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## Truman at Potsdam: The First Battle of the Cold War

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The year is 1945. Newly-minted President Harry S. Truman boards the U.S.S. *Augusta*, bound across the North Atlantic for the war-ravaged continent of Europe. The ultimate collapse of Nazi Germany and death of Adolf Hitler marks the end of nearly a decade of intense conflict that has left millions dead and many more without homes. Europe is a land in shambles, full of corpses and the empty shells of cities. It makes a sharp contrast to the nation Truman has just left behind, a land physically unscathed by war. The United States is as strong as it has ever been, fueled by nationalistic pride and a revitalized economy. The Great Depression, only a few years before, seems like a thing of the distant past. America lacks only faith in its new commander-in-chief.

As a decorated veteran of World War I, Harry Truman was not new to war. This would not be his first trip into a fallen Germany. However, it would be the first time he negotiated with seasoned global leaders as President of the United States. To say that the American people were unsure how he would handle figures such as Stalin and Churchill would be an understatement, with some going so far as to send letters to the White House suggesting that Truman should allow more experienced officials to deal in international diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> Many adored and trusted four-term President Franklin D. Roosevelt—who had recently succumbed to a stroke in April—but had very little knowledge of his third vice-president.

At the start of the Potsdam Conference, Truman's main purpose was attaining Soviet and British support in ending the war in the Pacific. By the end of the conference, however, new information on the power of the atomic bomb energized the president into taking charge and opposing Russia on many points. The rookie president would prove a capable diplomat, undaunted by the challenges posed by the rapid expansion of global communism. But his aggressive posture against the Soviets would leave long-standing feelings of resentment that would go on to fuel the Cold War.

Harry was born to Martha and John Truman in 1884, on a farm in rural Missouri. He initially had very little interest in politics, working for a railroad company and a number of banks before volunteering for duty in World War I. Upon joining the 129th Field Artillery in 1917, he deployed to France and achieved the rank of captain.<sup>2</sup> His unit would go on to fight in some of the most violent confrontations of the later war, eventually ending with the campaign at Verdun in mid-1918. Truman returned home as a decorated veteran and finally had the chance to marry his longtime fiancé Bess Wallace in June of 1919.<sup>3</sup>

After a fruitless foray into the hat-selling business, Truman launched his long and much more successful career in politics. Thanks to connections he had made within his unit overseas, he received an appointed position as a highway overseer before being elected a county judge in his hometown. In 1934, he was elected to the U.S. Senate and became a valued rising figure in the

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<sup>1</sup> D.M. Giangreco and Kathryn Moore, *Dear Harry: Truman's Mailroom, 1945-1953* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1999), 81-83.

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2013), 56-71.

<sup>3</sup> David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1992), 99-139.

Democratic Party. As a member of several key congressional committees, he earned respect from his peers on both sides of the aisle.<sup>4</sup> This bipartisan appeal is part of what led to President Franklin Roosevelt's selection of Truman as his running mate in the 1944 election.<sup>5</sup> The president knew well he might not live to see the end of his term, and wanted to be sure that he was followed by someone whose leadership would not divide the country. The nomination came as somewhat of a surprise to Truman, who had only been acquainted with the president for a few years and had never intended to be a part of his administration.<sup>6</sup>

Roosevelt would serve for less than three months of this fourth term before his death on April 12th, 1945. Vice President Truman inherited a nation engaged in conflict on two separate fronts in a war that had taxed every ounce of the nation's resources. Despite his popularity as a senator, many in Congress found his lack of foreign policy experience unnerving. Victory in Europe was nearly assured by this point, and the legislature could only hope that Truman would not allow the other allied nations to trample over the United States in the negotiations that would follow.

When the European theatre of war did finally come to an end in May of 1945, plans were immediately set in motion for a meeting between leaders of the Big Three nations of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union to decide the fate of the fractured continent. The new president was unsure if his short time in office had prepared him for such a task,<sup>7</sup> but he had an ace up his sleeve: the Manhattan Project. Deep in the desert of New Mexico, American scientists were nearing completion of the world's first atomic bomb. Nobody at the time knew what to expect from this weapon, except that it would revolutionize global warfare once completed. Truman planned to use this to his advantage both in ending the war with Japan and in negotiating with the other Allied leaders.<sup>8</sup>

As pressures mounted to schedule a meeting dealing with the issues left in the wake of the war, Truman pushed it back as far as he could in order to give the scientists at Los Alamos the time they needed. The final date was set for July 16th, 1945, in the Berlin suburb of Potsdam. The key matters to be discussed included restructuring the boundaries and government of Germany, the recognition of the new Soviet-backed governments of Eastern Europe by the U.S and U.K, and the inclusion of several countries into the newly formed United Nations.<sup>9</sup> The president put immense pressure on General Leslie Groves and Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer to finish the bomb before the start of the conference.<sup>10</sup>

Leaving for Potsdam aboard the *Augusta*, Truman had very low expectations that much could be done in dealing with the restoration of a lasting peace in Europe. His predecessor Roosevelt had met with Stalin and Churchill at the Tehran and Yalta Conferences, both of which accomplished very little in regard to the future. All three nations and leaders had their own ambitious ideas on how to move forward, and he noted in his diary that there was very little chance of any real progress being made at the conference.<sup>11</sup> In a letter he wrote to his wife Bess aboard the cruiser, Truman bemoaned, "I sure dread this trip, worse than anything I've had to face. But it has to be done."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 231-297.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman* (New York: Cambridge, 2007), 28.

<sup>6</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 193-195.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>8</sup> Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 224.

<sup>9</sup> J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 54.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Harry S. Truman and Robert Ferrell, *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman 1910-1959* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983), 518.

The president and his entourage arrived in Berlin on the day the meeting was slated to begin, but then word came Stalin had taken ill and would be a day late. The Americans took this time to explore the ravaged city. In another letter, Truman described Berlin as a “hell of a place—ruined, dirty, smelly, forlorn people... You never saw as completely ruined a city.”<sup>13</sup> Along with General Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State James Byrnes, Truman watched as the victorious U.S forces raised the American flag over the Nazi barracks.<sup>14</sup>

Upon retiring to the house he had taken in Potsdam (unbeknownst to him, an old book publisher’s home who was more than likely killed by the Russians<sup>15</sup>), Truman learned of the successful test of the atom bomb. At this point, not much was known about its destructive capabilities. As more information came in over the following days, he noted in his diary that it’s a “good thing for the world that Hitler’s crowd or Stalin’s did not discover this atomic bomb.”<sup>16</sup> Despite reports of the bomb’s success, Truman decided not to inform the other leaders about it at the outset of the conference until he knew more.

The president had his first chance to meet Joseph Stalin when the Potsdam Conference finally opened on July 17th.<sup>17</sup> He had enjoyed a visit with Winston Churchill the day before, though later he penned in his diary a comparison of the Prime Minister to “soft soap.”<sup>18</sup> Truman was initially more impressed by Stalin, with whom he had more in common. They both came from somewhat similar backgrounds and had a straight to business attitude that avoided all the unnecessary pleasantries that the English leader insisted on. In another entry, he described Stalin as “honest, but smart as hell.”<sup>19</sup>

Due to his experience leading the Senate back in Washington, the president was chosen to chair the meeting.<sup>20</sup> He used this position to push the topic of the Japanese war to the forefront and was pleasantly surprised when Stalin agreed to bring the USSR into the conflict in less than a month. He assured his wife and colleagues that this would save American lives, even if it meant ceding some former Chinese lands and allotting a large portion of the German and Japanese fleets to the Soviet Union when Japan was defeated.<sup>21</sup> These were largely the same terms for Russian involvement that had been discussed at previous conferences, but Roosevelt had been too proud to give into Stalin’s demands at the time. By 1945, America was ready to be done with the war, and Truman was much more willing to negotiate for Soviet assistance.<sup>22</sup>

Once Truman had what he wanted in terms of a quick and easy end to the war in the Pacific, he became slightly more reserved on the European issues in order to not upset Stalin and endanger



A soldier raises the Soviet flag on the Reichstag over the ruins of Berlin. (Yevgeny Khaldei: 1945)

<sup>13</sup> Truman and Ferrell, 520.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Grauer, “Big Three Open Parley Near Berlin,” Video (1945: Universal Studios/Associated Press) <http://ebscovideos.ebscohost.com/v/103168515/truman-sync-on-potsdam-world-war-two.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Truman and Ferrell, 518.

<sup>16</sup> Walker, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Barton Bernstein and Harry Truman, *Truman at Potsdam: His Secret Diary* <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/38.pdf> (accessed 4 December 2016).

<sup>19</sup> “Entries from President Truman’s Diary,” PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/truman-diary/> (accessed 25 October 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Truman and Ferrell, 521.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 519.

<sup>22</sup> Truman, 382-84.

his cooperation against the Japanese.<sup>23</sup> After a party on July 20th, he went so far as to call the Soviet premier a friend. The two engaged in a friendly competition for the remainder of the conference, always trying to one-up each other with the greatest pianists and violinists their countries could offer at increasingly lavish parties.<sup>24</sup> This provided a sharp contrast to the real rivalry in which they would soon be embroiled.

Truman and Stalin's relationship quickly began to wear on Winston Churchill. While he opposed Stalin at every turn, he found very little support from Truman.<sup>25</sup> It quickly became apparent that the British would have to negotiate with the Soviets alone on some major issues, as the U.S. seemed primarily focused on appeasing Russia and ending the war in the Pacific.

It was not until July 21st, when more details of the Trinity atomic blast came across his desk, that Truman began to distance himself from the Soviet leader. The report from General Groves described the explosion that had created a cloud thousands of feet high and leveled everything in a radius of miles.<sup>26</sup> This news would prove to be a turning point for Truman's involvement in the conference. The president was "immensely pleased" with the results, and had decided that the United States might now be able to deal with Japan on its own.<sup>27</sup>

Truman was hesitant to inform Stalin of the bomb test, fearing that he might spur the Soviets into action against the Japanese so they could ensure a piece of the reparations. However, he also did not want Stalin to harbor resentment towards the U.S after the bomb had been dropped if he had never been informed. Thus, on July 24th Truman casually mentioned the atomic bomb to Stalin, saying that the United States had created a weapon of "unusually destructive force."<sup>28</sup> Stalin feigned ignorance and wished Truman luck with his new weapon. The American and British delegations assumed that he had not known what they were talking about, but had no idea that the Soviets had spies planted within the Manhattan Project.<sup>29</sup> In his memoirs written several years later, Soviet Marshal Georgii Zhukov recalls Stalin informing his own physicists to speed up work on the Soviet atom bomb immediately after his meeting with Truman.<sup>30</sup> The Soviet Premier knew exactly what kind of weapon the Americans had created and was already using the information passed along by his spy network to begin work on his own atomic arsenal.

With Soviet support in the war against Japan no longer necessary or desirable, Truman was able to begin to help Churchill thwart Stalin wherever possible.<sup>31</sup> On the key issue of what would become of Germany's borders, the U.S and U.K were determined to not give up any land directly to Russia. Stalin wanted to allow Soviet-backed Poland to annex large areas of Prussia and East Germany as reprisal for the Nazi invasion in 1939. The western powers saw this as the communists trying to spread their grasp into central Europe, while the Soviets maintained the position that it was solely to prevent Germany from rising up as a threat to their nation ever again.<sup>32</sup> When their proposal was denied by the other two powers, the Soviets instead suggested that Germany be broken up into a number of independent nations. Again, the British and Americans vehemently denied this proposal, stating that Stalin wanted to pulverize Europe into several small and easily-conquered states.<sup>33</sup> Eventually the three managed to negotiate the splitting of Germany into two

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<sup>23</sup> Walker, 59.

<sup>24</sup> Truman and Ferrell, 521.

<sup>25</sup> Miscamble, 199.

<sup>26</sup> Offner, 75.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Walker, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>30</sup> Georgii K. Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971), 674-675.

<sup>31</sup> Walker, 65.

<sup>32</sup> Herbert Feis, *Between War and Peace: The Potsdam Conference* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 227.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 236.

halves and four zones, with the Soviets having control of the east and the Americans, British, and French governing the west.

Another vexing topic for the Allies was that of the former German satellite states in central and Eastern Europe. Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria had all joined in the war effort on the side of the Axis Powers. After failing to halt the invading Soviets, all three found themselves under the control of coalition communist governments.<sup>34</sup> Similar to the occupied portions of eastern Germany, Soviet troops were looting these regions and demanding heavy reparations of the people who lived there.

Stalin tried to push the other heads of state into recognizing the new communist regimes, but Churchill would not have it.<sup>35</sup> He insisted that British agents in these countries were being kept in the dark by the new governments, while private western assets were being nationalized.<sup>36</sup> Stalin



The main meeting room at Potsdam. Harry S. Truman Library: U.S Army Signal Corps, 1945.

called these accusations “fairy tales” and claimed that democratic elections would happen soon.<sup>37</sup> Truman took Churchill’s side again, opting to draft peace treaties with these nations but not reopening any kind of diplomatic relations or accepting them into the United Nations until a democratic government was put into place.

When the Americans and British had made it clear that they would not grant Stalin’s request to recognize his new governments, he brought up the topic of Spain. How was it that they would refuse to accept the new eastern European “people’s democracies,” but continue to maintain a diplomatic relationship with a vile dictator like Francisco Franco? Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy had helped to put

Franco in power at the end of the Spanish Civil War, and while never formally joining the Axis Powers, the Spanish fascists had still sent troops to fight the Russians in the east.<sup>38</sup> Churchill had already made it clear at the start of the conference that he would not damage Great Britain’s trade relationship with Spain, nor would he risk starting another conflict in Western Europe.<sup>39</sup> While Stalin tried to paint Truman and Churchill as hypocrites for their lack of action on the Spanish issue, his own motives for wanting Franco out were not entirely for the greater good. With the Franco regime deposed, the communist party might find a way to take power in Spain and provide the Soviet Union with a powerful ally in the west. Ultimately, the decision was made to keep Spain from joining the United Nations until Franco relinquished power to a democratic leadership.<sup>40</sup>

Just as Truman and Churchill were beginning to make progress in opposing Stalin, the results of the British election arrived and the prime minister had to return to London. Despite believing his Conservative Party would win, Churchill lost by a large margin and would not return to the Potsdam Conference.<sup>41</sup> His successor was Labour Party leader and former Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee, a man for whom Truman did not particularly care. In a letter to Bess, he described him as “an Oxford man” who “talks like the much overrated Mr. Eden (Churchill’s

<sup>34</sup> Feis, 190-191.

<sup>35</sup> Alperovitz, 255.

<sup>36</sup> Truman, 360-61.

<sup>37</sup> Feis, 196.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 202.

<sup>41</sup> James L. Gormly, *From Potsdam to the Cold War: Big Three Diplomacy 1945-1947* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1990), 52.

Foreign Secretary).<sup>42</sup> This change in the British leadership would stall much cooperation with the United States, as Truman did not mesh with Attlee as well as he had with Churchill. The two still worked closely together against Stalin, but from this point on much less was accomplished at the conference.

On July 26th, the American, British, and Chinese delegations met in secret to discuss the war against Japan. Truman had given them a vague idea of the capability of the atomic bomb, and it was decided that Russia's entry into the war was no longer needed. Together they drafted the Potsdam Declaration, offering one last chance of unconditional surrender to the Japanese and threatening the alternative of "prompt and utter destruction" if they did not stand down.<sup>43</sup> Stalin was infuriated upon hearing about the proclamation, and immediately demanded to know why the Soviet Union had not been invited to sign it.<sup>44</sup> The answer was that the Anglo-Americans had not wanted Russia to procure any reparations not deserved from the Japanese, but Truman managed to skirt the question for the remainder of his time in Potsdam. Stalin disappeared for another couple of days after allegedly taking ill, though he more than likely needed time to cope with his anger over being left out of the signing.<sup>45</sup> When he returned it was clear that there was little left to negotiate. Truman found no point in continuing the discussions until he had played his "master card," and thus the Potsdam Conference was adjourned on August 2nd.<sup>46</sup>

Four days later, the president and his party were homeward bound aboard the *Augusta* when news of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima reached them. State Department advisor H. Freeman Matthews described the president's attitude as overall positive as he moved about the ship informing the captain and crew of the great blow they had just dealt Japan.<sup>47</sup> Others onboard were not as optimistic, including Admiral William Leahy who described the bomb's explosion as having "terrible consequences for the future."<sup>48</sup>

The president immediately addressed the nation upon returning to Washington on August 9th.<sup>49</sup> He spoke of the successes at Potsdam and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, while promising he had more in store for the Japanese. While he made the negotiations sound as if they had gone more smoothly than they really did, it was hard for anyone to deny that he had defied expectations. Like most presidents, public confidence in Truman declined over the years. However, he enjoyed some of the highest approval ratings of his administration following the perceived success of his meeting at Potsdam.<sup>50</sup> Many across the nation had questioned whether or not the man who had begun life on a farm in rural Missouri would be able to go to Europe and parley with some of the world's most experienced and powerful leaders. The American people, who had initially been unsure



Clement Attlee (left) took Winston Churchill's place at the Potsdam Conference on July 28th. (Harry S. Truman Library: U.S. Army Signal Corps, 1945)

<sup>42</sup> Truman and Ferrell, 522.

<sup>43</sup> Walker, 72.

<sup>44</sup> Gormly, 61.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>46</sup> Alperovitz, 265.

<sup>47</sup> H. Freeman Matthews, interview by Richard D. McKenzie, Washington, D.C., June 7, 1973, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, Independence, MO.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> "Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference," Truman Library, <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/?pid=104> (accessed 8 November 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Leo Borart, ed., *Polls and Awareness of Public Opinion*, 2nd Ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, Bks., 1988), 6.

of Truman's ability to lead in the wake of arguably the country's greatest president, now knew that they had a commander-in-chief they could stand behind.

The Japanese would surrender less than a month later after a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Nearly six years after its start, World War II was over. Millions of soldiers and civilians were dead, hundreds of cities devastated, and still the world was not at peace. While Potsdam is regarded as an overall success today in relation to previous meetings of the Big Three, it was a failure that set in motion tensions between capitalists and communists that would lead to the Cold War. Despite an initially positive relationship with Joseph Stalin, Truman had made it clear that the Soviet Union would find no ally in the United States.<sup>51</sup> Though future conflict between the two nations was already nearly assured before the meeting, one has to wonder if Truman's, Churchill's, and Attlee's staunch anti-Soviet attitudes may have undermined any real hopes for negotiations and driven the world into a dangerous Cold War.<sup>52</sup> Even so, perhaps the gaps between west and east, democracy and totalitarianism, and capitalism and communism were just too wide to find much common ground. Both sides had different ideas for a global future in the new atomic era. The Potsdam Conference marked the end of World War II, but the Cold War was just beginning.

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<sup>51</sup> Robert H. Ferrell. *Harry S. Truman and the Cold War Revisionists* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 26-27.

<sup>52</sup> While the Potsdam Conference was generally regarded as a success by many western historians in the decades following its conclusion, some see it as a failure or at least as a causal factor of the Cold War. Pro-Truman authors cited in this paper include Miscamble and the traditionalists Feis and McCullough. The traditionalists, some of the earliest chroniclers of the Potsdam Conference, generally credit Truman's actions as essential to thwarting the expansion of communism. The revisionist perspective of the conference is best characterized by the writing of Arnold Offner, who argued Truman contributed more to increasing tension in the world than helping to stabilize it. It would be an obvious exaggeration to say that Truman's actions were the sole cause of conflict between the United States and Soviet Union, but it would also be a snub to the historical importance of Potsdam to say that the decisions he made there did not at least have some influence on their relationship in the years to come.