

# The Yalta Conference

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## Synopsis

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Separated by vast gulfs of political, cultural, and philosophical divergence, the three chief Allied nations of World War II - the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain - attempted to formulate a joint policy through a series of three conferences during and immediately after the conflict. The second meeting, named the Yalta Conference after its Black Sea venue, occurred in February 1945 and was both the most well-known and most influential of them all.

Adolf Hitler's Third Reich had scant time remaining when the "Big Three" met to discuss the future of Germany, Europe, and the postwar world as a whole. No doubt existed regarding the war's outcome; the Americans had shattered the Wehrmacht's desperate last throw in the west, the Ardennes Offensive, during the Battle of the Bulge in the weeks immediately preceding Yalta, and the Soviet front lay just 50 miles east of Berlin, with the Red Army preparing for its final push into the Reich's capital after a successful surprise winter campaign.

Among the agreements, the Conference called for Germany's unconditional surrender, the split of Berlin, and German demilitarization and reparations. Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt also discussed the status of Poland, and Russian involvement in the United Nations. By this time Stalin had thoroughly established Soviet authority in most of Eastern Europe and made it clear that he had no intention of giving up lands his soldiers had fought and died for. The best he would offer Churchill and Roosevelt was the promise that he would allow free elections to be held. He made it clear, though, that the only acceptable outcome to any Polish election would be one that supported communism.

The final question lay in what to do with a conquered Germany. Both the Western Allies and Stalin wanted Berlin, and knew that whoever held the most of it when the truce was signed would end up controlling the city. Thus they spent the next several months pushing their generals further and further toward this goal, but the Russians got there first. Thus, when the victorious allies

met in Potsdam in 1945, it remained Britain and America's task to convince Stalin to divide the country, and even the city, between them. They accomplished this, but at a terrible cost: Russia got liberated Austria. </p> <p>Given its context and importance, the Yalta Conference represented a contentious matter in its own day, and it remains so among historians both professional and amateur. As just one example, while some lauded Roosevelt's political dexterity, many others viewed him as excessively naïve in his dealings with Stalin, or even as a pro-communist quisling. </p> <p>Yalta neither delayed nor created the Cold War; the collision between two utterly incompatible systems of thought - one that, despite its flaws, placed its faith in freedom, human rights, and majority rule, and the other that believed in paranoid dictatorship enforced through systematic state violence and terror - seemed inevitable either way. If anything, Yalta enabled the three leaders to project a momentary phantasm of unity, permitting them to postpone their intractable hostility for a few months in order to first defeat Germany. </p>

## Reader's comments

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