Note by the Foreign Secretary, E. Bevin, to the Cabinet regarding the breakdown of the meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers, 5 January 1948

TOP SECRET

CABINET

POLICY IN GERMANY

Situation resulting from the Breakdown of the Council of Foreign Ministers[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The failures of the Council of Foreign Ministers to reach agreement on any outstanding issues is a milestone in our Germany policy. The breakdown was not unexpected, although the situation was aggravated by the way in which M. Molotov over-played his hand. However, until the very end I did not abandon hope of some agreement. My main difficulty arose from the underlying difference of approach between one of the Four Powers at the table and the other three. This was not simply a question of conference tactics, but a fundamental difference of view and outlook. The conflict is between the Soviet desire to dominate Europe politically and economically and the desire of the three Western Powers to put Europe on its feet again with American backing. We had known for a long time before the Conference opened that the actions of the Russians, both political and economic, in their zone had created a situation which was totally contrary to that which we were aiming to establish in Germany as a whole. This has been affected, moreover, by a consistent policy of suppression of the freedom of the individual, closely parallel to that followed in other Eastern European countries. Discrimination against the personalities, activities and publicity services of non-Communist political parties, beginning with the Social Democrats, the incarceration of political opponents in the same concentration camps as were used by the Nazis, the forced deportation of labour to the U.S.S.R., the rearrest of prisoners of war returning to the Soviet Zone from the West, political discrimination in the distribution of economic resources, and an extreme form of centralisation of all types of public authority under the domination of the Socialist Unity Party; these are some of the methods consistently employed by the Soviet authorities for the realisation of their unilateral policy of occupation. The general effect of Russian occupation for two and a half years is that the Eastern Zone has been harnessed economically and politically to the Soviet system in Eastern Europe[[2]](#footnote-2).

2. All our information about Russian plans for the meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers was to the effect that they did not intend to abate the policy which they had hitherto pursued in the Eastern Zone. Further, they intended, if possible, to extend their political and economic system into the Western Zones with the object of winning Germany over to Communism and to undermine one of the principle pillars of the Marshall Plan. Their best methods of achieving this would have been to bind the other Three Powers to a joint policy in Germany as a whole, which would in practice have allowed them a free hand to operate directly and through German Communist stooges in the Western Zones, while at the same time they prevented, on grounds of military security, any penetration either political or economic of the Eastern Zone by the Western Powers.

3. With this knowledge we were bound to enter the Conference with considerable reserve. Events proved that this reserve was felt even more strongly by the French and American Delegations. I wish to emphasise, however, that my mind was very far from being closed, and that up till the last few minutes I waited hopefully for any sign of a change of heart by M. Molotov or any indication that the Soviet Delegation were genuinely anxious to reach an agreement which was not designed to communise Germany and destroy the Marshall Plan. Considering the number of points where there was a deep difference of opinion between the Soviet Government on the one hand and some or all of the other three Governments on the other, it would have been necessary for a considerable modification to take place in Soviet designs and policy if confidence was to be restored among the Four Powers at the table and a genuine agreement to emerge. Far from this, however, there was no sign of any such change. It was this that was the real cause of the breakdown of the Conference and I do not propose to go further into details on the points of disagreement of which my colleagues are already fully aware.

*Present Situation*

4. We have therefore reached a point when we must consider urgently but soberly what our future policy in Germany is to be. This is a wide field, and the principle problems are discussed below. We must realise that the failure to reach agreement at the Council of Foreign Ministers means that, whether we like it or not, the division between East and West in Germany, which itself is part and parcel of the same division throughout the world, will continue and is likely to be sharper. I do not, however, consider that such a division can or should be permanent. The German desire for unity will, I am sure, prove too strong for this. It is probably the strongest force in Germany today. An irredentist movement is certain to arise sooner or later. In the long run, therefore, the will to unite in Germany will bring the Eastern Zone and the Western Zones together. The problem for us is to bring this unity about as soon as possible, but in such a way as to ensure that the forces of attraction operate from the West upon the East and not vice versa as the Soviet Union intend with their aim of dominating the whole of Europe. We want to see established in the Western Zones in Germany a political and economic system to which the Germans in the Eastern Zone will exert all their energy to join, and which will in the end prevail over the standards and system established in the Soviet Zone. This task is primarily one for the Germans and not for any of the Occupying Powers, however good the intentions of these may be. We must, however, see that the Germans, throughout Germany as a whole, achieve their unity with the support of the Western Powers and not in the face of their opposition. This is important. If we are not careful national unity will become a slogan to be used by the Germans against the Occupying Powers and their neighbours. It will be represented by the Germans that the only obstacle to unity is the Allied occupation and control, and that all Germans must unite to fight against this control. If that occurs we shall be faced with resurgence of nationalistic Germany.

5. It is not likely that Germany alone could become a menace to the peace of the world in the near future. The really dangerous situation would be a combination of any large part of Germany and Russia. If Russian man-power and resources were to be harnessed to German industrial power, technical skill and trained man-power, and were to be directed against Western Europe, the position would be extremely dangerous. This is an idea which would not be unwelcome to some Germans, and much as they fear and dislike the Russians they might prefer an alliance with Russia to the present stagnation. I do not think that the Russians are likely to seek such an alliance, since they would recognise the great dangers which it would hold for them. Nevertheless it constitutes the main potential danger, and we must bear it always in mind.

6. We should accordingly make it clear that it is our policy to restore the unity of Germany as soon as possible. The Russian claim to be the sole champion of German unity should be exposed and we should do our best to make the Germans understand throughout what may prove a long period, that true unity and the restoration of Germany can only be achieved under the auspices of ourselves and the other Western Powers and not of German nationalism or Soviet Communism. Our policy in this respect has been consistent throughout. Already at the Yalta and Potsdam discussions we took a stand against the dismemberment of Germany. On the other hand, we have always opposed Germany being centralised to the extent which would make her once again a menace to the peace of Europe and of the world. Our very consistency puts us in a strong position to rebut the Soviet claim to be the sole champion of German unity. We should avoid taking any irrevocable step which would make final agreement between the Four Powers on a unified Germany impossible. But I would ask my colleagues to leave to me the timing of such action as may become necessary. I would, of course, consult them before taking any important decision, and I shall watch the situation very carefully with the constant desire to avoid any action which would divide Germany irrevocably.

7. It is difficult to lay down exactly at this stage all the steps which His Majesty’s Government may now have to take in Germany. Some should in any case be taken soon, and these are discussed successively below. Others may be forced upon us, either after we have had discussions with the Americans and the French or in order to forestall or counteract steps by the Soviet Government. There are also a number of important but lesser matters where action may be expedient but which are not discussed in the present paper. We must bear in mind throughout the coming months that we have now reached a stage in Germany where we must take account of German public opinion. I do not suggest that our policy should be governed solely by what the Germans think, but even if we wished, we have no longer the power to force unpopular measures upon the Germans for very long, and our policy is much more likely to be successful if it meets with the general approval of responsible German opinion.

8. I would like here to mention that in my conversations with the United States Secretary of State after the end of the Conference, Mr. Marshall[[3]](#footnote-3) said that he was anxious to receive specific proposals from me on future methods for cooperation between the Three Powers on Germany. M. Bidault was even more impressed by the need for urgent consultation, in particular with regard to the question of the future of the Ruhr. Mr. Marshall agreed with M. Bidault that conversation between the Three Powers at a Government level should take place in London at an early date but he made it clear that these talks should cover the long-range aspects of the German problem and that any tentative agreement which might be reached with respect to the Ruhr would be contingent upon agreement on the other aspects of the German settlement. This was in line with the attitude I had adopted with M. Bidault.

9. I have tried to deal in the present paper with all the more urgent matters, but I would ask my colleagues to give me some latitude as to the way in which I deal with them as they arise, and particularly as to the manner in which I discuss them with the United States and French Governments. I will of course be careful to see that my colleagues are kept informed of all important developments.

[TNA, CAB 129/23/5]

Keywords: post-war Germany, great power relations

1. The fifth meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers took place in London and ended on 16 December. The Foreign Ministers were unable to reach agreement over Germany and Austria and the next meeting was held only eighteen months later. See Deighton A. *The Impossible Peace. Britain, the Division of Germany, and the Origins of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) pp. 207-222. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. During 1947 the creation of so-called Soviet joint-stock companies on the territory of Eastern Germany became common practice,; whole enterprises were transferred to Soviet ownership. See Vatlin, A. Yu., *Germany in the Twentieth Century* (Moscow: 2002) p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marshall, George C. (1880 - 1959) - American General and statesman. US Army Chief of Staff (1939 - 1945), US Secretary of State (1947 - 1949), US Secretary of Defence (1950 - 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)