality of the historical agents in an interpretation will only ever achieve a very partial and unreliable picture and the use of Pierre Bourdieu's toolbox may add an enriching and fuller dimension to discussions at Potsdam in 1945, also including the western Polish frontier.

Many of Bourdieu's ideas have already contributed to the development of practice theory in the study of foreign relations and international history.[9] The origins of his sociological ideas rest on his search for an understanding about how relatively small groups of people, in a dominant position in their worlds, manage to adapt and hold on to their position of dominance despite huge and varied challenges from the more populous subjugated peoples. He provides a series of tools which allow us to examine the struggles for dominance within the chaos of history. It is posited here that the essence of the discussions at Potsdam was a struggle for dominance amongst the three former allies after the war ended, each pressing to elevate their country's international recognition. There was also competition for dominance even amongst

[8] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic, 1973), p. 312ff.
[9] Cornut, *Practice Turn in International Relations Theory*.

the diplomats within the British diplomatic team. In examining the world of social affairs and the power relations therein, Bourdieu does not limit the agency of actors in the way that others such as Hegel, Marx or Foucault do. Historical actors are granted agency and there are no step changes from one era, or period of historical development, to the next. His approach does not lead to the writing of a meta-history. Within Bourdieu's method of working are six important concepts: habitus, field, forms of capital especially symbolic capital, doxa, and the key notion of misrecognition. These tools will now be defined, and then it will be shown how the use of various forms of capital was used in the broad cultural context amongst the participants at the conference and around the conference table itself.

A person's habitus is an accumulation of all their experiences during ongoing socialisation, from childhood within the family, to the later socialisation individuals engage in throughout their later educational, social and professional lives.[10] There is commonly a biographical element included in most diplomatic histories and the concept of habitus will feel familiar, but for Bourdieu habitus is both conscious and non-conscious, and becomes so accepted within the individual that many actions are habitual and taken automatically. For instance, the habitus which the British permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, Alexander Cadogan, carried with him to Potsdam was created along the way, from his early life in a rich and distinguished aristocratic family, through his education at Eton and Balliol College Oxford where he read history, his career in the diplomatic service, including a stint at the Versailles Conference, and posting in various national capitals.[11] He slipped easily through the stages in his life and these experiences shaped all his norms and values and his dispositions became evident to those spending time with him. According to Bourdieu, the influences of

[10] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. by R. Nice (Stanford University Press, 1990). A full explanation follows from page 141 onwards.
[11] Gore Booth, revised by G.R. Berridge, 'Cadogen, Sir Alexander George Montagu (1884-1968), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 6 January 2011, https://www-oxforddnb-com.uniessexlib.idm.oclc.org/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-32234?rskey=lSoBIM&result=1 [accessed 6 April 2026].

these experiences on both Cadogan's cognition and physical behaviour patterns would be both conscious and subconscious, with his habitus subject to the on-going struggles for dominance within society aimed at shaping human perceptions and actions. These would have been included naturally in his thinking and behaviour, and so ordinary and taken-for-granted, that they would often remain unexpressed. Occasionally, he revealed entrenched attitudes in his diary, such as the antisemitism common within his circles. For example, in January 1944, he wrote, "They [the Soviet diplomats] are the most stinking creepy set of Jews I've ever come across."[12] Every individual at Potsdam had a set of dispositions developed over their lifetimes, and some, rather than others, were well prepared for and well suited to the diplomatic environment there. As Bourdieu puts it, "[W]hen habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted"[13] Their deportment, dress style, vocabulary and language projection were all part of their habitus and the way they presented themselves to the world. The traditional recruitment practices meant that the Foreign Office was an offshoot of the British upper classes. To use Bourdieu's language, the fish does not notice the water and Cadogan and his fellow diplomats, through birth and education, were very comfortable in their mental and physical surroundings and took their procedures and practices there to be normal and natural. The diplomatic elite, deeply immersed in their upper-class background, carried the attitudinal baggage of their class and experience with them in their habitus and took this to Potsdam.

Agency is never denied by the Bourdieu's toolbox and world leaders were all keen to interact find out the nature of their opponents and their dispositions, and without doubt, believed that they were making the decisions and that their decisions would make a difference.

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[12] *Diaries of Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 765.
[13] Pierre Bourdieu and L. J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 127.

Roosevelt famously felt that his own personal charm would work with Stalin and Truman wrote in his diary entry dated 17 July 1945 after their first meeting, “I can deal with Stalin. He is honest — but smart as hell.”[14] A few days later on 29 July, he wrote to his wife, “I like Stalin. He is straightforward, knows what he wants and will compromise when he can’t get it.”[15] Stalin’s habitus obviously had an impact on Truman, even if the reciprocal effect is unknown. The influence of Truman’s initial opinion of the Soviet leader upon the decisions which were later made at the conference, is unknown, but it would have had sociological and psychological dimensions, some of which will be captured using Bourdieu’s schemata. Bourdieu takes a conflict rather than a consensus interpretation of institutions and individuals. Thus, Stalin and Truman are to be seen as being in permanent competition for international recognition of their respective countries. They had already been sparring with each other since Roosevelt died using the usual bureaucratic diplomatic methods, and on arrival at Potsdam they were doing so in person using all the capital available to them in its various forms.

For Bourdieu, areas of professional and social life are divided into ‘fields’ where struggles for domination take place. These differentiated fields are sometimes fixed and interrelated arenas, but are usually fluid and formed around particular issues. The diplomatic field in which the three winning allies competed with each other at the end of World War Two would fit Bourdieu’s definition very well. It had a geographical base and yet many connections with its international competitors, a limited number of participants and a data-collecting paper-based bureaucracy which was understood and used by all – a bounded professional world with its own norms and values. Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden straddled many fields in their public and private lives. While they were bargaining at Potsdam, they were also existing within

[14] Ferrell, *Off the Record*.
[15] Alonzo L. Hamby, ‘HARRY S. TRUMAN: FOREIGN AFFAIRS’, UVA Miller Center, https://millercenter.org/president/truman/foreign-affairs#:~:text=Nonetheless%2C%20as%20the%20conference%20came,Truman%20would%20change%20his%20opinion [accessed 6 April 2026].

the political field centred around Parliament and various webs of connections in London. The combined field diplomatic field in which the three winning allies participated was very large, stretching across three continents but they eventually met together face-to-face as they had on at least three earlier occasions during war-time. Most of the main participants had some knowledge of each other and felt comfortable in their field. When competing with each other in this field they usually used the accepted diplomatic protocols, thus enabling them to work together within a set of well-practised rules of behaviour. This meant that all the participants abided by the protocol or even that they had a full understanding of all its aspects.

The conferences held by the three allies in various locations throughout the war varied a great deal. The Moscow Conference of 1943 and the Potsdam Conference was the most organised with standard formats whereas the Tehran Conference was very different. Historian Geoffrey Roberts describes it as a "shambles" with the "physical setting as bizarre"[16] There was no structured discussion and "ostensible congeniality was at the expense of clarity; even today, with most of the documents at hand, it is difficult to reconstruct what was said during those rambling conversations"[17] Perhaps in these circumstances, without the structured protection of full protocol and prepared agendas it was easier to lapse into informal agreements, "nods and winks" in unguarded moments.[18] This might help to explain why so much was given away by Churchill. During the weeks leading up to the Potsdam Conference, by contrast, the competing delegations were setting out agendas and preparing the aims and objectives that they would promote and defend in the forthcoming bargaining, and the boundaries that they would not cross. These would be argued out in the field, however well or poorly structured, by the

[16] Geoffrey Roberts, 'Stalin at the Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9.4 (2007), p. 493.
[17] Ibid., p. 494.
[18] David Reynolds, 'Summit Diplomacy: Some Lessons from History For 21st Century Leaders', Gresham College, 4 June 2013, https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/summit-diplomacy-some-lessons-history-21st-century-leaders [accessed 6 April 2026].

three parties, and the final accommodation reached would be influenced by the amount of accumulated capital each was perceived to be holding.

According to Bourdieu, people compete for recognition by using various forms of capital and the dominant manage to accumulate the most. These have symbolic value. Cultural capital exists in three forms: in the embodied state, in the person's dispositions and thoughts, and in the objectified state (for example in libraries, goods in shops or art, and in the institutionalised state in the form of educational, academic or technical qualifications).[19] A person with a degree in Mathematics from Cambridge, a private art collection and an interest in opera, would be regarded as someone with high cultural capital. By the same measure, military and economic capital, often appearing together in a national arena, are simple to comprehend. A large country with advanced industry and a sizeable well equipped standing army would hold enormous capital when competing with other smaller countries.

There are also other forms of capital, for example, social capital, which is founded in membership of various groups and linked to durable networks of relationships and recognition. According to Bourdieu, there exists the possibility of transferability of symbolic value across the forms of capital. It is relatively easy for a person with high economic value in society to also have significant cultural and social capital and to use that capital in particular fields.[20] The accumulation of various forms of capital in the hands of one person endows them with high symbolic capital which they can use to further advance their recognition amongst others. Averell Harriman, the American ambassador in Moscow in the period leading up to the Potsdam Conference, for example, was someone who could wield significant symbolic capital. Born into a wealthy east coast family, the son of a railway baron, he was educated amongst the

[19] Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by J.G. Richardson (Greenwood Press, 1986), p 15.
[20] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984).

elites at Groton School and Yale.[21] After a career in finance and business involving banking and international corporations, he was recruited into American government administration partly through family relationships with the Roosevelts. From there on he held senior posts throughout the war including being the American special envoy to Europe and overseeing the Lend-Lease programme. Using the Bourdieuian term, had very high recognition based on the various forms of capital he held and consequentially was a powerful influence on others with his use of symbolic capital. The concept of capital is here transposed from the personal to the community and national level, where it is available to, and embodied in, those acting on behalf of their countries. The Russian presentation of their forms of capital took a less individualistic form, with their emphasis on the strength of their planned economy and the huge industrial advances that had proved strong enough to support armed forces capable of defeating capitalist Germany. All the staff sent to Potsdam by the three national allies took with them all the various forms of capital that they had inherited and earned. There they would compete for recognition for themselves and for their countries. Perceptions of the accumulated value of various countries' capital allows for the construction of a rank order, and in diplomatic circles this can be seen as contributing to an evolving order of precedence of people and the countries they represent at international meetings and ceremonies.

## Wider use of economic and cultural capital – international struggle

Bourdieu's schemata provide a way of including both conscious and unconscious thought into historians' interpretations of human actions, including amongst the diplomats at Potsdam. If cultural capital is to have any functioning effect on people's thoughts and behaviours, then these people need to be exposed to the culture either directly or indirectly. It is easy to see how Winston Churchill had been open to American cultural and economic capital. As well as his

[21] Abramson, *Spanning the Century*.

long-term exposure to the American norms and values via his long political and literary experience, he met it through the export of American films, books and consumer goods. He met it directly on his various lecture and book tours during his impecunious period the 1920s and 1930s.[22] Indeed, he had an American mother and he was a great admirer of that country and culture. The British elites who accompanied Churchill to Potsdam, despite being steeped in the high-brow European culture of their times, had similar experiences to a greater or lesser degree. If they did not appreciate the full strength and potential of the American economy before the war, they all witnessed the enormous deliveries of war materials and consumer goods to Britain from 1941. Fordism was also being exported around the world and Ford's supporters and publicists promoted his ideas about service, efficiency and progress.[23] In the 1920s and 1930s his factories were being constructed across Europe. Innother words, the world was getting to know American brand names, and people were not just benefiting from the products themselves but also from their embedded principles. Companies such as Ford required that other countries had a good degree of openness and did not have complete sovereignty over their public spaces. As Victoria de Grazia put it, the United States "exported its civil society – meaning its voluntary associations, social scientific knowledge, and civic spirit – in tandem with, if not ahead of, the country's economic exports."[24]

Rich in physical resources and with its own set of special social and commercial circumstances, the United States had developed by the start of the 20th century an immense capability to manufacture and sell standardised products. In her book about the expansion of American consumer culture into Europe during the twentieth century, de Grazia quotes from a speech by Woodrow Wilson in Detroit to the World's Salesmanship Congress, just before

[22] Jenkins, *Churchill*, pp. 425-7.
[23] Stefan J. Link, *Forging Global Fordism: Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and the Contest over Industrial Order* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
[24] Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's advance through twentieth century Europe* (Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 7.

American entry into World War One. Wilson said: “let your thoughts and your imagination run abroad throughout the whole world, and with the inspiration of the thought that you are Americans and are meant to carry liberty and justice and the principles of humanity wherever you go, go out and sell your goods and you will make the world more comfortable and more happy, and convert them to the principles of America.”[25] Wilson was linking his statesmanship with American consumerism and making it part of foreign policy. As de Grazia states: “Here America’s most renowned foreign policy idealist was authorising a global traffic in values as well as commodities. This traffic would not hesitate to disregard other nation’s sovereignty.”[26] Thirty years later, American consumerism by the end of World War Two had made significant advances, and its cultural capital, alongside its political relationships, economic potency and military success, all contributed to its international hegemony. Their exports to Europe rose from 1.3 billion to 9.3 billion dollars between 1939 and 1944.[27]

The crossover of products and culture enhanced their overall appeal. Along with extensive advertising for products came the huge range of American films made by Hollywood studios and Disney were shown in Europe and the British Colonies. Ragtime, Josephine Baker and the Charleston hit Europe in the earlier decades followed by the swing bands of the 1930s and 1940s with names such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Glen Miller. All these parts of American culture and other aspects of the American way of life followed behind the American soldiers in the field during the war. To quote the Museum of the American GI, “When U.S. Army General Dwight D. Eisenhower saw the early success of bottling plants, he sent a pressing telegram addressed to Coca-Cola’s headquarters in Atlanta. Dated June 29, 1943, his request included 10 portable factories, 6 million filled bottles of Coke a month, and the

[25] Ibid., p. 2.
[26] Ibid., p. 3.
[27] ‘Historical Statistics of the United States. 1789-1945, *Census.gov*, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1949/compendia/hist_stats_1789-19’45/hist_stats_1789-1945.pdf p. 250 [accessed 6 April 2026].

materials and resources to provide American GIs with refreshingly cool Cokes."[28] As this suggests, the country held enormous cultural and economic capital in Bourdieuian terms and was moving towards the apex of world economic dominance.

President Truman and his diplomatic team exercised their great power at Potsdam and were no doubt interested in promoting democracies of consumption everywhere. With Truman himself having a business background, the team was packed with people who had spent lifetimes promoting consumerism and it would have been very natural for them to be interested in promoting settlement solutions that would allow the perpetuation of their own norms and values. These included Harriman, who by then was US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, and who had been the first American to make a financial loan to Soviet Russia in 1928, and Truman's personal representative, the chief reparations negotiator and oil magnate Edwin Pauley.[29] It was their "habitus" in Bourdieuian terms and was so engrained that it would hardly have been mentioned in private conversations and certainly not in formal situations. Nothing was being overtly imposed on the subjugated countries. What the Americans were doing appeared to be natural, modern, altruistic and a good way to do things. That was taken for granted. One of their chief aims was to salvage as much as possible and create an open market out of the shattered European democratic nations. They were interested in encouraging democracy but it was their form of consumer democracy. Just before Truman left for his trip to the Europe, residential aides George Allen, Sam Rosenman and John Snyder sent him a memorandum setting out the consensus that they had reached with him two days beforehand when they had discussed the aims of the conference with the British and the Russians. The two main outcomes of the conference should be firstly gaining Russian entry into the war against Japan and secondly the "economic stabilisation of Europe." As mentioned in the previous

[28] An American GI's best friend: Coca Cola', 12 June 2024, *Museum of the American G.I.* https://americangimuseum.org/an-american-gis-best-friend-coca-cola/ [accessed 6 April 2026].
[29] Isaacson and Thomas, *Wise Men*, pp. 103-4.

chapter, they then wrote that Truman, “as a well-known Missouri horse trader,” was expected by the American people “to bring something home to them.”[30] In other words, he was going to bring home more American business.

Victoria de Grazia refers to the American “Market Empire” and writes that “it advanced rapidly in times of war and that its many military victories – and occasional defeats – were always accompanied by significant breakthroughs to the benefit of consumer industries and values.”[31] This means than when foreign policy decisions were to be made about the various territories across Europe, it was important to maximise the areas where populations could be directly reached and be encouraged to be democracies of consumption and open to American exports. Britain itself had already enjoyed American consumerism before and during the war, and American military might had been able to rescue many western countries on the European continent. But the soft power of American consumerism had the potential to capture and dominate others further east.

It was “natural” for these individuals to desire to have an open door to as many European markets as possible. Cordell Hull, the American Secretary of State until 1944 and one of James Byrnes’ predecessors, had been a long term advocate of free trade believing it promoted international peace and prosperity and was instrumental in passing the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act (RTAA) of 1934 which enabled the reduction of America’s tariffs in exchange for foreign tariff reductions with other countries. The struggle over social and economic capital between America and Britain was going on throughout the war while they were both engaged in the military struggle with a common enemy. Within the Atlantic Charter there was the obvious American aspiration for Britain to repay the United States for its help during the war by dismantling their system of Imperial Preference, which had been set up to

[30] The Federal Loan Administrator (Snyder), the President’s Special Counsel (Rosenman), and Mr. George E. Allen to the President, 6 July 1945 *FRUS*, Potsdam, vol. I, p. 228, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv01/d192 [accessed 6 April 2026].
[31] De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, p. 9.

encourage trade within the empire by keeping discriminatory rates of tariff against other trading nations.[32] Three years after the Charter in 1944, old British markets consisting of colonies throughout the world which had been closed previously off to the US were being opened up by the Bretton Woods agreement. America was gaining footholds in Australia, Canada and other parts of the British Commonwealth. Britain may have misrecognised this as American support against Hitler but it opened up the all these areas to various forms of American consumerism. Wartime co-operation led to increased trade between Australia and the USA. At the start of the war America lowered its tariffs to allow Australia to export wool.[33] The trade between America and Canada had always been substantial with raw materials going south and industrial products northwards, but the Hyde Park Declaration of 28 April 1941 announced in the Canadian House of Commons marked a huge growth in economic co-operation between the two neighbours and thus a move away from Britain.[34] America gradually gained access to other British preserves in India, Saudia Arabia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Iran. If the British believed that the Americans moving into these areas was solely part of their altruistic efforts to help them defeat fascism, then in Bourdieuian terms they were *misrecognising* the situation and they were being complicit in their own subjugation. Any agreements made in Europe by the Americans in 1945 would have an implicit expectation of the expansion of trading possibilities. Britain may have perceived this to be America keeping Europe safe for democracy but it was also keeping it safe for American business. Trade was always a fundamental part of American foreign policy and Truman himself would go on to extend the reciprocal Trade Agreements Extension later in his presidency.

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[32] 'Atlantic Charter', 14 August 1941, *The Avalon Project*, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp [accessed 6 April 2026].

[33] 'Australia's Trade Through Time'. Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/minisite/tradethroughtimegovau/site/index.html [accessed 6 April 2026].

[34] W.L. MacKenzie King, The Hyde Park Declaration, 28 April 1941, *Wartime Canada*, https://wartimecanada.ca/document/second-world-war/economy-and-trade/hyde-park-declaration-statement-william-lyon-mackenzie [accessed 6 April 2026].

With regard to American economic and cultural capital, the situation was different for the Soviets. Some of their leadership had lived abroad for periods but in accepting their ideology they turned away from the capitalist imperialist view of the world and made serious attempts to separate themselves and the Soviet people from western cultural influence. The Soviet system, with its centralised control over all of their media, allowed little foreign cultural influence of any kind. The diplomatic section alongside other Soviet institutions had been purged during the 1930s.[35] Alastair Kocho-Williams notes that "The Soviet Union closed consulates in order to limit contact with the outside world, and the loss of diplomats serving overseas further contributed to this, returning the diplomatic body to the state in which it had been between the Revolution and the Genoa Conference, paralysed by an inability to function in the diplomatic world."[36] Britain set up trading arrangements in 1921 and this grew into serious foreign relations with the Soviet Union in 1924, and following a three year break over espionage issues, this was renewed in 1929. That was followed by the USA as late as 1933, but the purges in the mid-1930s had set back this developing contact with western influence by a decade. Many of the younger diplomatic replacements after the purges had never left Russia and had little experience of foreign culture.[37] There may be different interpretations for the removal of Maxim Litvinov, the head of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs and many of his colleagues by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) on the night of 3 May 1939.[38] It may be that Stalin disapproved of the direction that Litvinov was taking in trying to build a security alliance against Hitler or that he simply wished to take direct future control of policy himself, through his new trusted appointee. One explanation may be that

[35] Alastair Kocho-Williams, 'The Soviet Diplomatic Corps and Stalin's Purges', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 86.1 (2008), pp. 90-110.
[36] Ibid., p 95.
[37] Ibid., p. 109.
[38] Sabine Dullin quoted in Susanne Schattenberg, 'Diplomacy of the Dictators: The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact', *Osteuropa*, 59.7 (2009), pp. 7-31 (p. 11); Geoffrey Roberts, 'The Fall of Litvinov: A Revisionist View', *Journal of Contemporary History* 27.4 (1992), pp. 639-657, p. 639.

foreigners were regarded as dangerous and the Soviet leadership obviously wished to reduce cultural contamination by removing all those with previous experience of western influences. The effect was that the diplomatic service was "plebeianized, provincialized and Russified".[39] A whole new batch of inexperienced but loyal staff were then the face of the Soviets on the world's stage. Molotov himself later wrote that he and Stalin oversaw a centralised diplomacy where ambassadors had no independence and many of them were not fluent in the required languages.[40] The ideology grounded in anti-capitalism and the limited contact with the outside world meant that the cultural capital of America and Britain had little impact. The leadership was likely to have the confidence that their own population, living in almost total isolation from the capitalist countries and fed on a diet of communist realism were not subject to outside influence. There was a small window into life in the democratic countries provided during war-time, when some limited numbers Russian language magazines were available to connected people in Moscow, but the mass of the population had no access to these.[41] Nonetheless, originating from pre-revolutionary contact with the outside world, there existed a "Soviet cult of America" a "young dynamic country that appeared to have made itself" inside Soviet Russia resting on earlier knowledge of its amazing industrial progress which they wished to emulate.[42] Stephen Kotkin suggests that it "was no accident that Gary, Indiana, (the home of the United States Steel Corporation), became the model for Magnitogorsk."[43] So, nowhere was completely out of the reach of America's economic and cultural capital.

Collaboration with America during the war also meant that the Soviet leadership and population at large were aware of the huge economic power of their capitalist partners. Every

[39] Schattenberg, 'Diplomacy of the Dictators', p 11.
[40] *Molotov Remembers*, pp. 69-70.
[41] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 175.
[42] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation* (University of California Press, 1997), 'Afterword'.
[43] Ibid.

Russian soldier and most civilians would have noticed or heard about the huge amount of American hardware shipped into their country during the war. According to the Albert L. Weeks, 400,000 jeeps and trucks, 14,000 airplanes, 8,000 tractors, 13,000 tanks, more than 1.5 million blankets, 15 million pairs of army boots, 107,000 tons of cotton, 2.7 million tons of petroleum products (to fuel airplanes, trucks and tanks), 4.5 million tons of food went there.[44] Some would even know about the entire Ford tyre factory built in Nizhny Novgorod.[45] A large proportion of the vehicles in Berlin at the time of the conference were made in the USA. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union was almost completely outside the reach of American consumerism and the further west the Soviet army went the more the Soviet leadership could deny access to other populations. Stalin himself had privileged sources of western culture and he had a fondness for western gangster films, Westerns, detective films and even Charlie Chaplin but the country itself had little access western cultural capital and thus it had little heft in Russia.[46] It is impossible to keep everything out of a closed society and American Jazz seeped in. The authorities were not consistently able to decide whether or not it was proletarian or had capitalist and commercial associations, and so sometimes it was supported by funding through organisations and at other timed jazz musicians were arrested and assassinated.[47]

America was not be going to go to war with Russia over the fate of territories in Eastern Europe in 1945 but would focus, conscious or unconsciously, on world-wide dominance through consumerism and soft power. They had great symbolic power because of their strength in many areas of capital. Russia's enormous military capital, via a huge army in control of large areas of new territory moved up the rankings in the quest for recognition but was still well behind America. When Truman approached Stalin on 24 July to let him know quietly about the

[44] Albert L. Weeks, *Russia's Life-Saver: Lend-Lease Aid to the USSR in World War II* (Lexington Books, 2010).
[45] Ibid., p. 77.
[46] Montefiore, *Stalin*, p. 457.
[47] Martin Lücke, 'Vilified, Venerated, Forbidden: Jazz in the Stalinist Era', trans. by Anita Ip, *Master & Margarita*, p. 2 https://www.masterandmargarita.eu/estore/pdf/eren013_jazz.pdf [accessed 6 April 2026].

new weapon that America had developed, the atomioc bomb, it was supreme demonstration of symbolic capital with military, economic and the cultural capital, inherent in scientific prowess, combined.[48]

## Smaller cultural struggles

Churchill wrote to Truman a month before the Conference mentioning that he did not wish to be a guest of the Soviet Government and their armies but he would rather "provide everything for ourselves and be able to meet on equal terms."[49] He did not want Stalin to have the status of a generous host. Not only did the Russians provide what Churchill requested, but the choice of Cecilienhof enabled them to have three equivalent sized houses for the Allied leaders, all overlooking the Griebnitz See, three roughly equal diplomatic preparation areas with rest-rooms next to the Great Hall which became the main meeting room, and indeed, three separate doorways so that simultaneous entry by the leaders was possible. A large round table gave no delegation physical superiority, but only the three leaders had armrests on their ample armchairs. The standards for accommodation thus met protocol expectations perfectly, with no-one being disrespected. The struggle in the recognition stakes would happen in other forms. The choice of Potsdam itself symbolised the defeat of their common enemy. Potsdam was the official home of the Hohenzollern family where they attended the Garnisonskirche and that had often referred to as being the home of aggressive Prussian militarism in diplomatic exchanges throughout the war. It was also where Hitler shook Hindenburg's hand to symbolise the rebirth of the nation just after the 1933 election victory. Another symbol awaited the delegates as the Russians had constructed a huge unmissable red star out of geraniums on the flowerbed in the inner courtyard.

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[48] Byrnes, *All in One Lifetime*, p. 300.
[49] Prime Minister Churchill to President Truman, 9 June 1945, *FRUS*, Potsdam, vol. I, p. 95, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv01/d55 [accessed 6 April 2026].

Interpretations of large foreign affairs events always focus on the political and diplomatic elites. At Potsdam these were usually men of advanced years who had taken lifetimes to reach their senior and powerful positions. The creation and use of capital in all its Bourdieuian variety was not confined to these people and it took many forms. It can be assumed that all the foreign staff, of whatever rank, gender or function, were competing. There were ventures out into the city of Berlin nearby, but most of the social and diplomatic life took place within the designated areas that were heavily guarded by Soviet soldiers. Even the vehicles used by the diplomats and administrative staff showed-off cultural and economic capital and were a reflection of the distinctions in the society that created them. Truman travelled in "The Sunshine Special" a car chosen by Roosevelt, while others lower down the ranks travelled in Packards and Chevrolets. While Churchill was in an armoured Humber Pullman, the senior diplomats used Humbers and Daimlers, also the most prestigious cars in Britain. The British took their class distinctions with them. The administrative staff used the transport provided by the military or walked. Many other people at Potsdam took part in the struggle for dominance even if it was not featured so prominently. The atmosphere at Potsdam was celebratory and relaxed and there were opportunities at all levels for people to show off their cultural capital. Charles Bohlen, the chief adviser to President Truman, wrote that "Potsdam was different to the two previous wartime conferences – different in tone, style and substance …As a result there was a sense of relaxation, an absence of compulsion, and with that absence, a freer exchange of opinions."[50] As well as the official business and professional commitments, there were dances, cinema, parties, lunches, music events and trips into Berlin.

The visiting diplomats and their support staff all had housing within their own compounds at Potsdam but each party was responsible for their own provisions and services. One of few women in positions of authority at the conference was Joan Bright Astley. She had

[50] Bohlen, *Witness to History*, p. 227.

managed the arrangements for the British delegations at Tehran and Yalta, and her services were engaged again at Potsdam. Having worked at the centre of power in the underground war offices in Whitehall, she was on personal terms with many of the senior people in the British leadership and her book *The Inner Circle* reveals a thorough understanding of the workings of British foreign affairs and her shared commitment.[51] Also, just as the diplomats came to know their counterparts at these meetings, so too did the service staff, in both the professional and social arenas. Astley was able to exert her own personal, social and political capital. There appeared to be an expectation that large amounts of vodka were to be consumed at some of their gatherings, and she developed professional and personal relationships with her Russian counterparts. After the Yalta stint, she recorded that "We had a sad drive to Sevastopol…the party over; I, because of the friends I had left behind and would most likely not see again."[52] But she met them again at Potsdam and after one of their "teas" together told their driver "to drive anywhere, while we sat by open windows, and tried to get the fumes of drink and cigarette smoke out of our system."[53] She flew to Berlin on 30 June as part of an administrative reconnaissance party and inspected the 50 houses, in each of which was placed a "beautiful Steinway or Bechstein grand piano" laid aside for the British party. The houses were spacious, well-furnished buildings in this rich residential area, untouched by allied bombing. It was her first job then to help select the house for the Prime Minister and the full diplomatic team and then to order all the required provisions for a lengthy stay, in advance. These were either to be delivered by the incoming British Army or flown in directly from Britain, including amongst her huge list of items, one hundred symbolic Union Jacks, six inches by four, for cars.[54] She was intimately involved in the delivery of all the services throughout the next 17 days until all

[51] Joan Bright Astley, *The Inner Circle: A View of War at the Top* (Little, Brown, 1971).
[52] Ibid., p. 199.
[53] Ibid., p. 215. This was after a meeting with General Karanadze, Nina Alexandrovna and Gala who were on the Russian service staff.
[54] Ibid., p. 214.

the delegations departed. She took pride in the work she was doing knowing that she representing the British delegation and she was exerting whatever cultural capital she had with the Russians with whom she worked closely.

Joy Hunter, as a twenty year old, worked as an administrative assistant in the British War Cabinet offices and was one of six such staff sent out to Potsdam to provide administrative support. She kept a diary of her time in Berlin, and dancing and the consumption of alcohol mentioned on almost every page.[55] Whatever the worries of the important delegates were, the mood was celebratory for the British support staff throughout the conference. Hunter was able to make number of trips into the destroyed city where she scavenged a piece of Hitler's marble table, visited Sans Souci and other highlights several times, attended the huge British Victory Parade, and later shook hands with Stalin, Truman and Churchill. She took pity on some of the local people she encountered. In her smart brown uniform, she herself embodied some form of capital in contrast to the defeated local people struggling to survive.

There are many ways of using cultural capital at a conference but one of the most obvious methods is the use of the diplomatic banquet. At Potsdam, it was open culinary warfare. After their previous war-time meetings, the Allies were developing a young tradition of these practices and the three sides took it in turns to organise an official banquet for the chief participants at the conference. Whilst the Russians could transport all their supplies overland, mostly by rail, almost everything the Americans and British needed was flown in. The Americans even brought daily supplies of water from France.[56] Historian Cita Stelzer focuses on Churchill's "use of dinner parties and meals to accomplish what he believed could not always be accomplished in the more formal setting of a conference room".[57] Wisely, she also points to the limitations of this kind of diplomatic engagement, notably a speech by Churchill

[55] Joy Hunter, *Joy's Journey: A Memoir* (Umbria, 2014), pp 85-110.
[56] Astley, *Inner Circle*, p. 214.
[57] Cita Stelzer, *Dinner with Churchill: Policy Making at the Dinner Table* (Short, 2011), pp. 1-2.

in the House of Commons in which he pointed his out: “It certainly would be most foolish to imagine that there is any chance of making straightaway a general settlement of all the cruel problems that exists in the East as well as the West…by personal meetings, however friendly.”[58] A common view is that the characteristic feature of international relations at its highest level is pitilessness when difficult or almost impossible decisions have to be made about recent human tragedies. Alongside this, however, at Potsdam the diplomats sat down and enjoyed large and ostentatious dinners together. Churchill obviously understood its limitations but during his political life he devoted immense efforts to this part of his diplomacy. It is doubtful that they have often led to small trades or concessions during warm and close conversations, but diplomatic banquets should not be dismissed just as opportunities for the diplomats to relax and discover the humanity within their enemies. A Bourdieu advocate would claim that they are open and blatant examples of the use of cultural and symbolic capital. Around the dinner tables, the world’s most powerful political elites are involved in a same contest for domination as they are around the conference table. At Potsdam, it was the same field of struggle but with more of a psychological dimension where the diners were subject to unconscious as well as conscious seduction with the results not being easily discernible. And not only were the diplomats engaged but so also were the hundreds of background military and service staff who were using their own cultural capital.

At their first meeting, an unplanned lunch with Truman, Stalin had admired the wines served and Truman later sent over a present to him at the house where Stalin was staying. This first gift between the leaders was “twelve bottles of Niersteiner (1937 vintage) wine, twelve bottles of Port wine and six bottles of Moselle wine.”[59] A gift of this kind is more than just a gift and can be understood as something which if given in a spontaneous way carries with it a

[58] Hansard HC Deb, 3 November 1953, vol. 520, cc7-136, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1953/nov/03/debate-on-the-address-first-day#S5CV0520P0_19531103_HOC_62 [accessed 6 April 2026].
[59] Stelzer, *Dinner*, p. 133.

social obligation.[60] This was a personal gift by Truman and it held more importance for the receiver than the sort that are officially approved in advance and exchanged by diplomats or heads of state. In a 2010 paper, Christina Nicolaescu suggests that "Reciprocity essence itself and accompanying feeling[s] of gratitude are crucial in almost all societies," and the "practice of gifts exchange allows agents to bear small losses in order to build a stable and long relationship with another one."[61] The expectation is that there will be some form of reliable partnership-building and reciprocity later on during the negotiations and in Bourdieu's vocabulary Stalin became indebted by the favour granted in the form a gift. Clearly the gift itself had no utilitarian value to Stalin but it was used as symbolic capital.

Later, in the conference itself, the Americans would make a further and much more important gift with the expectation of reciprocity. Truman served the same wine at the first of the official dinners at Potsdam arranged by the Americans on the evening of 20 July. For the meal, "The celery, lettuce, tomatoes and ice cream were flown to Babelsberg from the USS Augusta berthed at Antwerp. Other courses, presumably provided locally were pate de fois gras, cavier on toast, vodka…" Truman had asked Stalin about his musical tastes and he chose Chopin. So Truman had Eugene List, a classically trained U.S. army sergeant flown in to play the Chopin Waltz in A Minor (Opus 42) while Truman himself stood by the piano and turned the pages for him.[62] At one point in the evening, Truman himself took to the grand piano and played Paderewski's Minuet in G. Pederewski, whom Truman had met in his own boyhood, had been for a short while been a part of the Polish Government in exile in London in 1940.

The Russian banquet was next and according to Truman, there was a toast every 5 minutes until at least 25 had been drunk. It seems that the diplomats were transposing Georgian

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[60] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Routledge, 2011).
[61] Christina Nicolaescu, 'Bourdieu – Habitus, symbolic violence, the gift: "You give me/I give you" principle', Christian University 1.3 (2010), https://www.euromentor.ucdc.ro/en/nr1_vol3/engleza_articole/cristina_nicolaescu.pdf [accessed 6 April 2026].
[62] David McCullough, *Truman* (Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 427.

practices enjoyed by Stalin and others at the 'political dining society' at the dictator's dacha at the Kuntsevo where important decisions were also made. At these dinners in Moscow "the hosts customarily play at forcing their guests to drink, and then taking umbrage if they resist."[63] And not to be surpassed by the Americans, the Russians organised four musicians from Moscow. In his letter to his wife Bess, Truman wrote "Stalin sent to Moscow and brought his two best pianists and two feminine violinists. They were excellent. Played Chopin, Liszt, Tchaikowsky and all the rest. I congratulated him on their ability. They had dirty faces though and the gals were rather fat. Anyway, it was a nice dinner." As noted previously, the Russians had an advantage in the provision of food in that all their supplies were more easily available.[64]

Churchill, not to be outdone by the other two leaders, made very special efforts. Cita Stelzer suggested that "by this stage of the conference, Churchill was aware of the earlier attempts by Stalin and Roosevelt – continued at this conference by Truman – to marginalise him. His dinner was, in a sense, an attempt to regain standing and control of events."[65] For the British dinner he had ordered up the whole of the Royal Air Force Band – the String Orchestra. He personally selected all the seating for the guests and made sure that Truman and Stalin sat either side of him with their foreign ministers opposite. He may have hoped to influence or persuade his guests through his dinner-time convivial conversation but the later discussions at the conference provide scant evidence of any success. He had special menu cards printed with the Downing Street and Potsdam addresses included and chose the food that would be served. The ham for the meal had to be flown in at the last moment from England at his request.[66] Then he chose the music. After the meal, Stalin got up from the table with his menu card and started

[63] Montefiore, *Stalin*, pp. 465-71.
[64] 'The NKVD had all the electrical systems at Babelsberg and, as at Yalta, they even brought their own fire brigade. More than that Stalin had his own 'organised store of economic supplies with 20 refrigerators...and 3 farms – a cattle farm, a poultry farm and a vegetable farm' plus two special bakeries, manned by trusted staff and able to produce 850kgs of bread a day'. Montefiore, *Stalin*, p. 440:
[65] Stelzer, *Dinner*, p. 137.
[66] Gerald Pawle, *The War and Colonel Warden* (Harrap, 1964).

collecting autographs from the major figures in the room. Churchill wrote in his history of the war "I never thought to see him as an autograph hunter."[67] The whole Churchillian package on that evening was a display of British cultural capital, but on its own it would not in any way outweigh the military, economic and cultural capital of his adversaries.

## Struggles around the negotiating table

David Reynolds regards the cultural turn as having enriched diplomatic history writing particularly, "not just in opening up new areas of research but also in correcting a tendency towards documentary positivism."[68] T.G. Otte in a conservative defence of international history believes that its 'inner circle' involves judgement and decisions made in specific circumstances and that not to prioritise this and "dismiss it as desiccated diplomatic calculations is to fail to understand the sensibilities of a past age."[69] Yet, Bourdieu's toolbox is not dismissive of the inner circle. He always allows for both the human agency and the context involved in decision-making, and sensibilities are revealed in the signs, symbols and practices that constantly surround that human action. The decision-makers at Potsdam interact in imbricated conscious and unconscious ways and this is all worthy of exploration. As Bourdieu states: "We have spoken too much about consciousness, too much about representation. The social world doesn't work in terms of consciousness; it works in terms of practices, mechanisms and so forth. By using doxa we accept many things without knowing them."[70]

So, what was in the doxa a Potsdam? It was in the diplomatic protocol, which after common use, became second nature. It was within the language used, sometimes collaboratively and at cross purposes on other occasions. Euphemism eased difficult decisions. It was within the negotiating styles, developed by individuals and groups over time, taken up

[67] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume VI: Triumph and Tragedy* (Penguin, 1985), p. 579.
[68] Reynolds, *International History*, p. 90.
[69] Otte, 'Inner Circle', p. 27.
[70] Pierre Bourdieu, 'Doxa and Common Life', *New Left Review*, 191.1 (1992), pp. 111-121 (p. 111).

around the negotiating table. Those who conceded were allowed to save face and were supported in doing so. All were used at Potsdam. It was also within the performative aspects of diplomatic life and included emotional and taken-for-granted cultural behaviour. Alexander Clark-Kerr's responses to various expectations while the ambassador in Moscow showed the range of practices that can be included in doxa. On behalf of his country, Clark-Kerr found himself competing in a Russian male bonding session with senior politburo members and being subjected to drinking contests. Molotov brought them to a 'secluded' room and seated them with "the three toughest drinkers': It ended up with Molotov being propped up by supporters while Clark Kerr unable to stand up properly while trying to propose a toast" fell flat on his face.[71] Molotov "thumped the ambassador on the chest, exclaiming: 'Kerr is all right. He's the sort of chap we like. If he was one of us, he would be a partisan'. The manly poke and comradely praise, the honorary guerrilla status all this gratified the ambassador, who wanted Anthony Eden back in London to appreciate the closeness that he had achieved."[72] The diplomats at Moscow came to regard this as normal, taken-for-granted diplomatic practice. Mastery of the practices within the doxa, and the symbolic capital wielded allow a performer to hold sway. They will be able to interpret hard facts of the situation to their advantage. For those around the table at Potsdam, these were firstly, the decisions recorded at Yalta, and secondly, the facts on the ground as perceived by the three sides in July 1945.

Diplomatic protocol is a collection of traditional rules for courtesy and behaviour that make it easier for diplomats from different countries and culture to meet and hold discussions in a respectful way. By the time of Potsdam, all three diplomatic parties were willing to use the western diplomatic protocol. Over time, from a difficult start, the Bolshevik government in Russia found that it needed to rebuild a structured diplomatic service and this was constructed

[71] TNA, FO 800/301/250, Clark Kerr to Eden, 18 November 1943.
[72] Alexander Werth, *Russia at War* (Basic, 1993), pp. 753-4.

under the leadership of Georgy Chicherin. His successor, Maxim Litvinov, had allowed more autonomy for diplomats, so not everything had to be referred upwards, and in 1934 examinations for entry to the diplomatic service were introduced and an organisation for the Preparation for Diplomatic and Consular Work was set up. This included lectures by experienced diplomats, including Ivan Maisky, who became Ambassador in London in 1932.[73] When Soviet diplomats were removed by the NKVD in 1939, this represented a loss of both staff and institutional memory. Molotov, a complete newcomer to foreign affairs had to learn quickly and his first venture was the pact with Joachim von Ribbentop later in 1939. He must have learned international western protocol quickly because in 1943, after the Moscow Conference, Britain's Anthony Eden wrote that he was "brisk and business-like…a skilled workman".[74] Nicknamed "stone arse" for his capacity to read everything and argue for hours at the table, his negotiation style was to advance his most ambitious position and then doggedly defend it, making small concessions if pressed really hard. This happened at Potsdam where his request for 50% of 20 Billion dollars in reparations was gradually whittled down. His response to Truman giving him a dressing down in April 1945 about Soviet behaviour in Poland was to say "I have never been talked to like that in my life", but he was used to tough behaviour and robust exchanges.[75] Shouting was nothing new to Molotov. He met it with Stalin at Kuntsevo.[76] He admitted to his rough, undiplomatic treatment of the leaders of the Baltic States, even refusing to allow them to go home.[77] It was part of the Russian mode, as illuminated by Susanne Schattenberg, with regard to discussions between West German leader Konrad Adenauer and Nikita Khrushchev years later, suggesting that when negotiating with the Russians, sometimes Russian protocol is more effective.[78]

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[73] Kocho-Williams, 'Culture of Russian and Soviet Diplomacy', p. 182.
[74] Eden, *Memoirs*, p. 481.
[75] *Diaries of Alexander Cadogan*, ed. by Dilks, p. 733.
[76] Montefiore, *Stalin*, p. 471.
[77] Chuev, *Molotov Remembers*, p. 9.
[78] Schattenberg, 'Diplomacy of the Dictators', p. 11.

The British diplomats were well entrenched in western diplomatic protocol, with *Satow's Diplomatic Practice*, first being published in 1917 as a comprehensive guide for all their new entrants. Now in its eighth edition, it remains the bedrock of their practice.[79] All the British diplomats at Potsdam served long apprenticeship in the Foreign Office itself or on postings abroad. In common with Bourdieu, and also many cultural historians, Susanne Schattenberg endows the historical actors with both conscious and unconscious thinking, as shown in her analysis of Leonid Brezhnev's later leadership of the USSR, where she identifies that trust and familiarity were at the core of the cultural context there. She defines trust as "not merely a feeling but also an intellectual process, a semi-conscious decision in favour of something or somebody a person believes in". And she argues that familiarity is "an unconscious state not requiring any decision because it simulates a safe environment."[80] Trust is "a speculative investment into the future while familiarity permits the absorption of residual risk in the present."[81] One is therefore declared to be a precondition of the other. This elevation of the unconscious into the examination of diplomatic history is an accepted feature of the cultural approach. Diplomats from different states, following their careers, sometimes know each other for decades and there is time for familiarity and trust to be both built up and broken. These two concepts can be foundational in working relationships, even over the short term. Even Truman and Churchill declared some level of trust in Stalin based on very minimal contact. Despite the change in personnel, with the death of Roosevelt, and Churchill's defeat at the elections, and various hiccups over 6 years of war, there was a successful working relationship between the three foreign services and opportunities for the development of respect. The Potsdam Conference itself, with all its formal and informal meetings along with

[79] Ivor Roberts, *Satow's Diplomatic Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

[80] Susanne Schattenberg, 'Trust, Care and Familiarity in the Politburo: Brezhnev's Scenario of Power', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 16.4 (2015), pp. 835-858.

[81] Ibid.

dinners and social events, allowed some level of familiarity to develop. The conflicting ideologies and the particular routes towards developing relationships between diplomatic cohorts of the three allies mitigated against the Russians having the kind of trust and familiarity that the British and Americans enjoyed between them. But this familiarity also meant that Britain could be more easily drawn into 'misrecognition'. Even in personal relationships, someone can be exploited by their best friend.

The ambiguity and vagueness of diplomatic language, which all parties engaged in, allowed them to create constructive ambiguity that enabled them to sell the result to their domestic audiences. This is an accepted collaborative practice actively engaged in by both sides and the diplomats work towards the production of texts that allow each side to put their own slant on the results when they return home. They fall into this practice of constructive ambiguity quite naturally as discussions develop around a contentious issue. At Potsdam, the choice of the word 'responsible' or 'recognised', or the phrase 'to discuss' or 'to examine' as written in the final agreement mattered because they could allow for flexible interpretation and mean success or failure for the conference. The British were allowing the Soviet Union to have control over the satellite states but they needed the correct language to allow them to present this in a positive light to their home electorate.

All three of the allies had an interest in coming to some form of agreement and achieving a successful conference. Churchill had worked very hard to achieve the setting up of the conference with the objective of achieving a state of order in devasted Europe and defend or rescue Britain's imperial position in the world. Stalin may have been pursuing additional goals but he would have recognition for his new communist nation on the world stage. The Americans were interested in maintaining economic dominance, gaining support for her ongoing war against Japan and taking her soldiers back home. The prospect of a breakdown in talks was not an acceptable prospect for them. Despite, or maybe because of, the earlier

understandings and agreements made at Tehran and Yalta, the points of contention were considerable, but in order take home the perception of success, compromises were needed from the diplomats to deal with the unresolved issues. By the time Churchill departed for the election results in London, many of the small issues had been settled, and in his absence, and without informing the British, James Byrnes gathered together the major issues still outstanding and held four bilateral meeting with Molotov. At the point when the settlement was very close, there was tremendous pressure on the reluctant party to yield. Small inducements that did not change the main thrust of the whole deal may have been offered in order to push matters through. This is a normal practice in negotiations and is regarded as a legitimate way of reaching the greater good, at least for the benefit of the dominant parties in the discussion. On their arrival at the first meeting at Potsdam, after the British elections, Attlee and Bevin were in exactly this position. This was the moment of inflection. The two newcomers would have known that they would not be meeting British objectives for the conference and at the same time recognised their drop in rank order in the world. When this happens in a public place, it is common for diplomats to assist the compliant colleague to save face. It is a complicit collusion and it is in the interest of the dominant party to help. Erving Goffman's view on this, in his classic text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, is that they assist the person in maintaining face. Goffman avers that this type of artificial, willed credulity happens on every level of social organisation from top to bottom.[82] In this instance, Attlee asked for promises from the new Polish Government that they would hold fair elections and permission for direct flights to Warsaw, and the others gave these full consideration. This standard diplomatic practice eases the pain for the subjugated.

Appeasement is often used as a smear in political circles and the word 'Munich' conjures up the supposed negative effect of this practice in diplomacy. This is a result of a

[82] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Penguin, 2022).

lingering association of its interpretation by Winston Churchill and others who wrote their own contemporary version of Chamberlain's management of Hitler's ambitions in Europe.[83] But the practice has a long and successful heritage with many advantages as well as possible downsides. Appeasement was used by the huge British Empire in the management of its vast territories and by Stalin himself in his dealings with Germany in from 1939 to 1941.[84] And there is a strong argument that the British and Americans used it at Tehran, Yalta and that this continued at Potsdam. War is always sitting at the edges of important diplomatic discussion and if Britain and America wanted to achieve all that was on their list of objectives that prospect would be closer. The ceding of Niederschlesien could be construed as part of the appeasement that Britain and America practised at Potsdam.

Bourdieu often emphasises that the competence and skill in managing the doxa in the field allows for success. In the diplomatic context, this means those who present themselves well and who can manage the texts and their language can improve their results. Molotov was often criticised for many aspects of his performance, but both he and Stalin were very particular about the key works being placed in the final published documents, often returning to them days after the first draft and making revisions. Also, the use of euphemisms is important, casting difficult issues in a softer light. The use of the words 'transfers', and 'humane' reduced the mental image of other words that might actually best describe what was happening or be due to happen by agreement. This practice allowed diplomats to smuggle in to their home audiences some topics with strong moral attachments. It would be easier for British politicians to consent to the final agreement if the words were more palatable. Such words are "used to obscure something that is negatively valued or would prove to be an embarrassment if declared

[83] CATO, *Guilty Men*.
[84] T.G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind. The making of British foreign policy, 1865-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

more forthrightly".[85] In this case it would be easier to give Niederschlesien to Poland if "any transfers that take place should be effected in an orderly and humane manner".

At some point in this kind of historical narrative there has to be a marriage or coming together between the cultural and political elements involved and in answering the question about Niederschlesien. This must centre around the package deal put together by James Byrnes and the willingness of the British to accept the unpalatable. It had been assembled behind their backs, or at least without any forewarning, by the other two players and it had been constructed on the basis of materials being taken from the British zone of Germany without any consultation or license from them. It represented a complete defeat for the British stance on Niederschlesien. The sequence of events involved has already been laid out. Attlee and Bevin were not naïve politicians and they knew that they were faced with a difficult prospect. On the cusp between a past governed by complex relationships with both America and Russia, and an uncertain future in which they would be beholden to America for their economic well-being and security arrangements, they chose to go along with the deal. It can be argued that this was a completely rational decision, made because they felt able to balance the likely advantages and disadvantages in a conscious and calculating way. Britain had more to gain by accepting.

There is something of social Darwinism about Bourdieu. Humans are struggling to survive and be dominant in the social arena. If they are successful there, then they will survive. Success is not achieved just by physical strength or the use of the most potent weapons, but also by psychological and social means, and the use of their various forms of capital. Bourdieu's schemata rests on a number of pre-suppositions but so do the interpretations of all historians. Cynthia Roberts praises Stephen Kotkin's biography of Stalin because "Kotkin's book avoids getting mired in historical debates or the scaffolding of hypothesis testing that is found in the social sciences". But no-one can step outside of their presuppositions, whether

[85] James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), p. 53.

they are in the social sciences disciplines or anywhere else, not even Stephen Kotkin.[86] Bourdieu has never rejected the validity of explanations involving rational choice set in context, but believes this is only part of a bigger story. His toolbox, particularly involving his concepts of capital, doxa and misrecognition allows some of the unspoken and the unconscious to be considered and is therefore an enrichment to any historical interpretation, even if much of the evidence for these components is unspoken and hidden.

[86] Cynthia Roberts, review of Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin. Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941*, *H-Diplo/RJISSF*, 17 March 2019, https://issforum.org/roundtables/h-diplo-roundtable-xx-30-on-stalin-waiting-for-hitler-1929-1941 [accessed 6 April 2026].

# Chapter 6: Key decisions at Potsdam – July/August 1945

British diplomats went into the conference at Potsdam with many aims, one of which was to secure the Eastern Neisse as the new western border for Poland, but they eventually yielded to others on this aspiration. The first part of this chapter will offer a justification for the use of the application of ideas from behavioural psychology as an enriching supplement to the understanding the decision-making involved. Daniel Kahneman's research has a strong focus on heuristics, a normal and essential form of reasoning especially when quick decisions are required. Their application to the historians' study of past events relies on analogical reasoning. The second part of the chapter will present seven key decisions leading to the placement of the frontier and also examine how three of Kahneman's ideas can be utilised in context to understand the negotiations.

Diplomatic decision-making can be conscious and rational but it can also be the opposite. It would be uncontroversial to make the assumption that however rational they may be, the decision makers' desires and preferences, using Bourdieu's term, their habitus, can bias the interpretation of the limited information available to them. It will be claimed here that the diplomats and leaders' decisions are also influenced by everyday unconscious cognitive bias, in particular by the use of heuristics. All three of these approaches together make for a comprehensive and amalgamated interpretation of how and why Niederschlesien ended up on the eastern side of the new frontier. This approach also addresses a core suspicion that not all decision-making is conscious and perceptible to the participating historical actor. If this is indeed the case, why would historians not give it some attention and include it in their interpretations?

Daniel Kahneman believes that a good way to describe the human mind is to postulate that it operates with two cognitive systems, one that deals with the need to make swift decisions

and another which handles longer term decision-making, as well as controlling or overriding the first kind. He calls these System 1 and System 2, or "thinking fast and slow."[1] As he puts it, "Both systems appear to have different personalities. System 1 is quick, impulsive and intuitive and prone to errors and biases. System 2 is deliberate, cautious, effortful, but it is also lazy."[2] Much of the time people rely on System 1 and it is here where they mostly use heuristics. Heuristics are strategies "that ignore part of the information, with the goal of making decisions more quickly, frugally, and/or accurately than more complex methods."[3] They are a normal part of human activity. There are huge advantages in being able to deliver practical and swift decisions, particularly when humans are under pressure or are short of key information and in need of quick decisions, but many have a downside in that they can also be error-prone. As in every other venue where people meet, decisions were being made fast and slow at the Potsdam Conference. His postulation, if it has value, can therefore be applied to enrich our understanding of how some of the decisions were made there.

Application of Kahneman's approach to the decisions made at Potsdam does not require any kind of close internal psychological examination of the individuals concerned. It comes from a background of behavioural psychology, its focus being the analysis of observable behaviour, and so it is very different to the historian's usual interest in the empathic understanding of the historical actor's action. 'Fast and slow' thinking is a universal phenomenon and adherence to particular kinds of decisions or judgements can be measured in terms of probability. As long as one can outline the nature of the issue and its context is secure, it is possible to come to a conclusion about the probability of a particular judgement being made about the individual's decision-making. Obviously, setting up the issue and the context

[1] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Penguin, 2012). This book contains a good summary of all the ideas derived from his research into human cognition.
[2] 'Curious Reader', *How do we think? The definitive guide to Daniel Kahneman's "Thinking fast and slow,"* (Amazon UK, 2013).
[3] Gerd Gigerenzer and Wolfgang Gaissmaier, 'Heuristic Decision-making', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62 (2011), pp. 451–82.

in the present time would be easier than doing so in a past era, but there may be situations in well described and minuted international conferences where enough information is available to be sure of equivalence. The probability judgement would still suffer from the same weakness that all analogies would have, that is that the historian would still have to decide if the situation is equivalent by assessing the features that both events have in common.

An attempt will be made to apply some of Kahneman's research concepts to Potsdam. He and his collaborators were interested in judgement under uncertainty and that captures the atmosphere facing the allies at the end of the world war.[4] They were uncertain about the motives of the other parties with whom they were negotiating and they were undoubtedly unsure about the changing material and political conditions in the various countries under Soviet occupation at the time. Since the publication of his research in 1980s, some of Kahneman's concepts, such as "confirmation bias", "the halo effect" and the "loss aversion principle", have already moved into our public discourse.[5] These and a number of others can be used to interpret the thinking and decision-making at Potsdam and thus complement the more conservative interpretations based on geopolitics and the propensities of the main actors.

At the heart of Kahneman's thinking is the notion that human beings are not completely rational as their thinking is riddled with errors and biases. This is partly because life is difficult and complex and they have to make decisions concerning the likelihood of uncertain events or the value of an unknown quantity. Most people do not have the time or energy to handle the complexities of this decision-making and end up relying on "a limited number of heuristic principles which reduce the complex tasks of assessing probabilities and predicting values to simpler judgemental operations."[6] The people at Potsdam were in an analogous position and thus subject to both the advantages and disadvantages open to all users of heuristics. Usually,

[4] D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky, *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).
[5] Kahneman. *Thinking Fast and Slow.* These three concepts are covered on pp. 80-81, 82-85, 282-286.
[6] Ibid., Appendix A. Kahneman, et. Al., *Judgement Under Uncertainty*, p. 418.

these heuristics work successfully, but sometimes they lead to important errors. Many decisions were made at the Potsdam conference and these can be examined in the light of the research by Kahneman and others in the field of behavioural psychology. The conclusions should enrich any resulting historical explanation of events.

Historians often include a folksy generalisation or appropriate analogy within their narratives. This is accepted practice and readers allow them to do this and acquiesce, as if they have a license to do this based on their intuition or sagaciousness, after deep immersion in their chosen topic for many years. If an analogy is available after rigorous testing, it would be profitable to apply it in appropriate arguments. Probabilistic statements about human behaviour which can be constantly re-examined in the public sphere and in the laboratory offer more re-assurance than those randomly lifted from wider culture. Historians' narratives are eventually ranked within academia and elsewhere by their plausibility, if they are well written and include appropriate analogies. I argue that the plausibility of analogies would be enhanced if it were grounded on Kahneman's tested propositions.

The claim being made here is that some of the decisions made at Potsdam were the result of heuristic decisions that were analogous to those made by Kahneman's subjects. We can interpret some historical actors' decisions as rational, while some are biased by habitus, and some made via error prone heuristics. This whole interpretation of the latter depends on an acceptance of just another piece of analogous thinking. How plausible analogies are will depend how far they meet some simple criteria, as set out in the table below.[7] The plausibility of the analogies chosen and used by historians will help to determine their confidence in the overall plausibility of their historical interpretation. If analogies served no purpose then historians would not use them. Analogies, hidden and open, are a common part of historical

[7] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. By Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (Stanford University Press). https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html (accessed 17 April 2026).

writing and historians are used to making judgements about the plausibility of their arguments resting on the analogies they have used.

| | Commonsense guidelines for evaluating analogical arguments (Adapted from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) |
|---|---|
| a | The more similarities (between two domains), the stronger the analogy. |
| b | The more differences, the weaker the analogy. |
| c | The greater the extent of our ignorance about the two domains, the weaker the analogy. |
| d | The weaker the conclusion, the more plausible the analogy. |
| e | Analogies involving causal relations are more plausible than those not involving causal relations. |

No progress can be made with this line of argument without the recognition that it depends upon the following simple analogy. Some of the decisions made at Potsdam were analogous to decisions made by the subjects of Daniel Kahneman's behavioural psychological research in the laboratory. This is not a disturbing acceptance for a discipline such as history, whose narratives about past events are riddled with analogies, and often dependent upon them for their interpretative power.

Wherever iteration or repetition, however imperfect or incomplete, is perceived within chosen past events, there are possibilities for analogies. It is a shibboleth of the profession that every event is unique and yet Reinhart Koselleck writes that there is no understanding unless there is an acceptance of repetition. As he says, "Repetition is itself also an action and an event; however it is an event that is not legible in terms of its singularity, but it terms of what repeats itself in the event and its singularity. It is hard to judge this in percentages, but I would venture that more than 50% of all events contain structures of repetition that *in actu* arise again and again."[8] The argument presented by Koselleck is that ordinary life, whether in the past or the

[8] Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of time. On possible histories*, trans. and ed. by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (Stanford University Press, 2018), p. 256.

present, would be unintelligible if there is not an acceptance amongst people that there is some form of repetition. Events are repeated but differently and analogy is a good way of handling this, and, "If, in contrast everything were new or innovative, humankind would fall into a black hole from one day to the next, helpless and bare of all orientation."[9] There is no easily acceptable philosophical exit from this paradoxical situation. Koselleck recognises that and his solution is that there is an exit through the identification of "structures of repetition" in human agency.[10] He sees this as history's main aspiration and a way to achieve understanding of events in the past.

Adorno, approaching the issue in a slightly different way regrets the use of identitary logic in attempts to understand human thinking and behaviour. This term, as used by Adorno, refers to kind of reasoning that relates to human beings and their creations merely in an instrumental way. As Albrecht Wellmer explains:

> This type of thinking, or non-thinking, has, according to Adorno, come to assume an ominously fateful significance in today's civilization, and it has come to do so because of the way in which a reductive "instrumental" reason has become dominant in the forms of natural-scientific technical, administrative and economic forms of reasoning, forms of reasoning that, according to Adorno, have increasingly come to determine the everyday world as well as people's self-conceptions and their interpersonal relationships.[11]

The pursuit of objectivity in the world of natural science, in the search for laws and causes, demands reductionism, and skews towards abstraction, but Adorno argues that if similar

[9] Ibid., p. 160.
[10] Ibid., pp. 158-174.
[11] Albrecht Wellmer, 'Adorno and the problems of a critical construction of the historical present', *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory*, 8.2 (2007), pp. 135-56 (p. 135).

methods are applied to people's thinking and behaviour then a sort of cognitive deficit happens. An acceptance of the use of laws and classificatory abstractions, as in natural science, economics and elsewhere, would crush the human individuality and context out of any interpretation of decision-making. Adorno suggests that there may be a way to overcome this by the use of 'negative dialectics".[12] In philosophy and in the writing of histories, neither of these two aspirational suggestions by Koselleck or Adorno have so far reaped any obvious rewards.

If a fully deterministic view of human behaviour were to be taken, all the decisions at Potsdam would be examined from the outside and laws governing human behaviour could then be applied to gain understanding of the events therein. It may be that at some future time our mastery of the biological sciences, and with it discoveries of the chemical origins of thought, will make this possible. In the meantime, the historian's accepted professional way of understanding human decision-making is from the inside, in other words the granting of free will to individuals and then assuming their actions are related to human intentions set in a context. A clear and rational exposition of human decision-making is then possible if people are actually able to consciously know their own minds and the intentions therein. They would be able to know and inform others about why they made particular decisions and took particular actions, and thus answer the 'Why?" question with regard to past events. However, humans do not always know their intentions and motivations, nor can they be easily inferred, or they may wish to mislead. When decisions are being made by a human being, it is not possible to know all the conscious and unconscious factors that are involved. Even the decision-makers at Potsdam could not have a comprehensive understanding of their own thinking. The cognitive scientist, Douglas Hofstadter, holds the view that people are making analogies in their thinking

[12] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (Routledge, 1990).

every few seconds.[13] It is not viable to know exactly which analogies were being drawn upon at Potsdam, which specific piece if proverbial wisdom was being applied, and so any historian is forced back to using observed tendencies and patterns of behaviour. The supplementary use of behavioural psychology, which has research evidence of these tendencies and patterns, despite being another variety of identitarian thinking, will enhance an historical interpretation and the most plausible interpretation will be the one that more closely matches these tendencies and patterns of behaviour. It provides an opportunity to deal with the whole person involved in the decision-making at Potsdam. In getting access to unconscious thought and habit, an empathetic piece of psychotherapy would not be available in any circumstances. Insights from behavioural psychology certainly have something to offer which is unavailable elsewhere.

The relationship between the historian and the reader is a joint enterprise and only comes to fruition when the reading of the historian's words is happening. Without that active mental participation, the words are just dead marks on a page. There can be no success in this relationship unless there is repetition and unless the reader accepts that repetition. Things are the same, but at the same time they can be slightly different. In interchanges, we sometimes state that one thing is like another or we accept that one thing is like another without even recognising it. The repetition lies within the consciousness, unconsciousness and language of both parties. It is within analogies, constructed concepts, metaphors, parallels, folk wisdom and common-sense. These are all bound up with metaphor and analogy, and the resemblances we are creating are irredeemably horizontal. We are always trying to perceive or understand one thing in terms of another. Some of the analogies are so natural and universal that they are unnoticed, whereas some of the abstract terminology used may be misinterpreted or even avoided by the reader. In any historical exposition by the historian there is an acceptance that

[13] Douglas R. Hofstadter, 'Analogy as the Core of Cognition', https://worrydream.com/refs/Hofstadter_2001_-_Analogy_as_the_Core_of_Cognition.pdf (accessed 17 April 2026).

one thing is often like another and included in that is the notion that one piece of human behaviour is like some other piece of human behaviour and given similar circumstances a person would behave in the same way. This is a translational activity but because of the abstraction involved with the use of terminology, schemata, and classifications it does not necessarily get us any closer to the meaningless immensity and richness of reality. There is a propensity amongst readers towards closure and even if the historian does not offer it then the reader will. They are looking for something which resonates and they will find it somewhere, even if that is from their own conceptual apparatus including common-sense or folk wisdom. These all contain analogies.

There will be a piece of folk wisdom available for every decision made at the Potsdam Conference or indeed any other conference. It is almost impossible to know if, when and how it is applied by the historical actor, the historian or the reader. It is the assumption here that proverbs and other forms of folk wisdom are not just available for illustration purposes within public discourse but they may, 'under the surface', perform a more dynamic role in human thinking as unrecognised prompts for action. Wolfgang Mieder examined the proverbs and folk wisdom used by world leaders including some of those who attended the conference. He quotes Truman as saying that "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." which could serve as the attitude he applied to the Niederschlesien issue.[14] It is interesting to note that there is at least one piece of folk wisdom can be found to mirror almost all of Kahneman's heuristics.

History is a magpie discipline and use of classificatory terms from other disciplines is very common. A recent history book publisher claims "More recently, the use of quantitative methods and formal theory, drawn from contemporary political science, economics, and sociology, has led to a new understanding of ancient Greek economic and political

[14] Wolfgang Mieder, *Behold the Proverbs of a People: Proverbial wisdom in culture, literature and politic*s. , (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), p. 246.

development."[15] Many new classificatory terms are used within behavioural psychology.[16] Kahneman's methods and ideas, particularly prospect theory, have been applied before to a range of historical events, including the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1956 Suez Crisis, the German Kaiser's visit to Morocco in 1905, the attack on Pearl Harbor and President Carter's failed attempt to rescue the American hostages in Tehran in 1980.[17] It does have some obvious limitations, the first of which is the limited scope of the theory. It is not a complete or comprehensive decision-making theory because it focusses on interpreting the choices made within key boundaries of that decision, in particular the reference point, the options available and the likelihood of the chosen outcome. It is certainly not a general theory of diplomacy or politics, and it can only be assigned to particular closely described events. In this case it will be applied to two neatly defined decisions and then the more complicated decision-making on reparations at Potsdam. A second limitation is that it is a theory that, at least in its early stages, involved individual choice, whereas in many scenarios, decisions, or at least the preparations for the decisions, are made by organisations or states and thus always have a collective element. The counter argument to this is that at Potsdam, the three leaders were dominant and the final decisions were actually made at the top. Charles Mee, for example, claims that Henry Stimpson and other American delegates were kept on the periphery of what went on at Potsdam by Truman, and felt excluded. Mee wrote that "Truman restricted distribution of plenary session notes to himself and one or two others, and so the American diplomats took to filching copies

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[15] *Ancient Greek History and contemporary social science*, ed. by Mirko Canevaro, Andrew Erskine, Benjamin Gray and Josiah Ober (Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

[16] These include Prospect theory, Anchoring, Framing, Availability, The endowment effect, The planning fallacy, Confirmation bias, Hindsight bias, Representative Heuristic, and many more. See Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.

[17] Mark L. Haas, 'Prospect Theory and the Cuban Missile Crisis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 45.2 (2001), pp. 241-270; Rose McDermott, 'Prospect Theory in International Relations: The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission', *Political Psychology*, 13.2 (1992), pp. 237-263; Jeffrey Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great power intervention in the periphery* (Cornell University Press, 2019); Chaim Kaufman, 'Out of the lab and into the archives: A method for testing Psychological Explanations of political decision-making', *International Studies Quarterly* 38.4 (1994), pp. 557-586; Ariel S. Levi and Glen Whyte, 'A Cross-Cultural Exploration of the Reference Dependence of Crucial Group Decisions under Risk: Japan's 1941 Decision for War', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41.6 (1997), pp. 792-813.

of the minutes distributed by the British"[18] Truman clearly felt he was the decision-maker, writing in his diary "I told Stalin that I am no diplomat but usually said yes and no to questions after hearing all the arguments". This was his habitual style and the way that he had headed his Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program back home during the war.[19] Cadogan, Britain's leading diplomat, constantly complained about Churchill making a mess of things, but his cabinet and his ministers accepted that the final decision lay with the Prime Minister. Stalin's position was unchallenged. Perhaps the reason why Kahneman's conclusions are more often applied to foreign policy is because it is there where particular leaders are more dominant in decision-making.

We can assume rationality was at the centre of discussions at Potsdam, but many decisions were made under uncertain conditions. All the participants were stepping into an unknown and unpredictable future and whatever their habitus and dispositions they often made decisions on partial or unknown information. There is no claim being made here that the use of Kahneman's behavioural psychology provides a full explanation or complete interpretation of the decisions made there, particularly decisions made under uncertainty. Kahneman himself wrote,

> We did not ask ourselves whether all intuitive judgements under uncertainty are produced by the heuristics we studied; it is now clear that they are not. In particular, the accurate intuitions of experts are better explained by the effects of prolonged practice than by heuristics. We can now draw a richer and more balanced picture, in which skill and heuristics are alternative sources of intuitive judgements and choices.[20]

[18] Mee, *Meeting at Potsdam*, p. 209.
[19] McCullough, *Truman*, pp. 272-291.
[20] Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 11.

An acceptance of their use allows for an enrichment of our understanding. Years of practice would have allowed the diplomats to develop skills in managing conversations around the large table at Cecilienhof and if the discourse was what produced the results, no doubt some of the diplomats were more proficient than others. Heuristics being used in the making of decisions could be either conscious or unconscious, but that is always the case when decisions under conditions of uncertainty are being made. It would be a mistake to only consider and focus on the rational elements of decision-making if people are not always rational beings. In the study of history, much of the spoken and written evidence is absent, and therefore so is much of the evidence of the thinking undertaken by individuals involved because it is mostly hidden within the unconscious. Any access to that thinking, however slight, would improve our understanding of past events.

A simple narrative around the ceding of Niederschlesien to Poland follows a sequence of decisions made by individuals and groups of people over a period of many years, each decision being a tentative step into the future and wrapped within its own special context. It would be artificial to construct a single direct line between one and the other. Also, it would be unproductive to try to find applications from behavioural psychology, which would not necessarily be suitable, for each of these decisions. This sequence, leading eventually to the package deal agreed between the three parties to the discussions, can only be imaginatively created retrospectively and it is possible that alternative sequences can be created and described.

## 1st Decision

At the end of the First World War, a demarcation line known as the Curzon Line, between the new communist government in Russia and the new Polish state, was proposed. The line was actually based on a suggestion by philosopher Herbert James Paton in 1919 and eventually made its way into international diplomatic circles after being proposed by the British Foreign

Secretary, Lord Curzon, as a possible basis for a future border between the two new countries.[21] After a brief war between the two sides, in 1921 at the Treaty of Riga the Russians lost a large swathe of territory east of this line. As a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in 1939, this territory was regained by the Soviet Union after being in Polish hands for 18 years. The Soviet leadership had made the decision that the land, under their sovereignty in earlier times, would be Russian again.

## 2nd Decision

During the possible alliance discussions between Britain and the Soviet Union that followed Operation Barbarossa, when the Russians were in full retreat, Stalin wished to include in any agreement with Britain a recognition of Soviet sovereignty over the contested territory east of the Curzon Line. Such recognition was not included in the 1941 Anglo-Soviet Agreement of mutual support in the war against Germany. However, two years later in November 1943, when both the Americans and the British were hugely reliant on the enormous contribution of the Soviet armies, Churchill and Roosevelt decided to yield to Stalin's demand for this territory at Tehran, and in order that Poland be compensated for this lost land in the east they also agreed to move the German border westwards to the Oder and Neisse rivers.[22] The parties to the decision-making did not have an identical understanding of the undertaking. A decision was made, but at that stage there was no consensus on exactly which Niesse river was intended as the border demarcation. Nor were the Poles consulted and when they found out the Allies' intentions in late 1944, the Polish government-in-exile in London objected to the loss of their eastern territories and this eventually led to a split. Tomasz Arciszewski, the Polish Prime Minister in exile after Mikolajczyk, told the British newspapers "Poland does not desire to

[21] W.H. Walsh, 'Herbert James Paton, 1887-1969', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1971, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/1108/56p293.pdf (accessed 17 April 2026).
[22] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences*, p. 50.

annex Breslau and Stettin."[23] The split probably contributed to difficulties Churchill was encountering with Stalin with regard to the setting up of a new Polish government and the achievement of some form of democratic arrangements.

## 3rd Decision

The third decision, published in the Communique at the end of the Yalta Conference in February 1945 was a reaffirmation of the Tehran decision but with two further refinements. There would be some digressions along the Curzon Line in some regions of about five to eight kilometres and the new Polish Government of National Unity would be consulted about the extent of the compensatory land to be taken from Germany, to the west of Poland.[24] This was the position when the Potsdam Conference opened. By that time a new Polish Government of National Unity had been formed with the inclusion of some of the members of the Polish government in exile, including Mikolajczyk who joined despite mistrusting Stalin and resisting plans with regard to the Curzon Line. Mikolajczyk returned to Poland in the hope of rescuing democracy for his country but the bulk of Poles in exile held out against the Curzon Line plan, much to Churchill's annoyance, and continued to do so long after the war. They did not wish to have the land offered in compensation.

How can this resistance be understood? It is difficult to find a wholly rational interpretation for this stance. Many Poles had already been removed from the territory by Stalin between 1939 and 1941. After that period, the ethnic composition was altered again by the Nazi occupiers. With the red army in occupation, Stalin had complete mastery of the territory and there was no likelihood of that being changed. Yet, the London Poles could not or would not accept the fait accompli.

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[23] *Manchester Guardian,* 16 December 1944.
[24] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences,* p. 138.

The Poles had won the territory in their war against newly communist Russia 1921 at its most recent re-birth after many centuries of partition and foreign domination. Warsaw itself had almost been lost at one point in the war with the communists. The Poles' new land had been hard won. The rational construction of a list of pros and cons around their decision is unlikely to show why they made it. Being humans, they were not bound by rationality alone and their decisions were influenced by their unconscious thinking and practices. They had a huge range of folk wisdom and proverbs from their habitus to draw upon. Also, the heuristic known as the endowment effect supplies an enriching interpretation for their thinking. No law is being applied here. It is a probability. It is established that people attach a higher value to possessions they already own. As Kahneman puts it, "These negotiations are going nowhere because both sides find it difficult to make concessions, even when they can get something in return. Losses loom larger that gains."[25] Some of Kahneman's research was carried out with students in laboratory situations and this cannot faithfully mirror the exact context in which the London Poles found themselves in 1945. No doubt, they had profound knowledge of and affection for their country and its newly won identity, traditions, mores, values and folk wisdom and these weighed heavily in their thinking. Linkages to ideas of Polish identity stretching back to the Dmowski Line, the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, and even the geographical layouts of earlier Polish kingdoms were a factor.[26] Nonetheless, Kahneman points to a universal psychological tendency which may have a supplementary bearing on decision-making. In his experiments, 90% of people decided to stay with their original possession rather than exchange it for something of higher value.[27] Niederschlesien was much more valuable territory with productive agricultural land and advanced heavy industries and yet they preferred to hold on to the land they already owned. A psychological pull may have been in play. This heuristic is

[25] Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 299.
[26] Norman Davies, *God's playground: A History of Poland* (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 282-283.
[27] Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 297.

known by Kahneman as the endowment effect and is closely associated with the notion that losses count as more important than gains. Such a notion stretches as far back as Aristotle who wrote that "For most things are differently valued by those who have them and by those who wish to get them: what belongs to us, and what we give away, always seems very precious to us."[28] It has now been tested thoroughly by Kahneman in the laboratory and the outside world and so can be used in analogical form within this historical interpretation. It offers the reader something more than just description or an analogy with some other prior event.

## 4th Decision

The fact is that although Churchill was involved in British challenges against Stalin, it was actually Attlee and Bevin who made the final decision of acquiescence at Potsdam. In rational terms, the topic of frontiers was automatically linked to whether or not the population would be allowed to stay, the numbers of people involved, the volume of the territories from which they would be removed, and those to which they would be sent, the methods of removal, and the care of the people involved. Churchill, who had earlier declared his support for population transfer, had made some strong spoken remarks during the conference against the prospect of the movement of huge numbers of Germans. But it was not Churchill who had responsibility for looking into these matters long before they were put into practice, but the Labour politicians Attlee and Bevin. Long before the war ended both had by then well entrenched views on how to treat the Germans.

Population transfer was not well regarded before the Second World War, with the British government dropping the 1937 Peel Commission's recommendation of partition and population exchange to solve the Jewish/Arab problem in Palestine. Nonetheless the idea lingered and just before the outbreak of war, the British government through Sir Neville

[28] Richard McKeon, *Basic Works of Aristotle* (Random House, 2001), p. 43.

Henderson suggested to Hitler that they could solve the difficulties in the Polish Corridor through population transfer.[29] Churchill himself was an outspoken opponent of such transfers at the start of the war especially when Stalin and Hitler were using them to solve their perceived internal difficulties. When Stalin was transferring people east of the Curzon Line in 1941, Churchill wrote to the Australian Prime Minister that "the forcible transfer of large populations against their will …would vitiate the fundamental principles of freedom that are the main impulse of our cause".[30] However as the war got under way, the principle began to fade as the Russians were now on the British side and the Americans transferred large numbers of their ethnic Japanese citizens from their west coast to camps inland. Even Churchill started saying that the Greek-Turkish transfers after World War One had been a success.[31] A few years earlier, he had considered such a transfer as a war crime but by 1942 the British, under his leadership, were giving their attention to planning a mass expulsion of Germans. In February 1942, a preliminary study into this was carried out by the Foreign and Press Office overseen by John Mabbott from St John's College Oxford. If such an event were to happen, he believed that an international agency would need to take charge to avoid the sort of disaster that had happened at Smyrna in the Greek-Turkish exchange. If it was not managed properly, he predicted extensive persecution and abuse of the Germans by the Czechs and the Poles who would be sent into Germany with "little but light summer clothes on their backs."[32] He wrote that the Germans would have to be "herded into concentration camps", a large transient population living in public buildings and schools would be created and the whole evacuation would

[29] TNA, FO 371/23027, Sir Neville Henderson (Ambassador to Berlin) to Richard Strang (Assistant Under-Secretary of State for Europe), 25 August 1939.
[30] Clive Ponting, *Churchill* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p. 652.
[31] Hansard HC Deb, 15 December 1944, vol. 406 cc1478-578, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1944/dec/15 [accessed 17 April 2026].
[32] TNA, FO 371/30930, John Mabbott (Foreign Research and Press Office), 'The Transfer of German Populations', 13 February 1942.

perhaps last ten years until completion. This would have alerted the government to the massive scale and consequences of such an undertaking.

Almost two years later, in November 1943, after Eden had made his commitment to Benes about a post-war transfer from Czechoslovakia, and after the Allied leaders' meeting in Tehran when Churchill consented to population transfer, the British set up a full study of the implications of a mass expulsion of Germans from Eastern Europe, with senior representatives of major government departments taking part. It was called "Inter-Departmental Committee on the Transfer of German Populations" and the chair of the committee was Jack Troutbeck, a senior official at the Foreign Office. The report they produced took six months and it was then presented to the Armistice and Post War Committee, a group of cabinet ministers whose role was to make plans for Europe after the war. It would not have been easy for a committee to prepare a report with changing military scenario on the ground and in the absence of any decisions made about the future borders within Europe. By the time the report arrived the Soviets had made huge progress westwards, and the possibility was that the populations in the areas under discussion would be totally under their control by the war's end.

The committee reported that the size of the transfers would completely eclipse anything that had happened in the Greek-Turkish transfers and anything carried out previously by the Germans and Russians during the war. The estimates of numbers of people to be moved were considered at the time to be 5,340,000 if East Prussia, Upper Silesia and Danzig were to be given to Poland in compensation for their territorial loss east of the Curzon Line. If the new border was to include more German land and the land eastwards of the upper Oder River and along the Eastern Neisse to include Stettin and Breslau, then a further 3,000,000 would be added to the total. They speculated that half of the Germans living in Czechoslovakia, judging that to be about 1,500,000 people, would be added. This amounted "at the worst" to a compound total of 10,140,000 individuals and most of them would be expected to be placed

eventually in whatever remained of Germany to the west. There was some speculation that some could be sent to Austria, Argentina or Siberia or forced into labour in the Soviet Union. They then reported their views on the likely social, political and economic consequences of such large-scale transfers:

> It is not too much to say that the addition of the heavy economic burden on Germany which transfers would impose, over and above the grave dislocations following on the loss of the war, the devastation caused by it and the general demands of the United Nations, might create an economic problem which would prove insoluble and lead to a complete German collapse.[33]

They included the comment that "Large-scale transfers, however carefully organised, would be bound to cause immense suffering and dislocation and give rise to widespread criticism. His Majesty's Government might therefore prefer to wash their hands as far as possible of any active participation in their execution."[34] To reduce the problems that such huge forced exodus would create the committee recommended that an International Transfer Commission be set up with the three major allies along with Poland and Czechoslovakia as representatives. They also made recommendations about how people could be identified as German, that Germany itself would be made to pay the costs incurred and that the Transfer Commission would determine the circumstances and timing of the forced transfers.

The sombre conclusions of the report were not well received by the Armistice and Post War Committee when they met to discuss it in the summer of 1944. Clement Attlee, then Deputy Prime Minister, chaired the committee and Ernest Bevin was there as representative

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[33] TNA, CAB 121/85, A.P.W. (44) 34, Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Transfer of German Populations, 12 May 1945, p 22.
[34] Ibid., p. 8; TNA, CAB 121/85, Armistice and Post War Committee minutes, 10th meeting, 20 July 1944.

for the Ministry of Labour, and thus they had more than a year to consider their positions with regard to transfers of mass populations before they were faced with having to make crucial decisions related to them at Potsdam. The year before, Attlee had been promoting the idea that the Germans as a matter of policy should be re-educated and made to suffer and Troutbeck reported that he took "a very stern line about any thought of giving undue consideration to German feelings or interests in this matter".[35] Bevin, at the same meeting, suggested that the breakup of the large German estates and the dispossession of the Junkers of Prussia would allow for the creation of small farms for three million expelled families until he was told that many of these estates were in areas from which Germans would be expelled as the land would become Polish territory. A year later, as Foreign Secretary, he would himself be responsible for British policy and its implementation. The War Secretary Sir James Grigg thought that "some of the statements in it were much too lenient from the War Office point of view."[36] The report never went as far as the War Cabinet and after January 1945 was not discussed formally again.[37] In normal practice, Attlee, the chair, would have been the person responsible for bringing the report to the cabinet for further discussion or dismissal. He did not. Failure to carry through an established expectation can be regarded here as a decision. This is a clear indication that as the whole issue of population transfer came closer with the advance of the Russians and the retreat of the Germans, the British government were making no obvious preparations. When Winston Churchill made his "Clean Sweep" speech to the House of Commons, the die was cast.[38] They had given their approval to various parties over a lengthy period.

[35] TNA, FO 371/46812, Troutback Minute, 8 September 1945.
[36] TNA, CAB 87/68, A.P.W. (44) 125, R. Law, 'Food Production, Land Settlement and Large Estates in Germany and the problem of the transferred populations', 15 December 1944; TNA, CAB 121/85, Armistice and Post War Committee minutes, 4 January 1945..
[37] R.M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane. The expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (Yale University Press, 2012), p. 90.
[38] Hansard, HC Deb, 15 December 1944, vol. 406 cc1478-578, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1944/dec/15 [accessed 17 April 2026].

At that point, Britain was the only allied nation to prepare a report. The government had been warned by their civil service of the consequences, and the government, at least Attlee and Bevin were willing to allow and witness the uncontrolled expulsion of 10m people regardless of the predicted consequences. Seven months later, large number of those people had fled westwards from of the Soviet armies. While this was going on, and even while Churchill was challenging Stalin at Potsdam about the numbers of possible evictions, Attlee, the expert on the topic within the diplomatic team, did not once interject directly on it when sitting around the table. The numbers of evictions were unknown, but by the time the British delegates arrived in Potsdam many of them could be seen in the streets of Berlin. The obvious rational conclusion to draw from this is that Attlee had made his mind up two years earlier that Germans would be collectively punished and was treating that as a separate topic to the placement of the new Polish frontier. He may have thought that there were few votes to be gained by giving any focus to humanitarian issues, even though most of those who objected to Churchill's 'Clean Sweep' speech were Labour MPs. He may have been willing to take earlier advice from the Inter-Departmental Committee Report that given the 'immense suffering and dislocation' and the possible criticism that might follow, he might wish to wash his 'hands as far as possible of any active participation in their execution.'[39] It appeared that the new British leadership at Potsdam did not wish to recognise the undoubted link between frontiers and transfers.

## 5th Decision

The next decision in the selected sequence was about the number of people still in Niederschlesien during July 1945. If the numbers were low, then the decision to condone Stalin's plan was easier for the western allies. At the Yalta Conference, the topic of population numbers appeared in discussion, with Churchill saying "there were circles in Britain who were

[39] Douglas, *Orderly and Humane*, p. 75.

apprehensive of the idea of expelling a great number of Germans. Churchill himself was not afraid of such a prospect."[40] Stalin referred to numbers at the Yalta Conference saying "there was almost no German population in the parts of Germany occupied by the Red Army".[41] Churchill's response was that "that naturally made things easier."[42] So, in Churchill's eyes the numbers mattered and the assumption here is likely to be that in his view, the political consequences in Britain would be lessened if fewer Germans needed to be expelled. At Potsdam on 21 July 1945, when Truman and Churchill were objecting to the existence of a Polish administration already in Niederschlesien, Stalin stated that "It is very hard to restore the German administration in the western strip, everyone has run away." And a few moments later, when Truman asked him what happened to the local population amounting to 3 million people, Stalin's response was "The population has gone."[43] This was a lie and historians' later examination of the topic clearly demonstrated that. A more recent Polish calculation of the numbers suggests that "the territory of the Third Reich east of the Oder and Lusatian Neisse was inhabited by around 9.6 million people before the outbreak of war, and after the front passed through it in 1945, only by about 3.7 million people, including 2.5 million Germans and 1.2 million Polish indigenous people."[44] This process of removal was getting under way long before the Potsdam Conference itself. It was part of a secret agreement between the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) and the Soviet Government more than a year earlier on 27 July 1944, "to support the shape of the future Polish western border based on the line of the Lusatian Neisse and the Oder."[45] It was "implemented by the commander in chief

[40] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences*, p. 104.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., pp. 208-209.
[44] Witold Jarno, 'The Role of the Polish Army in the Military Settlement Action in the Years 1945-1948', *Zeszyty Wiejskie*, 29 (2023), 211-238 (pp. 222 and 225).
[45] Ibid., p. 213.

of the Polish army (Naczelne Dowodztwo Wojska Polskiego).[46] Also, on 26 May 1945, the Polish Workers' Party decided to have all Germans removed from the western territories of Poland.[47] There are various contested estimates about the actual numbers as being somewhere between 250,000 and 1.3 million in the period just between 19 and 30 June 1945.[48] Doubtless, many had reached Berlin by July 1945, as witnessed by the conference delegates.

However, the later establishment of the truth or falsity of Stalin's statements is immaterial here. What matters is whether or not the British believed him, and how and why they responded to his claims. Churchill challenged him, saying that the issue was important because much of the coal for Germany's energy needs came from Silesia. Also, the whole of the country would need to be fed and this could not happen because the area was the chief source of foodstuffs. Churchill stated that he accepted the Soviet figure of 8 million Germans being in situ before the arrival of the red army and suggested that "There is other information to the effect that two or two and a half million have after all stayed behind. Of course, these figures could be checked."[49] Perhaps unexpectedly Stalin agreed that they should be checked but this is something that was not followed up by either party. No source for Churchill's comment about "other information" was produced at the time or discovered later. A memo sent by Mr Roberts from the Moscow embassy a few days earlier had reported that some Anglo-American journalists who had just returned from a tour of Silesia had reported that the Soviet authorities were now "less inclined to support extreme Polish claims." They were preventing Poles "from expelling the Germans from Breslau and Lausitz" and the Poles they met had little confidence that they would receive any territory in Lower Silesia beyond the Oppeln district.[50]

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[46] Stanislaw Jankowiak, 'Cleansing Poland of Germans: The Province of Pomerania, 1945-1949', in *Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948*, ed. by Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 89.
[47] Ibid., pp. 88-89.
[48] Ibid., p. 89.
[49] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences*, p. 209.
[50] *DBPO Potsdam*, No. 3158 Telegraphic [N 8677/6/55] Mr Roberts (Moscow) to Mr Eden. (received 16 July 3.p.m.).

This was a rare snippet of information about what was happening in Soviet-occupied territory. Churchill's comment had been discussed by the diplomatic team with the possibility of delaying decisions until a survey of populations was carried out, but this idea was dropped. It was clearly completely unrealistic and impossible to carry through, and can be dismissed as a piece of rhetoric, said for effect and lacking sincerity. Any decision resting on a survey would be superseded by actions on the ground.

The discussion on that day was heated but inconclusive and it continued in the same vein the following day. Churchill continued to argue that the acquisition of Niederschlesien would not benefit Poland and pointed to "some doubts of a moral order concerning the desirability of such a great displacement of population. We are in principle agreed to a resettlement but in the proportion in which the population is resettled from east of the Curzon Line."[51] Stalin was able to offer his own set of counter arguments on the day but the eventual decision on the matter would not depend upon who performed best at rational discussions but on other judgements. On the following day he insisted that "The people were either drafted into the army and were killed or taken prisoner, or have left these areas. Very few Germans remain on this territory. But this can be verified."[52] Stalin had repeated his stance many times and the other two leaders had not made a serious and successful attempt to dispose of it. When Churchill left for London a few days later the numbers question was still not resolved.

The package deal was put in place very soon after that departure and his successor, Clement Attlee, would no longer have the opportunity to challenge again unless he wished to rekindle it. Stalin's claim about the numbers had therefore been accepted by default and dropped out of later public discussions at the plenary sessions. Churchill had obviously thought that the number of remaining Germans was an important bargaining point and this could have

[51] Ibid., pp. 217-218.
[52] Ibid., p. 218.

been used either to reduce the volume of territory being taken from Germany, perhaps to the Glatzer or Klodzka Neisse. A decision not to do something is also a decision. With their armies being in occupation, supported by the NKVD and the Polish Government of National Unity, the Russians without doubt knew exactly the state of affairs in Niederschlesien. In the absence of direct evidence, we can rationally compose reasons why the British acquiesced. The British delegation could always claim afterwards that they genuinely did not know that Stalin's claim was false and perhaps in the face of future criticism therefore could claim they did not agree to the clearing out of three million people from their homes. The politicians would naturally worry if it became known back home that they had openly and willingly consented to such a mass exodus of people. Churchill had already personally met significant resistance to this in Parliament when he made the speech to the House of Commons in November and on his return from Yalta in February 1945.[53] Also, the British may have considered that their greater aim was to remain on good terms with their war-time ally and if the lives and property of the Germans was the price to pay for this, then so be it.

The topic of numbers reappeared privately within the British camp at Attlee and Bevin's first meeting with their diplomatic team on 29 July. As was mentioned in Chapter 6, Bevin stated that he was considering an agreement with the Soviets around the idea of meeting the full Polish request for the Lausitzer Oder river frontier in return for a favourable reparations deal and guaranteed food supplies.[54] Following this, a suggestion was made at their meeting that as there was no reliable evidence to show how many Germans remained, before a final decision had to be taken, it might be useful to have a report prepared by experts who were enabled to visit the areas in question. One of the arguments in favour of this was that "it would give time in which British public opinion in the United Kingdom could become accustomed to

[53] Hansard, HC Deb, 15 December 1944, vol. 406 cc1478-578, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/sittings/1944/dec/15 [accessed 17 April 2026].
[54] *DBPO*, p 970.

the idea of Poland's acquiring a large stretch of territory in the west."[55] A draft memorandum for presentation to the conference by the UK delegation was prepared, stating that "For this purpose the Governments of the UK, USA and USSR, shall be accorded such facilities as they may desire for their representatives to visit the territories and study conditions on the spot."[56] However, it never reached the main table because it was withdrawn, a note in the margin of the document giving the reason as "Sir A Clark-Kerr is strongly in favour of leaving this out, as giving the Russians an excuse for continued interference. Mr Harrison and I think we can now drop it."[57] The decision about the placement of the frontier was ineluctably related to the numbers of Germans still in their homes in eastern territories, and the diplomats' view that this might be of concern to the public back home. They struggled with this, and while being pressed by other factors requisite to reach compromise, they relied in the end on a heuristic, an instinctive way of making a judgement under uncertainly and based on Stalin's prompts decided on a low number. This made the decision to accept the Lausitser Oder as the frontier much easier.

An instinctive and outright confrontation with Stalin on the issue of numbers might have led to the conference being abandoned without agreement on the issues that had still not been settled. This would not have been to the advantage to any of the three parties. The Soviets may not have cared much about diplomatic etiquette but they would not have responded well to a diplomatic snub. They had recently reached the top table in international affairs and a public challenge to their honesty would have been regarded as the highest insult in diplomatic terms. Churchill had felt insulted at Tehran, Molotov had felt insulted during his meeting with Truman on 23 April 1945, but the accusation of dishonesty at an international conference would have trumped these earlier slights and would probably have ended the conference. Alisher

[55] Ibid., p. 969.
[56] Ibid., p. 1048.
[57] Ibid., p. 1049.

Faizullaev describes three forms of symbolic insult used in diplomacy: by misrecognition ("diplomatic bypassing"), direct confrontation ("diplomatic punch") and concealed verbal or nonverbal actions ("diplomatic slap"). His paper focuses on the third, indirect form, or "diplomatic slap" which employs obscure symbolic insults as a means of tacit manipulation for influencing the opponent, or as an instrument of restoring social status."[58] Accusing Stalin of lying at the conference would not be like the "diplomatic slap" that Molotov received earlier in the year from Truman, but would rather be a "diplomatic punch". All three parties had too much invested in a productive outcome and at least the two western leaders would not have wished to return home to their domestic voters empty-handed. The very experienced Alexander Cadogan who held the senior portfolio for the British delegation would have counselled against such a major snub.

The reference to Alsace Lorraine in the 'clean sweep' speech is public, as well as his often-repeated mention of the Greek-Turkish population transfers in 1923 that was in the public domain. Thus, he confirmed that these were analogies which entered Churchill's decision-making. They were visible to all, but this does not mean that other thinking was not in operation. It would be wrong to rationalise his actions only on the basis of what is seen and heard as the unconscious and habitual also need to be included in any interpretation. In his psychological research Daniel Kahneman was very careful not to rely on WYSIATI, meaning 'what you see is all there is'.[59]

There may also have been a heuristic in operation of which Churchill was unaware. An outside view from behavioural psychology should enrich understanding of this event. It was a circumstance of some uncertainty and the allies had to make a decisions nevertheless. Daniel Kahneman's research is fundamentally about judgement under uncertainty. The leaders and

[58] Allisher Faizullaev, 'Symbolic Insult in Diplomacy. A subtle game of diplomatic slap', *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 2.4 (2017), 1-116.
[59] Kahneman, *Thinking fast and slow*, pp. 85-88.

diplomats involved had to make judgements and the situation on the ground within Niederschlesien was unknown to them. Some of these were people with wide life and military experience and might guess what it might be like for a defeated population to exist in the face of an oncoming Soviet army and how they were likely to behave. Based on this experience, they might guess at the size of the population remaining. Others only ever held safe desk jobs and in the absence of practical experience depended on academic sources for a sensible judgement. Nonetheless a decision had to be made and Kahneman suggests that people, in the absence of reliable information, use a rule of thumb called an anchoring and adjustment heuristic. He claims that this is not just something that is confined to a psychology laboratory but is widespread in society and can be found everywhere from house valuations, to the price of cars and even to the behaviour of judges in the German legal system.[60] No-one is exempt from using it. The anchoring heuristic describes how, when attempting to judge a certain value, people tend to use an initial value and then adjust it. They do this by decreasing or increasing their estimation. Despite this, people are attached mentally to the initial value. This is known as anchoring and prevents people from making sufficient adjustments towards accuracy and they end up close to the initial value. In this case Stalin provided the initial value. The others had the choice of adjusting it upwards or downwards. Given that he had offered zero, the diplomats, unless they had some special knowledge or skill, were going to end up close to the original figure and then base their further actions on that low figure. The impact of the anchoring heuristic can be quite astonishing. In the simplest of experiments, amongst many complex ones held in the real world, Daniel Kahneman asked visitors to the San Francisco Exploratorium to estimate the height of trees. He gave some subjects high anchors for the height of the trees and others were given low anchors. They were then asked to make their judgements. “The anchoring measure would be 100% for people who slavishly adopt the measure as an

[60] Ibid.

estimate, and zero for those who are able to ignore the anchor altogether. The value of 55% that was observed in this example was typical."[61] If the British leaders used the anchoring effect consciously or unconsciously around Stalin's initial value, then they would be judging very low numbers indeed, and therefore acting on Stalin's claim. They would then be much more likely to consent to bestowal of a larger territory in Poland's favour, because in their heuristic judgement fewer people would be impacted. They may then have judged that there would be less adverse comment from their domestic audience on their return to Britain. Of course, the decision of the leaders is not a simple one and can also be understood at other levels, but the suggestion here is that it may be partly based on faulty heuristic thinking.

### 6th Decision - the reparations

With regard to the amount of reparations to be extracted, in very simple terms, one side wished to occupy the devastated country until she was able to pay her own way and eventually re-enter the community of nations, while the other was keen take as much material wealth and to spread communism. If the starting point is an acceptance that the two western powers, after much discussion in the previous three years, arrived at Potsdam wishing to help set up Germany on a stable economic basis and Russia was keen to keep Germany in subjection then there is a number of options that historians can take in their interpretation. It is worth noting that at the Tehran Conference, Churchill said to Stalin "I am for partitioning Germany. But I should like to consider the question of partitioning Prussia. I am in favour of separating Bavaria and the other provinces from Germany." Roosevelt then went on to suggest how Germany might be divided into five separate parts.[62] Firstly, it can be a rather traditional one, in the Collingwoodian style, and composed as a complex empathetic re-enactment with the parties mustering their arguments in attempts to defeat the other party. Diplomatic skill, personality,

[61] Ibid., pp. 123-124.
[62] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences,* p. 48.

rethinking the thoughts of the leaders and the bridging of gaps when evidence is missing, are all very important in this kind of reconstruction of the event. A second and very different approach would emphasise the maximising of material value using expected utility theory to help make sense of the decisions. The assumption here is that people will act rationally to achieve their stated goals, in Truman's case, as he stated it, "Byrnes and I expect our interests to come first" and "I'm not working for any interest but the United States."[63] A big shortcoming of this is that interests cannot be reduced to material value, and also it does not make it possible to recognise the fact that a loss in a given amount of money or material can provoke a stronger emotional reaction than a gain of the same amount of money or material. A third approach would be to apply a Bourdieuian framework where the three parties, all in perpetual conflict, would be using their various forms of capital in all the interchanges. A fourth approach could be the imposition of a framework taken from the ideas of Daniel Kahneman. The latter two have a psychological orientation within. Each of these involves identitarian thinking at some level and none would claim to comprehensively explain the decisions made. This narrative will bolt on Kahneman's "four-fold pattern" to its interpretation.

Prospect theory and the fourfold pattern is a part of Kahneman's behavioural psychology that has been most used by historians or international relations scholars in their examination of decision-making with regard to major conflict situations.[64] It is particularly suitable where there is enough available historical evidence to show that options available to the decision-makers before the event being studied. Rose McDermott was an early user of this method when she examined the President Carter's failed attempt to rescue 53 American hostages being held by prisoner at the American Embassy in Tehran in 1980.[65] Her

[63] Ibid., p. 49: Truman confided in his diary that "Byrnes and I shall expect our interests to come first"…and… "I'm not working for any interest but the United States". In practice this is not understood through the rational exercise of expected utility theory.
[64] Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, pp. 310-321.
[65] McDermott, 'Prospect Theory'.

interpretation of events using Daniel Kahneman's ideas is a model of how it can be applied to enrich understanding of past events. McDermott fortunately chose an event where the historical decision-maker lost, where the reference point can be clearly shown and where the probability of a range of options was available. She used the options and probabilities prepared by the American JCS and CIA involved in the operation itself as her guide.[66] This allowed her to apply the full prospect theory. Her role as the historian is to ensure that the nature of the decision at issue and its historical context is secure. Not all of these things are known for the actors at the reparations discussions and so the reduced version, the fourfold pattern, is used instead. This substitution can be taken as guidance that Kahneman's behavioural psychology has to be used sparingly.

No claim is being made that an interpretive response to the reparations discussions will only be understood by the application of research results of behavioural psychology. It will just be enriched. Probably most of the decision-making at Potsdam was made on the basis of rational thinking by intelligent people within their habitus and deserves interpretation from the 'inside'. Behavioural psychology's focus is on events and decisions as seen from the 'outside', and is less concerned with how people describe their own thinking and more concerned with heuristics used by people and their patterns of behaviour particularly in conditions of uncertainty. Heuristics are often described as biased or irrational ways of thinking or decision making, but without them it would be difficult for humans to function. They are just little rules of thumb which allow people to make quick decisions in responses to the situation in which they find themselves. They do not fit into rational thinking but they are fast, functional and simply wrong on some occasions. There is no reason to believe that people were not using heuristics at any point in everyday or formal situations. So, room must be made for them in some form in historical interpretations.

[66] Ibid., pp. 257-258.

Behavioural psychology reveals tendencies that people have when dealing with particular kinds of decision-making. Two of these are the certainty effect and the possibility effect, and together they can give some understanding of the attitudes opposing sides have in a dispute or when working towards a possible settlement. The certainty effect is when outcomes that are almost certain are given less weight than their probability justifies. Possibility effect "causes highly unlikely outcomes to be weighted disproportionately more than they 'deserve'".[67] This can be applied to the struggle over reparations at Potsdam, one of the three elements of the final package deal. It does not negate or override the arguments that each side brought to the table, the pressures they felt, their estimation of the opposing sides or the rich cultural and political context in which they saw themselves. A decision maker who claims to be rational is obliged to conform to the 'expectation principle'. In other words, the more probable an outcome is in a risky situation then the more weight it should have. The Russians, with the Yalta agreement in place and their armies in place across Europe, had every expectation that in the forthcoming discussions on reparations there was a high probability they would get what they wanted. In the face of this, Truman, if he were to win the reparations argument, would have something substantial to take home to his domestic audience. Extricating the USA from Europe without the prospect of long-term financial commitment was seen as important to the whole American diplomatic core.

The certainty and possibility effects, according to Kahneman, lead to a system of preference known as the fourfold pattern and this challenges the expectation principle. The pattern appears when one crosses two unattached pairs of categories: low probability events against high probability events, and losses against gains. This can be laid out in a grid of 4 different settings. In the first scenario or setting, the certainty effect will lower the actor's perceived probability of a gain during the discussions across the table and Kahneman's research

[67] Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 311.

predicts that their decision will be affected by their fear of disappointment. They will be risk averse and will therefore accept an unfavourable settlement just to avoid uncertainty. In the second setting, the same certainty effect will predict that the actor will aspire and work hard to gain value and will therefore be willing to take risks. In the third setting where there are low probability gains available for the actor, they will feel pressed to go for a large gain and will be prepared to act riskily and be unwilling to settle even for fairly favourable gains. The last setting is where there is excessive perception of the chance of a large loss, so then the actor will wish to avoid risk and will accept an unfavourable deal. One can attempt to impose this grid on the lengthy tripartite discussions over reparations, starting in Moscow and ending with the incorporation of the agreement into the package deal. Kahneman's research reveals that if the probability of winning is high for an actor, then they will be willing to accept a settlement and their opponent will be in the position where they will be willing to continue the struggle to achieve more. Therefore, the opponent is in the stronger position and it is probable that the final settlement will be less beneficial for the first actor. It soon became clear that because of the opposing views about the future of Germany, there were only two camps in this struggle with the two western allies keen to avoid the mistakes of the Versailles settlement and preserve some form of democracy in Germany through the maintenance of a functioning economy. It remains to place the two opposing sides in the grid. The judgement about where to place the Russians on the grid is not made by the Russians but by the historian and the judgement here is that the Russians are in the first setting with the British and Americans in the second setting and thus very ready for the struggle ahead and psychologically in a stronger position.

At Moscow a month earlier, the main discussions were around the supposed but contested agreement at Yalta and the Soviets were expecting their opponents to carry through the arrangements for reparations through the value of industrial assets and forced labour. German factories and equipment to the value $20 billion was mentioned with Stalin and Maisky

demanding half. By August 1945, the Soviets had been in occupation of Eastern Germany for four months and were actively removing equipment. They would have expectations in regard to achieving a favourable settlement. No sooner had the Potsdam Conference started than the whole reparations issue was reframed by James Byrnes in terms of percentages to be allocated to each part and from where they should be sourced. The Russians had started this discussion with a fixed amount and the major portion of the assets facing opponents determined to reduce their take.

Kahneman has shown that framing has a significant impact on how people perceive reality.[68] An issue, if framed differently can alter their perception of something and change their behaviour as a result. Byrnes, perhaps based on his great experience in backroom politics during his various roles in the American state and national governments, cleverly changed the frame of the whole reparations discussion by offering the Russians a percentage financial calculation rather than a fixed sum. Initially, this gave the impression that they might end up with the same amount, $10 billion, but Byrnes spent the first two weeks whittling away at the percentages. The details of the movements in these discussions on this topic are outlined in the previous chapter. They finally reached an impasse which was only broken when Byrnes offered Niederschlesien to Molotov. Despite the Russians starting off in an apparent position of strength, Byrnes, in a determined effort avoid the Versailles predicament being repeated, pressed the Soviets to take to a very low amount.

Kahneman reveals that the psychological tendencies in such a circumstance are that they will compromise and accept less than their initial expectation and the Americans and British will be much more willing to take risks in the negotiations, as this table illustrates.

| | GAINS | LOSSES |
|---|---|---|
| HIGH PROBABILITY | **Risk Averse** | **Risk Seeking** |

[68] Ibid., pp. 363-374.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Certainty effect | e.g. Your bet on a sure thing<br>Fear of being disappointed<br>Accept unfavourable settlement | e.g. A gamble between bad options<br>You hope to avoid loss<br>Reject favourable settlement |
| LOW PROBABILITY<br>Possibility effect | **Risk Seeking**<br>e.g. Lotto<br>Hope to make a large gain<br>Reject favourable settlement | **Risk Averse**<br>e.g. Insurance<br>Your fear of a large loss<br>Accept unfavourable settlement |

Kahneman's research was based on studies of the results of court cases with genuine, experienced judges classifying the cases in terms of the strength of each.[69] Court cases are not simple affairs, although their complexity may not measure up to that of the Potsdam discussions. The pattern of results was clearly demonstrated and matches that of the agreement that formed the package deal at Potsdam. At the point when Byrnes brought the proposed settlement back to the eleventh Plenary on 31 July, Molotov had conceded. The Russians were prepared to accept much less than their previous insistence on 10 billion dollars worth of reparations and ended up taking only a percentage from their own areas of occupation. This interpretation may seem like a blunt instrument used in a very complex set of lengthy and robust exchanges, with a low level of resonance for the reader, but it does allow a psychological element to be included. Its success will still depend upon the solid groundwork of the historian who has to ensure that the nature of the decision at issue and its historical context.

### 7th Decision

It is often the case at conferences that the big decisions or the turning points are not made in the public space with immediate fanfare but take place at smaller meetings in quieter circumstances. Such a meeting happened at Potsdam when Byrnes came to meet Attlee and

[69] Ibid., p. 319.

Bevin at 4.00 pm on 30 July. There is no record of this meeting and so the physicality of the moment and the immediate plan of either party can only be speculated upon. There was much available for consideration. It was a short meeting which suggests that whatever Byrnes had to say was not deeply contested and argued over, and he was simply saying that the Americans were going to offer to agree to the Soviet proposal of Western Neisse as the new Polish frontier. Nevertheless. the decision by Attlee to acquiesce was still a decision. Within half an hour of entering Attlee's house, Byrnes was already back speaking to Molotov at his house a few hundred metres along the road. Attlee had attended all the plenary sessions with Churchill and had been fully integrated into the diplomatic discourse throughout. He was now the main player and in perhaps his first decisions as prime minister he was condoning the brutal uprooting of millions of people westwards into uncertainty, along with the creation of a new international border with all the future implications that might be involved. That it was with his full knowledge and consent is without doubt. This does not sit well with his reputation as a man who devoted himself to the welfare of his own people, from his voluntary work with slum children at the beginning of the century to his presiding over the setting up of the welfare state in the 1940s.

A claim could be made that the decision to submit to the will of the Americans did not happen on that afternoon because at a subsequent plenary meeting the following day the British yielded formally. Bevin told the delegates on that day that he had been instructed to keep the new Polish frontier along the Eastern Neisse. He went on to say that the British had met with the Polish Government of National Unity delegation again and gained verbal assurances from them that they would carry out free and unhampered elections by secret ballot as soon as possible.[70] He then asked Stalin when the occupying troops would be removed and was assured that only two roads would be occupied as these would be needed as supply routes. Then Stalin

[70] *Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam Conferences,* p. 282.

asked, “Is the British delegation in agreement?” Bevin answered, “It is.”[71] The British concerns were appeased by two unenforceable promises and on that basis Niederschlesien became de facto a part of Poland. The case has already been made that America held all the various forms of capital against Britain, which had little option but to agree. Attlee may have believed he had achieved two aims that he could go back to Britain and pass off as gains made against a tough opponent. Predictably, only two weeks later, Churchill, now in opposition, was on the attack in the House of Commons saying the western frontier decision was a mistake and expressing concern about reports that were reaching Britain of “the conditions under which the expulsion and exodus of Germans from the new Poland are being carried out and the huge numbers of Germans still unaccounted for.”[72]

Was the decision to submit easier for Attlee than it would have been for Churchill? He had consented to the new frontier and the huge humanitarian disaster attached to it, agreed to a divided Germany, and pinned the future of Polish democracy to a vague promise. He said almost nothing significant about it in his autobiography and said very little to parliament on his return to London. Despite Stalin’s derogatory comments about him and Churchill’s oft quoted comment that Attlee was “a sheep in sheep’s clothing”, he was in fact a substantial character. He is much lauded for his achievements leading two post war governments and, in defiance of such comments, had the toughness and character to push through reforms that had a major and lasting impact on British life.[73] It may have been easier for Attlee to accept the symbolic violence of the Americans and withstand the weight of the public opprobrium that may lie ahead after their joint decision. Firstly, he, along with Bevin had strong feelings about the necessity of imposing retribution. To be fair to him, he was placed in a set of circumstances

[71] Ibid., p. 284.
[72] Hansard, Debate on the Address, vol. 413, 16 August 1945 https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1945-08-16/debates/abb06368-c553-467a-85be-9e83ecbb4105/DebateOnTheAddress, [accessed 17 April 2026].
[73] Harris Kenneth, *Attlee*, (WW. Norton, 1983). A neat compilation of Attlee’s achievements can be found therein, esp. pp. 567-568.

created by others, but it is clear he had a hardened attitude towards the Germans and had worked against the preparations to ameliorate the effects of the huge displacement of humanity he had a part in overseeing. Secondly, the next election was a long way away and he could hope that it there were horror and disapproval expressed in the public discourse, it would have dissipated by 1950 when the next election was due. Thirdly, capable of taking a view of the broader picture, he could see the value of continued good relations with the USA from whom he would soon be asking for a loan, and with USSR which still had a huge standing army in the middle of Europe. Fourthly, it was Churchill who made the promises to the Poles at the start of the war about democracy and he might not have felt such a strong commitment to that promise. Lastly, Britain was weary of war and was looking forward to peace and reconstruction. He may have judged that the voters would not be very forgiving if he came back home without a settlement and perhaps a prospect of a future struggle, this time against a former ally.

In the study of the past, no-one has been able to offer a successful alternative to with direct access to human agency. Every decision made by the historical actor is a step into the future and historians are chasing after an understanding of that momentary action. We cannot grasp it in its concrete immediacy, and so to get any access at all, we surround it with a conceptual apparatus of one kind or another. The conceptual apparatus is needed to select the material for the context and also to interpret the action itself. Seven key decisions have been selected as having some relation to the final acceptance of the package deal which sealed Niederschlesien's future. Three of them have been examined using a set of concepts from psychology and they rest on a straightforward analogical argument likening some of the decisions to those that Daniel Kahneman has studied. Given their thorough provenance, they should merit a place amongst the many other forms of analogy routinely used in historical interpretations.

# Conclusion

Despite my thesis making much of the argument that a great deal of what humans think and do is habitual or subject to non-conscious thought, I will give myself a licence to deliver a conscious interpretation about why I set out on this path. This is perhaps an unreliable retrospective glance back at my own circumstances. About ten years ago, I encountered a book written by T.K. Wilson entitled *Frontiers of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia*.[1] Wilson wrote a comparative history of violence in two important areas of upheaval and changing national boundaries just after the First World War. It is based on an intriguing analogy, but many such analogies are used in historical interpretations. In Silesia, a plebiscite had been set up by the League of Nations and in the meantime, while awaiting the result, international troops, including Irish soldiers, were sent to keep the peace. At about the same time in Northern Ireland, after the breakaway province was established, and against a violent background, a boundary commission was set up to delineate a new frontier, mostly along land ownership and religious lines. Despite its recommendation that my village should become part of the Free State, that never actually happened. Instead, the report was buried, not being published until 1969, and my village remained part of Northern Ireland. As a reader I instantly moved into analogical thinking, the reason being that my German mother's family originated in Lower Silesia or Niederschlesien.

Whereas my Irish family were undisturbed by the decisions being made by Britain and Ireland in the wake of the First World War, later some members of my German family were very much uprooted by decisions made by the British, Soviets and Americans in 1945 and became expellees. In my conscious thinking, these unlikely family and territorial connections

[1] T.K. Wilson. *Frontiers of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia, 1918-1922* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

may explain not only my interest in this topic but why it also maintained my long-term interest in the use of analogy in history. Analogies can only stretch so far before they break down and certainly, although there similarities between the two scenarios, there are also major differences. The most obvious one is that in both post World War One situations the inhabitants concerned were being consulted about their future, whereas at Potsdam there was no representation of any kind of the people who would be affected by the decisions made there.

This thesis has a main focus on the British involvement in the decision about the future of Niederschlesien. Its aim is stated in the form of a simple ‘Why’ question. The first half part has a conventional structure. After a review of literature, it examined the influence of newspapers, the role of the Foreign Office, and the part played by the War Cabinet in composing the contents of the portfolio that the British leaders and diplomats took to Potsdam. It is impossible to judge the level of influence of the newspaper discourse about frontier placement on the British decision-makers at Potsdam. Of these three institutions, the War Cabinet, as it included all four of the final decision-makers at Potsdam, was likely to provide the best guide on Britain’s stance prior to the conference, but the topic did not appear on any of their agendas after the Crimea Conference and in the months leading up to Potsdam. It was the Foreign Office, in its usual professional way, that prepared the relevant paperwork.

The British were fighting on many fronts and a great proportion of articles in the selected newspapers were devoted to various aspects of that war effort. There were many about punishment of the Germans and preventing Germany from rising again as a military power. The newspapers devoted little space to the topic of the removal of German territory until after the Moscow conference in November 1944. Yet Niederschlesien, as a separate parcel of land, was given little attention even at the very end of the war. Coverage varied but newspapers on the whole gave little focus to the possible humanitarian impact of the frontier changes on the possible population transfers. Newspapers were kept away from the conference itself and so

opportunity for influencing decision-making there was limited. Given their political and cultural differences, and their mismatching diplomatic practices, the Foreign Office had a difficult and ever-changing relationship with their Soviet counterparts throughout the war period and afterwards. In the summer of 1945, uncertain about Russia's intentions, the British diplomats expected difficult discussions ahead with an uncompromising former ally. It was understood by those diplomats that Russia would be pursuing her own interests in her own high-handed way. Nonetheless, amidst all their attitudes and assumptions about the Russians that were in their portfolio, the diplomats placed the real possibility that the eastern Neisse would become Poland's western frontier. The War Cabinet minutes reveal that they were always pursuing Britain's interests above others, and thus were never interested in the defence of the old boundaries of Poland or in satisfying the Polish Government-in-exile's changing aspirations on frontiers. Most members held entrenched attitudes about punishing the Germans and were worried about the extent of the Soviet expansion. The War Cabinet had a well-informed understanding of the relevant geography related to possible frontier options but broke up in advance in the forthcoming conference without laying out a clearly outlined objective about Niederschlesien. The eviction of Germans from eastern territories was taken for granted by all, but especially the Labour members. All four politicians, Churchill, Eden, Attlee and Bevin, played their full part in the War Cabinet for four years and had longer and richer experiences of examining and understanding border issues in eastern Europe than their two future American counterparts at Potsdam.

Noting what the negotiators said to each other is essential in understanding the decision-making, but it is impossible to completely segregate the discussions about Niedershlesien from everything else that happened at Potsdam, in particular because it turned out to be at the crux of matters. In chapter four, this thesis presented a detailed interpretation of the discussions that took place around three strands; these strands being determined by the three main parts of a

compromise package deal put forward by James Byrnes, the American Secretary of State, in order to bring the conference to an end. By that time, a large number of side issues and easier settlements had been made and this package deal was an American attempt to achieve its main objectives with regard to the chief contested topics. The interpretation given includes a description of British deference to American dominance, marking a demotion in its world ranking, its retreat on the aspiration to secure the eastern Neisse as the new frontier of Poland, and its face-saving steps taken at the end of the conference.

The next two chapters offer additional interpretations of a kind that might be described by David Reynolds as forms of enrichment. Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus is applied to events at Potsdam. Bourdieu always accepted the validity of explanations involving rational choice, set in contest, and this is the meat of this and any other traditional diplomatic history. However, a more deliberate cultural aspect can be added and his conceptual toolbox, involving his concepts of habitus, capital, doxa, practice and misrecognition amongst others, and they have been applied in this thesis. The various forms of capital including cultural capital of the three allies was in contest at Potsdam and manifested itself with great variety. These activities carried meaning for the participants and influenced the thinking of their opponents. Both the leaders and all the other supporting attendees certainly devoted a great deal of attention and effort to them. A purpose was being served even if that purpose was not expressed by those involved. The inclusion of capital rests on the assumption that it had some influence on relationships and on the decisions made by the delegates. This, of course, is always difficult to substantiate, as it rarely appears in the written record, as is the case with other elements of unspoken or non-conscious life. The inclusion of the use cultural capital in the interpretation has also allowed for others, outside of the elites, to exert their own capital and to be included.

Daniel Kahneman's research in behavioural psychology has revealed that as well as using deliberately slow conscious thought, human beings also use fast and efficient thought,

and sometimes non-conscious and error-prone systems in their decision-making. This has been introduced into this historical interpretation but not as a way of smuggling psychology or science directly into the text. This can only be introduced to the discipline of history by accepting it as analogical thinking. It has been proposed that analogy already plays a central role in historical thinking and explication, and this makes the introduction of another analogy acceptable, despite the fact that Kahneman's ideas are based on behavioural science. It has been argued that Kahneman's ideas on fast intuitive thinking and its associated errors cannot be universally applied, but it is only useful in particular circumstances and three pieces of decision-making about the Niederschlesien issue have been singled out. The decision-makers at Potsdam were special people, otherwise, they would not have found themselves in such prominent positions and making such important decisions. On the other hand, they were also people with thinking skills like the rest of humanity, and subject to similar errors when they made intuitive judgements under pressure or in a hurry. This thesis has included three judgements which if made differently could have affected the future position of Niederschlesien.

There is one counter factual point to make. If the Mikołajczyk memo is genuine and the Kwisa Neisse was being considered behind the scenes, then Stalin was not averse to a softer view about the exact location of the western boundary, and subject to further pressure from the two western leaders he may have been willing to some form of compromise.

Clement Attlee's role at Potsdam is usually overshadowed by that of Winston Churchill, who was at the forefront of Britain's diplomatic decision-making throughout the war period and during the first half of the Potsdam Conference. This interpretation of events and decision-making gives him a more prominent role. His work in the War Cabinet right at the centre of political affairs, and his presence throughout the conference, provided him with a special moment of prescience when the uplift to leadership happened. He inherited the responsibility

after all the easier decisions had already been made, and only the difficult ones remained. The view has often been taken that he was just carrying through what had already been decided by others but this underestimates his capabilities and removes his agency. What actually happens at moments of decision is entirely contingent and he, rather than Churchill, held the responsibility of conceding rather lightly to the Americans.

The response to the 'why' question turned out not to be very simple, and one where no single answer is ever able to present full closure. Hannah Arendt, who neither claimed to be a philosopher nor a historian, said this in her last TV interview:

> We don't know the future. Everybody acts into the future and no-body can follow. No-body knows what he is doing because the future is being done. Action is a WE and not an I. Only where I am the only one, if I were the only one, I could foretell what is going to happen from what I am doing. Now, this looks as though what actually happens is entirely contingent. Contingency indeed is one of the biggest factors in all history. No-body knows what is going to happen simply because so much depends on an enormous amount of variables, that is, in other words, on the simple hazard. On the other hand, if you look back on history retrospectively, then you can, even though all this was contingent, tell a story that makes sense. How is this possible? This is a real problem in every philosophy of history. How is it in retrospect that it always looks as though it couldn't have happened otherwise. All the variables have disappeared. And reality has such an overwhelming impact on us that we cannot be bothered with an infinite variety of perhaps possibilities. They are afraid of freedom, afraid to be afraid.[2]

[2] 'Last Interview with Hannah Arendt', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FkoMm1hs1g&t=984s.

The notion that the historical actor is acting into the future, and nobody knows what he is doing, is given space in this thesis with its acceptance of the non-conscious within the Bourdieuian concepts. Arendt is also saying that regardless of what has happened at Potsdam, one can always compose a story about it that makes some form of sense. I do this by avoiding most of the variables that are part of the contingency within every action or decision. The resulting story that is composed, usually with a chain of causal links, aims for closure. This enriched narrative about the Niederschlesien decision provides a kind of aporia and readers will decide if the interpretation makes sense to them on grounds of plausibility.

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