



A J P Taylor (1906-1990)

ENGLISH HISTORY 1914-1945, OUP, 1965

of eastern Europe, and the Western Allies had no resource other than Stalin's good will, unless they fell back belatedly on alliance with Hitler - a course which no one contemplated. The conference at Yalta ended in a blaze of friendship. The Western Powers yielded really only over one point: the Soviet nominees were recognized as the provisional government of Poland 'with the inclusion of democratic leaders from Poland itself and from Poles abroad'. This was too much for some English Conservatives. The men of Munich began to re-form. Twenty-five M.P.s voted against the motion to approve Yalta on 27 February, and a junior minister resigned.¹ This was a troublesome portent for Churchill's future as Conservative leader.

The immediate anxiety was over the course of the war, and this was soon dispelled. The Germans had used their last resources in the battle of the Ardennes. As well, the strategic air offensive belatedly achieved decisive results. This was mainly the work of the Americans. Once released from Eisenhower's control, their strategic air force returned to the precision bombing of Germany's oil supplies and brought her armies almost to a standstill. The aim of the bomber command was less sure. Portal, chief of the air staff, was converted to the attack on oil. Tedder, the deputy supreme commander, still asked for attacks on communications. Harris remained unrepentant and dismissed these plans as 'panaceas'. He defied the clearest orders from his nominal superior and in January 1945 challenged Portal to dismiss him. Portal dared not do so. Harris enjoyed great prestige with the public and still more with the crews of the bomber command. He was the only British commander of the second World War who could serenely go his own way. A face-saving device was found. The attack on German morale was revived in a new form. One further devastat-

1. The junior minister was Henry Strauss, parliamentary secretary to the ministry of town and country planning. Of the other rebels, one, Lord Dunglass (later Sir Alec Douglas-Home), subsequently became Conservative prime minister and another, Peter Thorneycroft, Conservative chancellor of the exchequer and minister of defence.

ing onslaught, or 'Thunderclap', might cause this morale to collapse, when it was already crumbling under the Russian offensive. If the attack also aided the Russians, so much the better.

Harris found no difficulty this time in conforming. Berlin was the first target chosen. Then it was decided to attack a town which had been virtually untouched before, and Dresden was chosen instead. On the night of 14 February it was devastated. The Germans alleged that up to a quarter of a million people had been killed.¹ The attack on Dresden was no different in character from previous attacks on other towns, though greater in effect, and the policy underlying it had been repeatedly approved - by Churchill himself, by Eden, by Sinclair, the secretary for air, and collectively by the war cabinet. But ministers had never been as frank with the public as they had been among themselves. They had always pretended that the bomber offensive was being conducted against strategic targets and that German civilians were being killed only by regrettable accident. Only in this way, Sinclair explained, 'could he satisfy the inquiries of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and other significant religious leaders whose moral condemnation of the bombing offensive might disturb the morale of Bomber Command crews'.² Now the politicians, led by Churchill, rounded on Harris and saddled him with sole responsibility for the strategy of indiscriminate destruction. They launched a myth which has endured to the present day. The strategic air offensive was formally ended on 16 April. Thereafter bomber command received no acknowledgement. Churchill did not mention it in his victory broadcast on 13 May. No campaign medal was struck for it. Harris was not allowed to issue his

1. The correct figure is now known to have been 25,000. In all 93,000 German civilians were killed by bombing. H. Rumpf, *The Bombing of Germany* (1963), 164.

2. Sinclair to Portal, 28 October 1943. Webster and Frankland, *Strategic Air Offensive*, iii, 1943. Further to sustain morale, Anglican chaplains were maintained on the strength of all air-stations.

final dispatch. Alone among successful British war-leaders, he was not elevated to the house of lords.¹

The bombing of Dresden came when the Allied armies were still stuck west of the Rhine. It was their new advance in March which made it seem unnecessary or immoral. On 7 March American forces crossed the Rhine at Remagen. On 23 March Montgomery's armies crossed the Rhine further north and penetrated into the Ruhr. In early April Alexander's armies broke into the valley of the Po. Final victory was not won without final dissensions. The British still complained against Eisenhower's strategy of the broad advance. Churchill wanted to take Berlin - more, it seems, from the effect on the Germans than to forestall the Russians. Stalin complained that Alexander was secretly negotiating with German emissaries. Division among the Allies was indeed Germany's last hope. The hope was strengthened when Roosevelt died on 12 April.² Hitler believed that this had saved him as the death of the tsarina Elizabeth saved Frederick the Great in 1762. He was wrong about himself, though right maybe in a longer run about Germany. Truman, the new president, had none of Roosevelt's vision as international leader and wanted to turn his back on the rest of the world as soon as possible. He did not intend to prop up Great Britain. On the other hand, he was quick to take offence at Soviet complaints or opposition. Now and not before, Churchill was free to sound the anti-

1. Though nearly all chief commanders received peerages, none received a grant of money, as most had done after the first World war. This was an interesting change of social attitude. In 1919 England was still trying to live in the past, and it was assumed that generals and admirals should be admitted into the aristocracy with suitable endowments, as Marlborough, Wellington, and many lesser figures had been before them. By 1945 people felt that commanders, other ranks, and for that matter civilians had all been doing their duty and that money rewards would be invidious. Perhaps, too, it was expected that the war-leaders would do well enough on the profits of their memoirs or by becoming directors of limited companies.

2. Marshall had been doing most of the work for him during the previous weeks. On the other hand, observers announced their discovery of Roosevelt's failing powers at Yalta only after his death.

bolshhevik alarm and had to do so. It was the only way of securing American assistance for Great Britain and of maintaining American participation in world affairs. It was also perhaps more justified by changing events great and small, from Russia's victory over the Germans to the harassments of Tito, the Yugoslav dictator, at Trieste.

Allied unity lasted long enough to achieve total victory, and not much longer. On 28 April Mussolini and his mistress were shot by Communist partisans, and their bodies hung upside down in Milan. On 29 April the German forces in Italy surrendered unconditionally to Alexander. On 30 April Hitler killed himself and his mistress whom he had married on the previous day. Their bodies were burnt in the yard outside his bunker. The remains were found by the Russians and subsequently destroyed. On 4 May the German forces in north-western Germany surrendered unconditionally to Montgomery. Admiral Doenitz, whom Hitler had nominated as his successor, attempted to end the war in the west, while continuing to fight against the Russians. His proposal was rejected, and at 2.41 a.m. on 7 May the Germans signed an instrument of unconditional surrender on all fronts at Eisenhower's headquarters.¹ To please the Russians the instrument was ratified at Zhukov's headquarters in Berlin at 11.30 p.m. on 8 May. In a final stroke of muddle the Western Allies celebrated VE-day (Victory in Europe) on 8 May, the Russians on 9 May.² Churchill announced victory in the house of commons on the afternoon of 8 May, and the two houses of parliament proceeded to St Margaret's, Westminster, where they gave thanks for victory. The church bells were rung, floodlights took the place of the blackout. Crowds once more danced in the streets, as they had done on armistice day, 1918.

1. Montgomery received the Germans himself, and his chief of staff was not present. Eisenhower did not meet the Germans and left them to his staff officers. A characteristic difference.

2. Eisenhower's headquarters meant to keep the news of the German surrender secret until after the ratification in Berlin. An American reporter broke the ban, and the British and American governments had to admit that the war was over.