

September 23, 1944

Stalin's Conversation with Ambassadors Harriman and Kerr

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Summary:

Ambassadors Harriman and Kerr discuss Stalin's surprise about the Warsaw Uprising, the Russian's engaging with the Japanese after Germany's defeat, and the next Big Three Meeting.

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Transcript - English

When Harriman and Clark Kerr saw Stalin together on September 23, he belatedly acknowledged that the fighters of Warsaw had good reason, after all, to rise up against the Germans and for the first time showed a degree of sympathy. With disarming frankness, Stalin admitted that he had misjudged the motives of the Warsaw insurgents:

He stated that it was now understood why the insurgency had started prematurely. The Germans had threatened to deport all the male population from Warsaw upon the approach of the Red Army. It became necessary for the men to rise up and fight - they had no other choice as they were faced with death either way. As a result most of the population of Warsaw went underground and started resistance.

When Harriman asked how the battle for Warsaw was progressing, Stalin defended the Red Army's failure to storm the river. He spoke of the Vistula as a "tremendous obstacle":

It was impossible to get tanks across the river because of continual heavy German shelling, and it was difficult to carry on operations without tanks. Even medium tanks could not be ferried across the river because of German vigilance. The Russian plan was to encircle the city and to cut the German communications so that the Nazis would find themselves in a "mousetrap." They could not take Warsaw by a frontal attack because of the advantageous position of the Germans.

I inquired whether contact had been made with the resistance groups in Warsaw. Marshal Stalin replied that some infantry battalions had been ferried across the Vistula to support the resistance groups. These were Polish troops - four infantry battalions - and they had been transferred on General Berling's insistence against the better judgment of the Red Army. They had suffered great losses and they would have to be withdrawn.

I inquired whether fighting was still going on in Warsaw. Marshal Stalin replied that after Praga had been taken the Russians got a clearer picture of the Warsaw situation. The insurgents were still fighting in four different isolated parts of the city. They were attempting to defend themselves but they had no offensive ability. They had beaten off some German attacks but could not emerge from their positions of hiding. They had no artillery and were equipped only with rifles and pistols. The Russians had dropped mortars, tommy guns, food, and medicinal supplies and the Red Army was in contact with the groups both by radio and by men who got back and forth by swimming the river. It was now clear, he continued that little of the supplies dropped by the American and British planes had actually gotten to the Poles. Most of these supplies had been scattered by the wind, in some cases up to 30 kilometers away.

Harriman found Stalin's extraordinary admission hard to explain. "Perhaps Molotov had never fully or accurately reported Clark Kerr's or my representations," he later remarked. "Stalin may have been misinformed by his NKVD. To me, nothing could excuse his outrageous denial of help for so very long. But the episode again underlined the importance of getting to Stalin directly on matters of importance."

It was too late, in any event, for last-minute heroics. After sixty-two days of front-line battle, the exhausted Warsaw insurgents laid down their arms on October 2. Roughly one quarter of the city's population, nearly 250,000 men, women and children, had been killed or wounded in the fighting. Of the underground army's 40,000 members, 15,000 were dead. The Germans also had paid a heavy price in spite of their enormous military superiority - 10,000 dead, 9,000 wounded and some 7,000

missing. (Three months were to pass before the Red Army entered Warsaw. It found the entire city in ruins, so bitter had been the hand-to-hand fighting. The broken streets were still littered with unburied bodies.)

The memory of Warsaw's martyrdom was to scar the relationship between Russians and Poles, including Communist Poles, for all the years to come. Just as virtually all Poles to this day, regardless of personal ideology, share the common Western belief that the Russians were responsible for the massacre of the Katyn Forest.

The Polish agony had preoccupied Churchill and Roosevelt throughout August and much of September. Now they met a second time at Quebec to lay their plans for the final defeat of Germany. During the nine months since Teheran, the military outlook had been totally transformed. Hitler's downfall was now assured; Allied armies were converging on German territory from west and east. No one could say with assurance whether the war would end in a matter of weeks or months, but the end was so palpably near that detailed decisions could not be postponed much longer. On September 23 Harriman and Clark Kerr put before Stalin the decisions reached at Quebec:

1. Northwest Europe - Our intention is to press on with all speed to destroy the German armed forces and penetrate into the heart of Germany. The best opportunity to defeat the enemy in the west lies in striking at the Ruhr and the Saar since the enemy will concentrate there the remainder of his available forces in the defense of these essential areas. The northern line of approach clearly has advantages over the southern and it is essential that before bad weather sets in we should open up the northern ports, particularly Rotterdam and Antwerp. It is on the left, therefore that our main effort will be exerted.

2. Italy - Our present operations in Italy will result in either: (a) The forces of Kesselring will be routed, in which event it should be possible to undertake a rapid regrouping and a pursuit toward the Ljubljana Gap; or (b) Kesselring will succeed in effecting an orderly retreat, in which event we may have to be content this year with the clearing of the plains of Lombardy. The progress of the battle will determine our future action. Plans are being prepared for an amphibious operation to be carried out if the situation so demands on the Istrian peninsula.

3. The Balkans - We will continue operations of our air forces and commando-type operations.

4. Japan - With the ultimate objective of invading the Japanese homeland we have agreed on further operations to intensify in all theaters the offensive against the Japanese.

5. Plans were agreed upon for the prompt transfer of power after the collapse of Germany to the Pacific theater.

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Stalin responded warmly to this information. Commenting on the success of Allied operations in France, he said to Harriman and Clark Kerr, "they are most bold and daring. Great risks have been taken in driving wedges into the German lines. But no success can be attained without risks. The operations in the west have never been equaled here." Once again, as at the time of the Normandy landings, he paid an

ungrudging tribute to his allies.

He also showed great satisfaction over the plan to capture the Ruhr and Saar. Before long, he said, the Red Army would take Katowice and Upper Silesia. Then Hitler would have lost his coal and much of his basic industry - in the east as well as the west. When Clark Kerr mentioned that the Allies also were contemplating operations in Greece before long, Stalin responded, "Good! It is high time!"

Harriman then reopened the question of joint military planning for the final stages of the war against Japan. In a message to Roosevelt marked "For the eyes of the President only," Harriman reported:

In discussing the Pacific war I explained that the plans referred to in your message covered the use of British and American resources. Stalin inquired whether we wished to bring Japan to her knees without Russian assistance or whether you wished, as you suggested in Teheran, Russian participation. The British Ambassador and I both assured him that Russian participation was desired but that no plans could be made for the use of Soviet resources until Marshal Stalin was ready to initiate discussions. He then stated that there was no change in his attitude as he had expressed it to you at Teheran. Russia is ready to participate in the war against Japan after Germany is defeated...

He was somewhat surprised that after the assurances he had given at Teheran we were not taking into account in our planning the participation of Russia and he appeared anxious to know specifically what role we would want Russia to play. He gave every indication of being ready and willing to cooperate but did not want to be an uninvited participant. It seems clear that we will get greater cooperation from him if we will suggest the operations that we would like the Russians to undertake, rather than wait their proposals. Because of this new aspect General Deane is cabling the Joint Chiefs of Staff for more detailed instructions than he has previously received.

I strongly recommend that we follow the course Stalin has indicated and that General Deane be authorized to discuss with the Red Army staff, in broad outline at least, our Pacific strategy and to propose the full measure of Russian participation desired.

Stalin showed no immediate interest, however, in discussing arrangements for the use of Soviet air bases in the Maritime Provinces by the American Air Forces, a matter he had promised to deal with months before. "That is not the most important question," he said to Harriman, adding that the Russians would have to move some twenty-five to thirty divisions to the Far East before they could play their part against the Japanese.

Stalin was more forthcoming when Harriman asked for permission to send 500 trucks with GI drivers across Soviet territory by way of Teheran and Alma Ata all the way to China for use there by the American air force. General Deane and Harriman had been pressing the request upon subordinate Soviet officials for many months without result. "Stalin agreed readily," Harriman reported, "and appeared not to have known before of our request. He even offered to supply trucks from Russia if they were needed quickly, to be replaced at a later date."

Encouraged by Stalin's reaction, Harriman then reopened another subject which had been waiting for a Soviet decision - the need to coordinate military operations now that Allied armies were converging on Germany from two directions. He proposed that a tripartite military committee be established in Moscow for this purpose. Stalin preferred to call it a commission. Committees, he said, existed to make decisions,

and this body, after all, would be purely consultative. Harriman offered to accept any title that suited Stalin. The important thing, he said was to get the machinery set up. Stalin inquired who the members would be, and when Harriman nominated General Deane to represent the United States he seemed well satisfied, until Clark Kerr added that Lieutenant General M. B. Burrows, Deane's counterpart in Moscow, would be the British member, There Stalin unexpectedly drew the line.

"The Soviet military people," he said, "are reluctant to deal with General Burrows. It is apparent that General Burrows has no respect for the Russian military and this feeling is vice versa." The British ambassador did his best to defend Burrows, but Stalin was not to be swayed. Marshal A.M. Vasilievsky and other senior officers of the Red Army had told him, Stalin said, that General Burrows considered them "savages." Accordingly, they would refuse to work with Burrows, whom they, in turn, considered altogether too arrogant. On a trip to the front in July, General Burrows evidently had got off on the wrong foot with Vasilievsky, the Red Army's Chief of Staff. General Deane at first attributed their misunderstanding to Burrows' unconscious air of superiority. It was later developed, however, that the Russians had planted listening devices in each room of the British military mission, which was housed in the former Czechoslovak legation, and must have overheard private comments by General Burrows that were distinctly uncomplimentary to the Red Army. (After Burrows had left Moscow, an American technician sent by Harriman to look over the British mission dug out thirty "bugs," all of them linked to a listening post across the street.) Harriman asked Stalin how the Russians felt about General Deane. He was greatly reassured by Stalin's reply - that his generals held Deane in the highest respect. To Harriman, this statement implied that the NKVD had not succeeded in tapping Deane's office.

Before leaving Stalin, Harriman on instructions from the President reopened the question of the next Big Three meeting. Roosevelt, he said, was thinking about November, after the election, and since it was too late in the year for Alaska, he proposed a meeting somewhere in the Mediterranean. Such a meeting would, of course, be most desirable, Stalin said, but he feared that his doctors would not allow him to travel. Old age was creeping up on him, he complained. In years past he could shake off an attack of the grippe in two or three days but now it seemed to take a week or two. Harriman praised the healing effect of the Mediterranean sun. But his doctors insisted, Stalin said, "that any change of climate would have a bad effect." He offered to send Molotov, who had his complete confidence. To this, Molotov remarked that he could never replace Marshal Stalin. "You are too modest," Stalin replied, favoring his deputy with a kindly glance. Harriman assured Stalin that while the President was always glad to see Molotov, he hoped there would be second thoughts in the Kremlin. Conceivably the doctors would change their minds or Stalin perhaps would change his doctors. This humorous suggestion led Stalin to observe that if he had faithfully followed the advice of his doctors, he would long since have been in his grave. Doctors were always too cautious, he said. Healthy people could fly wherever they liked. Churchill, for example, that "desperate fellow," was forever flying around the world, Stalin said, with obvious admiration. So the time and place of the next Big Three meeting were deferred temporarily.