Memorandum by Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, E. Bevin, ‘Policy towards Germany’, 3 May 1946[[1]](#footnote-1)

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3 May, 1946

[…] 10. In seeking a solution of our dilemma the following considerations should be borne in mind. Though we could argue that the principles laid down at Potsdam were only designed for the initial control period and are therefore now due for reconsideration, nevertheless to throw the Potsdam policy overboard entirely and organise our zone as an independent unit would have very grave consequences: -

(a) We should be unable to retain for long even the façade of four-Power cooperation in Germany and should soon find ourselves forced out of Berlin.

(b) The hopes we still entertain of breaking down the iron curtain would have to be abandoned. The whole of eastern Germany and indeed of eastern Europe would be irretrievable lost to Russia.

(c) We should also have to defend our zone (or western Germany) from the infection of political and economic influences from the east. For example, we should have to set up a separate currency and almost certainly a separate nationality.

(d) All this – which would in effect amount to bringing western Germany into a western anti-Soviet bloc – would mean an irreparable break with the Russians, who would go all out to destroy our policy in western Germany and turn the population against us. This task would not be difficult in an industrial area in a period of acute food shortage. They would, no doubt, also redouble their attacks on us in all other parts of the world, and the prospect of UNO continuing in such circumstances would be slender.

(e) The Americans are probably not yet ready for this. Certainly their leading representatives in Germany would oppose it tooth and nail. In any case one could not count on continued American support even if they came to agree to it. But full American support would be essential.

(f) The French might or might not support us, depending on the strength of communism in France. In any case Communist influence would be strong enough to make their support an uncertain factor.

(g) The Belgians and Dutch (as indeed all minor Allies) would be distressed by any reduction of reparation which would be involved in organising western Germany for prosperity, but the prospect of restoring a prosperous trade with Germany might reconcile them to the loss to some extent. They would be less easily reconciled to the “forgive and forget” attitude towards the western Germans which our new policy would necessarily involve. Their love for German Socialists is no greater than their love for other Germans.

(h) We should find ourselves at the mercy of German blackmail – “We must be given this and that, or we shall be overwhelmed by the Communists.” We should probably soon have to accept a German army.

(i) The fear and contempt which Germans feel for Russia, coupled with their unforgiving resentment at the loss of the eastern provinces, might keep them content for a time with holding Russia at the Elbe. But, whether we like it or not, the conception of German unity is a basic fact which has survived many centuries and is unlikely to be destroyed by any artificial creation established today[[2]](#footnote-2). Sooner or later the east and the west would join up again.

(j) Meanwhile we should have lost the one factor which might hold us and the Russians together, viz., the existence of a single Germany which it would be to the interest of us both to hold down.

11. The foregoing are powerful arguments against abandoning the Potsdam policy and setting out to organise our own zone or western Germany as a separate unit. On the other hand a “western” policy, if developed with determination and subject to the conditions mentioned in paragraph 12 below, could have certain attractions: -

(a) It would be clear both to the Russians and to the Germans that we were determined to resist the further westward expansion of Russian influence and of communism. In this we could expect the support of the great majority of Germans, whose assistance we should have in resisting the infiltration of agents from the east.

(b) By denouncing the level of industry plan and limiting reparation to more reasonable proportions we should give the western Germans a hope for the future even though it would in itself bring them little immediate material benefit.

(c) If the German population became more contented by seeing our determination to save them from the Russians and restore their economy, the tasks of our authorities would be lightened, as also would those of the German authorities as they take over responsibility for administration.

12. It must, however, be stressed that two conditions are essential to the success of a “western” policy. The first is that we should give an immediate fillip to the population by raising the food ration and maintaining it at a satisfactory level. Even if the level of industry plan was discarded, we must reckon with an interval of two or three years before German industries could be so far rehabilitated as to render western Germany self-supporting. Secondly, we must be assured of full and continued support from the United States.

13. Whatever decision be taken on this fundamental problem, there are certain matters which we should keep to the forefront of our policy. These are: -

(a) to concentrate on constructive measures in our zone, both political and economic, and refuse to be deflected from our course by the Russians or such satellites as the World Federation of Trade Unions;

(b) to accelerate constitutional development in our zone and to develop the local autonomy of the provincial governments, giving them the widest practicable powers and organising them in such a way that they will fit into a federated structure either for the western zones or for Germany as a whole;

(c) to maintain and, if possible, increase the present food ration in the British zone and western Germany as a whole, and to use every pressure to extract food surpluses from the Russian zone for the benefit of the rest of Germany;

(d) to take every possible step to increase coal production and see that a sufficient proportion is devoted to the re-activation of Germany industry;

(e) to apply the economic principles of Potsdam to the western zones even if the Russians refuse to collaborate, and in any case to foster the solidarity of the western zones;

(f) to act in fullest collaboration with the Americans;

(g) to maintain our position in Berlin.

[TNA, CAB 129/9]

Keywords: post-war Germany, inter-allied relations

1. It was distributed to Cabinet ministers. The ideas Bevin lays out in this memorandum were developed in spring 1946 in proximity to influential Foreign Office officials (including Sargent), but they were also articulated against the important inter-agency meeting of 3 April. As the British historian A. Deighton notes, ‘this meeting appears to have convinced Bevin that now serious consideration had to be given to officials’ ‘Western’ option: the permanent separation and organisation of either the British zone alone, or the western zones, to contain the spread of communism in Europe.’ (Deighton A. Towards a ‘Western’ Strategy: The Making of British Policy Towards Germany 1945–46 // Britain and the First Cold War. p. 63). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Back in March 1943 when the question of the future of Germany was being studied, the Foreign Office came to a similar conclusion about the complexities of dividing Germany and staving off the unification of her different parts in the long-run. See: W.P. (43) 96, Memo by Eden, 08/03/1943 // TNA, CAB 66/34. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)