PART ONE

RECONCILIATION
The UK, Poland, and the future of Germany: The origins of UK policy on the Oder–Neisse line

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Introduction

The delimitation of the Polish-German frontier was a point of disagreement among the leaders of the Grand Alliance during the Second World War. Joseph Stalin’s insistence that the USSR’s security depended on the westward repositioning of the Polish-Soviet border meant that Poland would have to be compensated for the loss of territory in the east with the acquisition of territory in the west at Germany’s expense. Although Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt acknowledged the legitimacy of Stalin’s security concerns, they were reluctant to agree to a dramatic reconfiguration of the map of Central and Eastern Europe, and hoped to keep any changes to a minimum. At the Potsdam conference in the summer of 1945, provisional agreement was reached on the position of the Polish-German border but this agreement was never formalised and the border remained unrecognised by any public international agreement until 1970. The contested border stood as a testament to the total collapse of cooperation between the Soviet Union and the West during the Cold War, and the West’s refusal to recognise the border remained an obstacle to détente with the Soviet Union for decades.

Because the issue became a Cold War dispute, the traditional interpretation of UK policy on the Polish-German frontier holds that it was determined virtually from the outset by rising suspicion of the Soviet Union, and by a desire to roll back the edges of the Soviet sphere of influence (Deighton, 1990). I will argue, however, that on the contrary, the British position – at least up until the late 1940s – was shaped by two considerations which were unconnected to the Cold War tensions that would later define the issue. First, the UK’s policy was shaped by the repercussions of

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[1] Although the UK secretly guaranteed the inviolability of Poland’s western frontier in 1962 (Hughes, 2005).
the delimitation of the border on its ability to cope with the responsibility for its occupation zone of Germany, which quickly became an economic liability. This concern was made more acute by the economic crisis which engulfed the UK almost immediately after the war and because of the newly elected Labour government’s priority of implementing a far-reaching programme of domestic social and economic reforms. Second, the UK had to consider the implications of its policy for the political position of the Polish Peasant Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – PSL), to which the UK government had pledged its support as the party sought to establish itself within the post-war Polish provisional government. The commitment to support the PSL was ultimately crucial in the UK’s decision to provisionally accept a border further to the west, despite concerns about the occupation zone. Thus, UK policy on the issue of the frontier was defined by pragmatic, immediate economic concerns and by pre-existing diplomatic commitments, not out of fear or alarm at Soviet intentions, or a concern about pushing back the boundaries of the Soviet sphere of influence.

Wartime origins of UK policy on the Polish-German border

The UK’s role in shaping the post-war Polish-German border had its origins in the wartime period, specifically in the special relationship established with the London-based Polish government-in-exile. Early on in the war, in return for the very substantial Polish contribution to the British war effort, the UK had pledged to ensure that a sovereign Polish state would be reconstituted and a democratic Polish government established after hostilities ended. As a result of this commitment, Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary, attempted to negotiate an agreement over the position of the Polish-Soviet frontier, which became a point of contention when Stalin insisted that the Soviet border would have to be shifted further to the west to protect his country’s security.

Churchill and Roosevelt accepted Stalin’s demand and agreed in principle that Poland would be compensated for the loss of territory in the east to the Soviet Union with the acquisition of German territory in the west. This decision was based partly on recognition of what they regarded as legitimate Soviet security concerns and partly – at least in Churchill’s case – because he believed territorial concessions could be used to secure a Soviet guarantee of non-interference in Poland’s political future. At the Tehran
conference in November 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt accepted Stalin’s demand that the Curzon line, with a few modifications, should form Poland’s post-war eastern frontier, while its western border would be shifted westward at German expense to the Oder line. A more precise agreement on the Polish-Soviet frontier was reached at the Yalta conference – the Curzon line with the exception of the city of Lwów would constitute the border. Poland would receive substantial territorial compensation in the west, although the precise border was to be determined at a future peace conference (FRUS, 1955, pp. 973–4).

**British occupation zone of Germany**

The main discussions regarding the Polish-German border took place at the Potsdam conference just after the end of the Second World War in Europe. The two main determinants of the UK’s policy regarding the border – the repercussions for its occupation zone of Germany and the implications for the PSL – pulled in opposite directions. Concern about the occupation zone dictated that the UK should push for a border as far to the east as possible but the government’s diplomatic commitment to the PSL obliged acceptance of the western Neisse border.

Already in the summer of 1945, the UK’s military government was struggling to cope with the responsibility for the zone of occupation in the northwest of Germany, which included some of the most devastated cities, along with the highest concentrations of urban population, among the highest number of displaced persons, and the most severe food shortages. In Cologne, for example, 66 per cent of the houses had been destroyed; in Düsseldorf the figure was 93 per cent, while across the British zone as a whole, 64 per cent of the houses had either been completely destroyed or badly damaged (Balfour and Mair, 1956, p. 7; Knowles, 2013, p. 85). In the summer of 1945, there were already nearly 1.5 million civilian refugees in the British zone, one million wounded German soldiers, and 1.5 million German prisoner of war (Donnison, 1961, p. 250; Montgomery, 1958, p. 365). In short, the task of feeding, rebuilding, and main-

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2 For further detail see: The National Archives: Public Record Office (hereafter TNA: PRO). PREM 3/355/7, Churchill to Eden, 12 January 1944.

3 The British zone comprised the regions that now form four German Länder: Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony.
taining order in the British zone was overwhelming. The first military governor of the British zone, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery later recalled that he feared famine and epidemics of disease would sweep through the population if the authorities failed to establish control over the situation before the winter set in (1958, p. 365).

The occupation zone became an immediate economic liability. The cost of food was a particular problem. In order to restore the British zone to self-sufficiency, German industry had to return to production, and trade had to resume with the area under Soviet occupation, which had always been a vital source of foodstuffs and raw materials for western Germany. The Soviets, however, were proving to be unforthcoming with shipments of food from their zone (FRUS, 1960, pp. 210–15). It was also difficult to manufacture sufficient exports to pay for food as a result of low levels of production in the British zone, which were due to shortages of labour and scarcity of raw materials (Knowles, 2013, p. 88). In 1946–47, the total cost of the occupation zone was GBP 80 million, equivalent to approximately GBP 3 billion today (Donnison, 1961, p. 340). The strain of supporting the zone could not be borne for long given the UK’s exceptionally difficult post-war financial circumstances: huge overseas debts, a balance of payments deficit, and a foreign currency reserves shortage, which meant that the country could not afford to import food. On top of this economic exhaustion after six years of war, the abrupt termination in August 1945 of the Lend-Lease agreement by the US pushed the UK to the brink of calamity (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000, p. 4; Bessel, 2009, p. 287).

The repositioning of the Polish-German border would have two consequences for the British zone. First, it would require extensive resettlement of populations, including the entire ethnic German population from the areas to be ceded to Poland, amounting to approximately eight and a quarter million people, many of whom would have to be absorbed in the British zone. The further west the border was set, the more displaced people the UK would have to accommodate. Second, the area to be ceded to Poland, amounting to approximately 21 per cent of German territory, would no longer be considered part of the Soviet zone. It would be withdrawn from

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5 In addition to more than four million Germans expelled from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania (Thum, 2011, p. xxxv).
the authority of the Allied Control Commission (ACC) in Germany, thereby excluding it from the area from which reparations could be drawn. The removal of this mostly agricultural land would make it more difficult for the UK to obtain the vital foodstuffs it needed to feed the population in its zone, as well as the raw materials necessary to restart production. From this perspective, then, it was in the UK’s interest to insist that the border be positioned as far as possible to the east. This was the approach initially pursued by Churchill at the conference. He argued strenuously against the cession of the territory, objecting vehemently to having “a mass of people dumped” into the British zone (FRUS, 1960, p. 213).

In my view, Churchill’s objections were not evidence of an early Cold War mind-set taking hold. Instead, they were born of frustration at the difficult circumstances in the British zone. Churchill objected to Soviet actions insofar as they exacerbated the problems in the British zone, but not because he interpreted them as a sinister sign of Soviet political intentions. Churchill later cast himself as a staunch cold warrior who had foreseen the Soviet threat before anyone else (Churchill, 1954). In fact, however, at this stage, Churchill’s policy was underpinned by the assumption that cooperation with the Soviet Union would continue after the war (Mason, 2014, pp. 87–88). This interpretation is supported by recent historiography on the UK’s occupation policy in Germany, which has moved away from the view that the drive to rebuild the British zone, return it to economic self-sufficiency, and eventually restore its military capabilities was designed to counter a perceived threat from the Soviet Union. Instead, recent work argues that although concern about the Soviet Union certainly influenced UK policy by the end of the 1940s, in 1945 and 1946, the Soviet Union was still seen in a generally favourable light and the preoccupations of the British military authorities focused entirely on coping with the devastation and disorganisation in their zone (Knowles, 2013, p. 87).

**Position of the PSL**

The border issue must also be understood in the context of the power struggle between the Polish Workers’ Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza –

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6 For further detail see: TNA: PRO FO 371/47592/N6328/6/55, Foreign Office Minutes, 5–15 June 1945; FO 371/47593/N6767/6/55, Moscow to Foreign Office, 9 June 1945; Foreign Office Minutes, 14 June 1945.
PPR) and the PSL during the period of transition immediately after the war. The provisional Polish government was an uneasy coalition comprising former members of the wartime government-in-exile, communist party members who had spent the war years in the Soviet Union, and former leaders of the underground state during the war. The PSL had the highest level of support among the population and its leader, Stanisław Mikołajczyk, was the deputy prime minister and minister of agriculture in the provisional government. The PPR had to tolerate Mikołajczyk’s presence in order to preserve the legitimacy of the provisional government but at the same time it sought to limit his influence and marginalise his party as far as possible (Mason, 2014, pp. 83–86).

In the summer of 1945, officials in the UK Foreign Office and the embassy in Warsaw were already becoming alarmed by these PPR attempts to marginalise or undermine the other political parties. Of particular concern were reports that the PPR intended to exclude opposition parties from the elections, as well as an attempt to force the PSL to merge with the communist-sponsored Peasant Alliance (*Stronnictwo Ludowe* – SL). In view of the circumstances in Poland and given that the UK had explicitly committed to ensure the establishment of a democratic Polish government, Churchill’s initial strategy at the Potsdam conference was to use the border issue as a form of leverage in order to extract a series of political concessions from the PPR, for example, a promise to hold early elections and to allow the full participation of the opposition parties in the election process. The westward extension of the Polish-German frontier was of the very highest importance to the PPR. The acquisition of this territory would do much to enhance the new government’s prestige among the population as well as serving to boost the country’s economy. The PPR representatives at Potsdam were therefore anxious to secure Western agreement to the position of the border.

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8 For further detail see: TNA: PRO FO 371/47601/N9024/6/G55, Sargent to Cagogan, 24 July 1945.
Churchill held a series of meetings with the leader of the Polish provisional government, Bolesław Bierut, at the conference, which left the British unconvinced that the administration would abide by its promises. The Foreign Office recommended that Churchill and Eden should stand firm and withhold recognition until conditions had been met “if as is possible M. Bierut’s airy words amount to nothing”\(^9\). The new foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin took the same approach when he and the prime minister, Clement Attlee replaced Churchill and Eden at the conference after the Labour party’s election victory at the end of July. Bevin pushed Bierut particularly hard on the timing of the elections, pinning him down to a promise of a date no later than early 1946\(^10\).

In meetings with Mikołajczyk, however, the PSL leader stressed the importance of the UK’s agreement to Polish territorial claims in order to avoid the PPR “using [the UK’s] hesitation as an instrument of propaganda to show that all good things in Poland came from Russia while [the British] and the Americans are unsympathetic”\(^11\). This internal competition between the PSL and the PPR had a decisive influence in determining UK policy on the border issue. In order to gain popular support and legitimacy among the population, the PPR had exerted pressure on the Soviet Union to cede immediate administrative control over the disputed territories to the Polish provisional government. The establishment of \textit{de facto} Polish control over the region made it difficult for the UK to object to a border in Poland’s favour without weakening the position of the PSL. It would have been politically disadvantageous to the PSL, the party with strong links to the West, if the British had disputed the frontier demarcation. Ultimately, Mikołajczyk’s insistence on the importance of British acceptance of the frontier for the PSL swayed the British decision. Article IX(b) of the Potsdam agreement set out the terms of the territorial transfer:

“The three Heads of Government agree that, pending the final determination of Poland’s western frontier, the former German territories east of a line run-


\(^10\) For further detail see: TNA: PRO FO 371/47603/N9922/6/G55, Record of a Meeting at the Foreign Secretary’s House, Potsdam, 31 July 1945.

\(^11\) TNA: PRO FO 371/47603/N9720/6/G55, Record of a meeting between Eden and Mikołajczyk, 25 July 1945; Clark Kerr to Eden, 26 July 1945; N9659/6/G55, Clark Kerr to Bevin, 30 July 1945.
ning from the Baltic Sea immediately west of Swinemunde, and thence along the Oder River to the confluence of the western Neisse River and along the western Neisse to the Czechoslovak frontier […] shall be under the administration of the Polish state and for such purposes shall not be considered as part of the Soviet zone of occupation in Germany” (cited in: Oppen, 1955, p. 49).

Article XIII of the agreement covered the transfer of the German population from this territory. Thus, for the time being, the UK’s diplomatic commitment to support the PSL overrode concerns about the consequences for the British occupation of Germany, although Bevin insisted on caveating the agreement with the proviso that final agreement on the borderline must await the peace conference.

The British decision to accept the border is important because it elucidates the line of official thinking regarding the political future of Poland at this stage. The UK’s willingness to compromise on the position of the border was not an insignificant gesture given the consequences for the German occupation zone. That the UK government was prepared to take this step shows that it regarded the PSL as a strong political force which would have to be included in any future Polish administration which hoped to secure popular support. Although both the Conservative government and its Labour successor harboured concerns about the intentions of the PPR, both believed that the PPR’s support base was insufficient to allow it to rule without the cooperation of the PSL. This conclusion was based partly on the overwhelming popularity of the PSL among the Polish population, and partly on admissions by Bierut and the prime minister of the provisional government, Edward Osóbka-Morawski12 in Moscow earlier in the summer of 1945 that the PPR’s position within Poland was not secure and that they needed the participation of Mikołajczyk and his party to strengthen the legitimacy of the provisional government13.

12 Edward Osóbka-Morawski belonged to the Workers’ Party of the Polish Socialists (Robotnicza Partia Polskich Socjalistów – RPPS) – a splinter group of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) which had allied itself with the PPR.
13 These conversations took place during the negotiations for the formation of the new Polish government in Moscow in June and July 1945 – see: TNA: PRO FO 371/47594/N7295/6/G55, Moscow to Foreign Office, 21 June 1945; N7297/6/G55, Moscow to Foreign Office, 21 June 1945.
Conclusions: reopening the border issue

In the spring of 1947, the UK government attempted to reopen the border issue. By this point, three things had changed. First, a full-blown refugee crisis had developed in the British occupation zone of Germany. In 1946 alone, the British zone received more than 1.5 million German refugees from Poland. By October 1946, in total there were 3.6 million refugees in the British zone. The Länder, or states, of Schleswig-Holstein and Lower Saxony, both in the British zone, had the highest proportion of refugees as a percentage of the total population out of all the zones. Lower Saxony also had the second highest number of refugees in absolute terms. This endless stream of people seriously exacerbated the food, housing, and public health crisis with which the UK authorities were struggling to cope (Frank, 2007, pp. 245–61; Schulze, 1997, p. 54).

Second, the UK’s post-war economic crisis had deepened. The winter of 1946–47 marked a low point – bad winter weather had interrupted coal deliveries to power stations and factories, making it necessary to implement power cuts, the trade deficit had risen to USD 1.8 billion; unemployment had reached 2 million; living standards continued to decline, with, for instance, deeper cuts in food rations and a severe housing crisis (Deighton, 1990, pp. 125, 135–9, 145). Further, the Labour government had been elected in the summer of 1945 on the promise that it would construct a welfare state in the UK. The government had to continually weigh up its responsibility for the occupation zone against the expectations of the electorate for the introduction of the promised economic and social reforms. In these circumstances, the diversion of resources into the maintenance of the occupation zone was politically unpalatable for the UK Labour government.

Third, after the Polish elections in January 1947, the PSL was left badly weakened. Following an election campaign marked by the systematic harassment of PSL politicians, activists and supporters, the PPR emerged firmly in control of the state apparatus in Poland. The PSL was excluded from the government (Mason, 2014, pp. 181–5, 188–9, 194–5). The party’s collapse as a viable political opposition force meant that British policy

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14 In absolute terms, Lower Saxony received 1,851,000 people, second to Bavaria, which received 1,937,000. As a proportion of the total population, Schleswig-Holstein had 33 per cent; Lower Saxony had 27.2 per cent.
on the border issue was no longer constrained by the need to consider the ramifications for the position of the party.

Thus, in April 1947, in meetings with the Polish minister of foreign affairs, Zygmunt Modzelewski and the prime minister, Józef Cyrankiewicz, Bevin raised the possibility of revising the border. He explained the problem of German expellees from the border regions being sent in large numbers to the British occupation zone of Germany, stressing that there were too many people to cope with (Mason, 2014, pp. 206–9). These were unproductive discussions, which quickly became deadlocked: the Polish leaders rejected Bevin’s assertion that the Potsdam agreement had provided only for a provisional settlement, insisting that the question was closed. Ultimately, the border issue remained an unresolved dispute until 1970, when West Germany extended de facto recognition of the Oder–Neisse line under the terms of the Treaty of Warsaw of that year.

What stands out in the record of these meetings is that even in 1947, by which time Cold War tensions were beginning to define the international system, the UK’s primary concern about the border was unconnected to the Soviet Union or the extension of communist influence in Europe. Rather, the UK government remained almost exclusively preoccupied with the difficulty of coping with the demands of the German occupation zone. In one sense, my conclusion about the UK’s policy on the frontier issue is disappointingly prosaic: up until the end of the 1940s it was determined by narrow, immediate, practical, non-ideological concerns, rather than by foresight of an impending clash with the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the British approach to the frontier dispute suggests that the UK remained relatively unconcerned about the establishment of communist control in Eastern Europe, and did not necessarily see these changes as an obstacle to possible future cooperation with the Soviet Union.

Summary

This paper examines the UK’s policy on the delimitation of the Polish-German border. The contested Polish-German frontier, which remained a point of international tension until 1970, exemplified the breakdown in relations between the Soviet Union and the West after the Second World War. By the late 1940s, the border dispute had assumed the unmistakable contours of a Cold War conflict. As a consequence, the origins of the conflict have been cast in similar terms, with British resistance to the Soviet-
Polish proposal to position the border further to the west interpreted as an indication of an early concern to restrict creeping communist influence in Europe. This paper argues that far from being shaped by anti-Soviet sentiment or a preoccupation with the spread of communism, the UK’s policy was determined by the implications of the delimitation of the frontier for the stability of the British occupation zone in Germany and, on the other hand, by the UK government’s commitment to support the democratic Polish opposition after the war. It shows that although the UK’s precarious post-war economic position dictated that it should insist on a border along the Oder-eastern Neisse river in order to limit the number of people entering its already overcrowded, heavily damaged occupation zone, the UK’s final decision on the border was determined by the importance of Western acceptance of the Oder-western Neisse for the main Polish opposition party, the PSL, in its struggle to secure a position in the post-war Polish government. The ability of the PSL to exert this influence shows that the UK regarded the party as a powerful political force in post-war Poland – indeed as an essential component of any administration which hoped to be able to govern effectively.

**Keywords:** Cold War, Mikołajczyk, Oder–Neisse line, Poland, United Kingdom

**References:**


