

Why was there relative goodwill at Yalta but not at Potsdam?

In 1945, at the Yalta conference, the situation was the following: The second world war, that had been going on for six years, was close to an end: Germany was on the brink of defeat, and Japan was being pushed back as well. At the Yalta Conference Stalin agreed to "enter the war against Japan, once Germany had surrendered" [1], what would bring about victory over Emperor Hirohito even quicker. From a psychological point of view, "The Big Three" still had an enemy to face, and it is said that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". Therefore, on a more friendly relationship resulting from the ally, they agreed to compromise.

The USA and the UK managed to divide Berlin into four zones, and made sure that the (from the Nazis) liberated nations should have democratic elections (even though the USSR then set up communist regimes against the will of the e.g. the Poles). Greece was particularly important to Churchill, and Stalin agreed to keep it out of the Soviet Sphere of Influence. In return Stalin could make Eastern Europe a part of the Soviet Sphere of Influence, and his plan to move the Polish border was accepted by the UK and the USA, after Churchill persuaded Roosevelt to accept it, since there was not much to do about it anyway (The Red Army was controlling the area). Apart from those "more risky" agreements, the major powers agreed to join the United Nations organisation, and to punish war criminals, what in my opinion are things to agree upon with more ease. They weren't the points that changed the situation in Potsdam.

What changed between the Yalta and the Potsdam conference was that the UK and the USA weren't represented by Churchill and Roosevelt anymore, but by Attlee and Truman. Truman (as the earlier Vice-President) had stepped in for Roosevelt, who had passed away, and Attlee bet Churchill in the UK elections. Truman "was much more anti-Communist than Roosevelt and suspicious of Stalin" [2]. Additionally the Red Army was controlling most of eastern Europe, and the US had tested an atomic bomb (What Truman informed Stalin about at the Potsdam conference, but Stalin already knew about from his intelligence agencies. Therefore he did not react surprised, and one could suppose that the US felt something was not right). These circumstances must have caused even more suspicion on both sides. Stalin believed that "there is nothing [the British] like better than to trick their allies", and shortly after the Yalta Conference Churchill wrote "The Soviet Union has become a danger to the free world" to Roosevelt. These two quotes perfectly represent what both sides thought of each other.

At the Potsdam conference, the two sides then met again, after Germany had been defeated. It was at this conferences where the mistrust between the two sides lead to great disagreements. One of the disputes was on how to deal with Germany: Whilst "Stalin wanted to Cripple Germany completely to protect the USSR against future threats"[3], Truman wanted to avoid another conflict caused by punishing Germany similarly to how the Treaty of Versailles did. It is possible that Stalin had felt that Truman was the wrong person to debate on this, since his country had not been invaded by the Germans. Another dissension was linked to this condition:

The Operation Barbarossa had devastated the Soviet Union, and 20 million Russians lost their life on the battlefield. Stalin wanted Germany to pay reparations, but Truman disagreed again in order to not repeat the mistake of the Treaty of Versailles. Furthermore Truman was not happy about the Russian intentions in east Europe, and was against the Yalta agreement that allowed the Soviet Union to set up its sphere of influence. Therefore he "adopted a 'get tough' attitude towards Stalin"^[3].

"Free Elections?"

As a result, the Potsdam conference ended without an overall agreement. In the following years, Stalin "achieved domination of eastern Europe", and set up communist regimes. In March 1946 the ex-Prime Minister Winston Churchill held the "Iron Curtain" speech, in which he claims that an "iron curtain had descended" between the west and the communist east. What he meant was that there was no trust between the west and the east, and one could not interfere with the other side. The Cold War had begun.

[1] *Modern World History*, page 319

[2] *Modern World History*, page 322

[3] *Modern World History*, page 323

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well done overall!