In the USA at that time, the great majority of Americans greeted Soviet citizens with great warmth. It is known now, however, that the US secret service, in the person of Allen Dulles, had been conducting separate peace talks in Switzerland with certain leaders of the Third Reich whose interests were represented by General Wolff. Hearing about these talks, Stalin sent the President a message expressing his indignation at the activities of the US special services, and on 12 April 1945 Roosevelt signed a message to Stalin in which he spoke of his firm intention to strengthen co-operation between the USSR and the USA. That was the last letter he wrote to Stalin, and the last he wrote in his life. He died later that evening, and so did not live to see the victory for which he had done so much.

A yawning gap, with enormous consequences for international affairs, appeared in American political life. Roosevelt’s place was taken by Vice-President Truman and almost at once serious strains developed in Soviet-US relations.

On Victory Day President Truman appeared on American television. He spoke about the victory, but in an official, cold manner. The nation was rejoicing, the whole of America was triumphant, yet the face of the President was stony. It came as no surprise later when he and Churchill did their best to disrupt the good relations that had been built up during the war between the USA and USSR. After all, this was the self-same Harry Truman who, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union, had made a statement which became famous beyond his country’s shores: ‘If we see that Germany is winning the war, we should help Russia, but if Russia is winning we should help Germany, and let her kill as many Reds as possible.’

A sign of Roosevelt’s goodwill towards the USSR had been to invite Molotov to attend the San Francisco conference in the spring of 1945. Molotov had accepted, but by the time he and I arrived Roosevelt was dead and it was Truman who received the Soviet guests. As ambassador I accompanied Molotov to the White House.

I had seen Truman only a few weeks before. Then he had been reasonably friendly, but now, as he talked to Molotov, he was harsh and his demeanour was cold. Before Roosevelt’s death, Truman had wanted to create a good impression of himself in Moscow, but at the meeting with Molotov it was as if someone else had been put in his place. Whatever was suggested, whatever
the topic of conversation, his attitude was negative and sometimes he seemed not even to be listening to us.

It was plain that he was not pleased with the results of Yalta as regards the UN and some of the principles of its operations. He was stridently pugnacious and found fault with practically everything said by us about the international organisation and the need to prevent aggression from Germany. Molotov had been instructed to raise with Truman the question of the forthcoming first session of the United Nations General Assembly, at which the USSR was prepared to speak in unison with the USA on some issues. The discussions never took place.

Quite unexpectedly – still in the middle of our talk – Truman suddenly half rose and gave a sign to indicate that the conversation was over, in effect breaking off the meeting. We left.

In analysing that meeting, one might conclude that Truman had behaved in this way because, as he now bore the highest office, he had been informed that America had just become the only country in the world to possess a new weapon of terrifying destructive power, the atom bomb. With this weapon in America’s hands, Truman evidently felt he could dictate terms to the Soviet Union.

Stalin was of course informed of the meeting, but he never referred to it in my presence. I am, however, convinced that he took a very unfavourable view of Roosevelt’s successor, a man who felt and did nothing to hide his hostility to the power which had borne the heaviest sacrifices in the war against the common enemy.

As soon as Nazi Germany had been defeated, there arose the practical need to take stock of the situation by convening another conference of the three Allied leaders. A progressive mood was growing in Europe and throughout the world. The conference took place at Potsdam, in the still-smoking ruins of the Third Reich, and as ambassador to the USA I was a delegate. It was an especially important event in my political life.

A great amount of preparatory work was necessary before the conference, and I went to Moscow to do my share. Stalin and the Soviet leadership mapped out our country’s main aims, paying particular attention to the more obvious controversies which would arise. Thus the Soviet delegation was well prepared and we set off for Potsdam determined to seek agreement.

Truman represented the USA. For Stalin personally he was a totally unknown figure. Naturally Churchill knew Truman better, and from the opening days of the conference, for as long as Churchill was still taking part, it was noticeable that he and Truman understood each other almost intuitively. During the conference Churchill was replaced by Attlee; but the new Labour government fully adopted the line taken by Churchill, and Truman and Attlee easily found a common language.

It is worth recalling some aspects of the conference. Although some of its foreign participants have already written about it, there are inaccuracies in their accounts.

As Potsdam was located in the Soviet zone of occupation, all the logistics and security for the delegates were our concern. The Soviet delegation was housed in Babelsberg, a small town a few minutes’ drive from Potsdam and a former residence of the German kings. The conference itself took place in the Cecilienhof Palace. When all the Soviet delegates had assembled, Stalin looked the place over, the staircases and corridors, and commented: ‘Hmm, nothing much. A modest palace. Russian tsars built themselves something much more solid!’

The entire route from Babelsberg to Cecilienhof was lined with security guards, soldiers placed at six-yard intervals. In addition, fifty yards beyond these men was a further line of guards, spaced further apart.

Stalin frequently invited Molotov to travel in his car. He also invited me, usually because he had questions for me about Truman, the mood of American political circles and so on. At first, when Stalin sat in the folding-seat of his ZIS, while Molotov and I were given the main back seat, I felt somewhat awkward; but I later discovered that Stalin actually preferred that seat, since it was in the middle of the vehicle and he found it less bumpy.

At every crossing and in all the squares there were Soviet women traffic police with flags. They were immaculately dressed in new army uniforms of a very fine cut, and in all their movements they were so graceful that they could almost have passed for ballet dancers. We were told that the American and British delegates found them as delightful as we did.

Both at Yalta and at Potsdam I worked close to Stalin and I would like to describe some aspects of his dealings with people through the prism of the conferences. My impressions of Stalin at meetings, my general observations of him, the episodes that have stuck in my mind, either from the conferences or during
conversations with foreign officials visiting the Soviet Union – all these come together to form my image of the man as I then saw him. On the other hand, I do not set out to define what Stalin was. I just observed him while I was doing my job, and my impressions of him were secondary to the work in hand. I therefore do not want to present my view of him as a complete or incontrovertible truth.

At Yalta Roosevelt became ill and the session was deferred for the day. Stalin wanted to visit him and he asked Molotov and me to accompany him. We went to the President’s rooms on the first floor of the Livadiya Palace where the empress had once slept. The window opened on to a beautiful view of the sea.

The President was delighted to see us, as he was confined to his bed and had hardly any visitors. He was clearly tired and drained, though he tried not to show it. We sat with him for maybe twenty minutes, while he and Stalin exchanged polite remarks about health, the weather and the beauties of the Crimea. We left him when it seemed that Roosevelt had become detached, strangely remote, as if he could see us, yet was gazing somewhere into the distance.

We were descending the narrow staircase when Stalin suddenly stopped, took his pipe out of his pocket, filled it unhurriedly and, as if to himself, said quietly, but so that we could hear: ‘Why did nature have to punish him so? Is he any worse than other people?’

Despite his basic harshness of character, Stalin did just occasionally give way to positive human emotions.

Next day Roosevelt was back to normal and the sessions restarted, though the fatigue did not leave his face throughout the conference. He had only two months to live.

I repeat: Stalin sympathised with Roosevelt the man and he made this clear to us. He rarely bestowed his sympathy on anybody from another social system, and spoke of it more rarely still.

Despite his basic harshness of character, Stalin did just occasionally give way to positive human emotions.

Next day Roosevelt was back to normal and the sessions restarted, though the fatigue did not leave his face throughout the conference. He had only two months to live.

I repeat: Stalin sympathised with Roosevelt the man and he made this clear to us. He rarely bestowed his sympathy on anybody from another social system, and spoke of it more rarely still.

Naturally, everyone in Stalin’s entourage or who worked closely with him took pains to observe him closely, catching his every word and gesture. After all, the more imposing the thundercloud, the more warily one watches it. For his contemporaries, to be in Stalin’s company, still more to talk to him or to be present during a conversation, was something special. One was aware how much depended on the will of this man.

This in one way contradicts the Marxist view of the role of personality in history. Outstanding personalities are the product of conditions in a particular time. On the other hand, these people can and do influence the course of events and the development of society. Marx, Engels and later Lenin all based their philosophical works on a recognition of this.

What was the most striking thing about Stalin at first sight? In whatever situation, the first thing that one was aware of was that he was a thinking man. I never heard him say anything that was not precisely relevant to the matter in hand. He did not like preambles, long sentences or verbose speeches. On the other hand, he was patient with people who, because of a lack of education, found it hard to order their thoughts neatly.

I was always aware, watching Stalin speaking, of how expressive his face was, especially his eyes. When rebuking or arguing with someone, Stalin had a way of staring him mercilessly in the eyes and not taking his gaze off him. The object of this relentless stare, one has to admit, felt profoundly uncomfortable.

If he was seated when speaking, he was apt to shift his weight from one side to the other, sometimes emphasising a thought with a movement of the hand, though in general he used gestures sparingly. He spoke quietly, evenly, almost as if muffled, and raised his voice rarely. Even so, whenever he spoke there was total silence, however many people were there. His speeches had an original style. His thinking consisted of precisely formulated, non-standard ideas.

As for foreign officials, he did not exactly pamper them with his attention. If only for that reason, seeing and hearing Stalin was regarded by them as a major event.

Stalin was always unhurried in his movements. I never saw him increase his pace, and it seemed to me that time itself slowed down when he was at work.

Very often at small meetings, while someone was giving a report, Stalin would simply pace the room, listening and making comments as he did so. He would walk a few paces, stop, look at the speaker and the others in the room, maybe go closer to gauge their reactions, and then recommence pacing. Then he would go and sit at the head of the table, and remain there, quite still, for several minutes, which meant he was waiting to see what impression the speech was making on the others. Or he would ask: ‘What do you think?’ Those present would try to answer briefly, avoiding superfluous words.

It was noticeable that Stalin never carried a file of papers with
him, whatever kind of meeting he was attending, including the international conferences. I never saw him with a pencil or pen in his hand. He was never seen to make notes. Whatever materials he needed he kept in his study. He worked at night, and was generally more friendly at night than during the day.

He always turned up for a session of the international conferences prepared. When the delegation went with him, they knew what he would speak about. He did almost all the talking for the Soviet Union. His chief support on foreign affairs was Molotov. When necessary, Stalin would lean over and consult with a member of the delegation before speaking.

I recall an occasion when the discussion was about the stubbornness of the German resistance towards the end of the war, when even a blind man could see it was all over for the fascists. Several people had something to say on this. Stalin listened to each one and then, as though summing up a debate, he said: ‘That’s all true, I agree. But still, one must recognise one characteristic that Germans have, and that they have shown in more than one war, and that is the doggedness and determination of the German soldier.’

Then he added: ‘History shows that the most dogged soldier of all is the Russian; then comes the German, and in third place . . .’ He paused before he said: ‘. . . the Pole, the Polish soldier, yes, the Pole.’

Stalin’s assessment made a big impression on me. The German army was by then virtually destroyed. One would have expected him to describe this army of aggressors, rapists, pillagers and hangmen in the harshest terms. Yet Stalin had set the German soldier in an unemotional historical context.

Stalin was one of those few leaders who would never allow bad news from the front to obscure his assessment of the facts, or his faith in the party, the people and his armed forces. It later transpired, however, that the stress and the colossal difficulties of the war had taken their toll on Stalin’s health, and one can only be amazed that, despite it all, he lived to see the victory.

Did Stalin take care of his health? It struck me that he always looked tired, but I never saw a doctor with him throughout all the Allied conferences. I don’t think it was bravado on his part. He simply didn’t like the long walks which the doctors invariably prescribed. As for his appearance, he was of medium height. His perfectly tailored marshal’s uniform suited him, and he seemed to like wearing it. If he wasn’t wearing uniform, then it would be something in between uniform and civilian dress. Sloppiness in dress was not in his nature.

Stalin’s face was rather podgy. I often heard it said that he bore the scars of smallpox, but I don’t recall ever seeing any, and I was close to him many times. It was not true that he was prone to put on weight easily. Of course, as a man who did no physical labour, he had a tendency that way, but he was careful to curb it. At table, I never saw Stalin over-active with the knife and fork; one could say he ate rather slowly and sparingly. He did not drink spirits, but he liked dry wine and always opened the bottle himself, first studying the label carefully, as if judging its artistic quality.

People often asked about his attitude to art and literature, and my own impression is that he loved music. He enjoyed the concerts arranged in the Kremlin, especially singers with strong voices, male or female, whom he would applaud vigorously. I personally saw how during the Potsdam conference, in full view of everyone, he kissed the violinist Barinov and the pianist Gilels, who played beautifully after the official dinner, and he was moved also by certain singers at the Bolshoi, men like Ivan Kozlovsky.

I recall that once, when Kozlovsky was performing, some Politburo members loudly requested a folk-song. Calmly, Stalin intervened: ‘Why put pressure on Comrade Kozlovsky? Let him sing what he wants. And I think he wants to sing Lensky’s aria from Eugene Onegin.’

Everyone laughed, including Kozlovsky, who immediately sang Lensky’s aria.

As for his taste in literature, I can state that he read a great deal. This came out in his speeches: he had a good knowledge of the Russian classics, especially Gogol and Saltykov-Shchedrin. Also, to my own knowledge, he had read Shakespeare, Heine, Balzac, Hugo, Guy de Maupassant – whom he particularly liked – and many other western European writers. It was also apparent that he had read a lot of history, as he often quoted examples that could only have come from historical sources.

It has been justly remarked that in his behaviour Stalin was always correct. There was never any familiarity or slapping on the back, which sometimes passes for geniality. Even when he was angry – which I have seen – he never exceeded the permitted limits, and he rarely swore.

I do remember, however, an episode that took place in 1950,
when the puppet government of South Korea was being egged on by the USA to start war on North Korea. The outbreak of war in Korea created serious international tension, since everyone realised it could lead to a wider conflict.

One day before the Security Council was convened, Moscow was deciding what position the Soviet representative should take, and, further, whether the Soviet delegation should even take part in the session, when the USA had written a letter to the Security Council that was both insulting and an open provocation.

Having read a cable from Ya. A. Malik, the Soviet UN representative in New York, Stalin phoned me in the evening: 'Comrade Gromyko, what instruction do you think we should send on this?'

I said: 'Comrade Stalin, the Foreign Ministry has already prepared an instruction for your approval. The main points are a decisive rejection of the rebukes directed at North Korea and the Soviet Union, and an equally decisive condemnation of the USA for its part in unleashing aggression. Secondly, if the Security Council introduces a motion against North Korea or the Soviet Union, or both, Malik must use the right of veto and prevent the vote.'

I waited for Stalin's reaction. He said, 'In my view, the Soviet delegation should not attend the Security Council session.'

He added some sharp comments about Washington's hostile letter to the UN. Even so, I felt obliged to draw his attention to an important consideration: 'In the absence of our representative, the Security Council will be able to do what it likes, including sending troops to South Korea from other countries under the guise of being UN forces.'

But my argument made no impression on him. He was not going to change his mind, and he actually dictated the instruction himself - something he did very rarely. Forty minutes later the text was transmitted to Malik.

As is well known, my warning to Stalin was justified. The Council passed a resolution cobbled together by Washington, and military units from various countries were sent to South Korea under the label of 'UN forces'. On this occasion, Stalin, guided for once by emotion, had not made the best decision.

Stalin liked people with wit. He himself used this weapon economically. I never heard from anyone, during his lifetime or after, that he abused it. But he also liked people who thought logically, and was impatient if he gave an order and got an immediate, unthinking response.

For example, while on holiday in the south of the country, he once gave one of his security officers the order: 'Get me Ras Kasa on the phone at once.'

The officer immediately responded, 'Very good!', and rushed off to carry out the order.

Ras Kasa was one of the Ethiopian chiefs who at that time was putting up tough resistance in the war against the Italians, but there was simply no telephone line to his mountain fastness in Ethiopia. So after a while the young security man, half dead with worry, returned.

Hopping from one foot to another, he reported: 'Comrade Stalin, there's no way we can get through to Ras Kasa, as he's somewhere in the mountains of Ethiopia.'

Stalin had a good laugh and said: 'And you're still working in security?'

Another, sadder example. A little while after Stalin's death, I was in Molotov's study and he told me about Stalin's last moments.

'The members of the Politburo went to see Stalin, having heard he was not well. In fact, he was very ill. One day during his illness, we were standing by his bedside: Malenkov, Khrushchev, myself and other members of the Politburo. Stalin kept falling into semi-consciousness, then coming round again, but he was unable to say anything.

'At one moment,' Molotov went on, 'he suddenly came to himself, and half opened his eyes. Seeing familiar faces, he then pointed slowly at the wall. We all looked where he was pointing. Can the wall there was a photograph with a simple subject: a little girl feeding a lamb with milk through a horn. With the same slow movement of his finger, Stalin then pointed to himself. It was his last act. He closed his eyes never to open them again. Those present took it as a typical example of Stalin's wit - the dying man was comparing himself with a lamb.'

Khrushchev described Stalin's last moments in virtually the same words.

I have decided to express my thoughts on Stalin, firstly, because I was his contemporary, and have seen him in many different
situations during and after the war, and, secondly, because people rightly ask what attitude to take to him, since he had so many confusing qualities.

Stalin will provoke controversy for decades, if not centuries. A man of large calibre, he successfully held the Communist Party together after Lenin’s death, and for a further thirty years played a determining role as the leader of a great power facing momentous tasks. Red Army men and partisans died with his name on their lips.

However, it is wrong to see only his positive side, since he was a tragically contradictory figure. On the one hand, he was a man of powerful intellect, a leader with the unshakeable determination of the revolutionary, and also the ability to find common understanding with our wartime allies. On the other hand, he was a harsh man who did not count the human cost of achieving his aims, and who created a monstrosely arbitrary state machine that sent multitudes of innocent Soviet people to their deaths.

The names of his victims must never be forgotten. General Secretary Gorbachev spoke with great force about Stalin at the ceremonial session celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the October revolution, and his words expressed the thoughts and feelings of the Soviet people. The Soviet nation feels justified anger against Stalin for the tyranny he exercised over utterly innocent people. Beside his mass of crimes, the worst evils of Russia’s past autocrats and their henchmen pale into insignificance. The snake of Stalinism slowly stifled its victims, using the most cunning ploys and attacking with equal lack of mercy the worthy representatives of the Bolshevik Old Guard and ordinary Soviet citizens, workers, peasants, intellectuals, communists and non-party people. No wonder those who survived are still angry.

But this should not be allowed to overshadow our nation’s achievements, in both war and peace. These achievements are great, and they were accomplished despite Stalin’s monstrous crimes. Justice demands that we see the dark pages, but also the heroic pages of our history.

The day before the Potsdam conference opened, our military suggested to Gusev and myself that we take a tour of Berlin, which was something we had already decided we very much wanted to do.

Now, on the ground, we observed the ruined capital of Hitler’s Reich, and there were precious few undamaged or even half-destroyed buildings to be seen. Only some of the smaller houses in the outlying districts remained scathed. I remember the difficulty our jeep had in negotiating the Unter den Linden, littered as it was along its entire length by collapsed walls. There were bricks, mountains of bricks everywhere.

Our officer escorts suggested we take a look first of all at the Führer’s former Chancellery. We reached it with some difficulty, as the route was obstructed by fallen buildings, tangled masses of girders and concrete blocks. Our jeep could not drive right up to the Chancellery building, so we had to walk the last lap.

Every step of the way was guarded by Soviet sentries who courteously passed us along the line to each other right up to the grand entrance, though there was nothing very grand about it now, as the building had been practically destroyed by the bombardment. There were still some walls standing, albeit riddled with countless bullet-holes and yawning shell-holes. Only fragments of the ceilings remained, and the windows gaped black.

The Chancellery made a strange first impression. The architects seem to have incorporated an air of diabolical severity, intended to inspire a feeling of reverence and fear. One could have no positive reaction to the building. We were told by many Germans that it had been a gloomy place even before it was destroyed. If one drastically reduced it in scale in one’s mind’s eye, keeping the proportions as they were, this Hitlerite citadel would resemble an ancient tomb.

We passed through halls which Hitler and his henchmen had used for gatherings and ceremonies. For some reason, apart from its floor and ceiling, the main hall had been less damaged. The doors, windows and chandeliers, as in most of the other rooms, bore signs of the battle and most of them had been broken.

We descended into the underground part of the building, which went down several floors, on one of which we found an auxiliary electric generator. Our escort commented: ‘The whole of Berlin could have been plunged in darkness, but here the lights would still be burning.’

The lower floors presented a scene of chaos. Evidently the Chancellery garrison had put up a desperate fight, and many shells, bombs and grenades had found their target here. The place
was littered with fallen iron and wooden girders and ceiling supports and huge lumps of concrete. Along both sides of the narrow corridor were compartments of some sort that had been distorted by explosions. The corridor itself seemed to stretch the entire length of the building, and as one made one's way through it, on duck-boards, one had to be careful not to fall into the water, which was quite deep. No doubt a shell had hit the water main. The whole thing induced a gloomy and depressing feeling. Photographs of this underground chaos, if they exist, would make a fitting illustration for Dante's *Inferno*.

It was with a feeling of great relief that we emerged from that building, reminiscent of a gun-emplacement and so recently the lair of the chief fascist criminal himself, and filled our lungs with fresh air.

We were then taken to see another sight – Hitler’s bunker. If one were looking for a monument to symbolise a curse on everything criminal and anti-human that was associated with the Nazis then the ruins of that bunker would do perfectly. Cylindrical in form, some nine metres high and five metres or so in diameter, it appeared to have been carved out of solid rock. The entrance led down into a cellar full of water. Shapeless lumps of reinforced concrete blocked the path from one part of the bunker to another. I had the feeling our troops had done a good job in destroying the madman's last hiding-place. Powerful explosions had dug deep craters all around the bunker.

The scene of the ruined Chancellery and the bunker, embodying as it were the collapse of Nazi Germany and its criminal regime, made an indelible impression on us.

We were also taken to a place alleged to be Goebbels's house, though practically nothing was left of it. The Soviet officers told us that when the corpses of Goebbels’s six children were found in the cellar of the Chancellery, they were brought out on to the street. Soon after, they found the bodies of Goebbels and his wife not far from the bunker. All the corpses were laid in a row and covered up. Only a restricted number of people were allowed to view and identify them.

It is hard to convey the depressing, eerie feeling all this created in me. Before committing suicide, the fascist big-mouth had given orders for his wife and children to be exterminated. The murderer-mother tells her children: 'Don’t be afraid, the doctor’s going to give you an injection that they give to all children and soldiers.' On Magda Goebbels’s orders, the Nazi doctors give the children an injection of morphine, the children become semi-conscious, and Frau Goebbels slips a capsule of potassium cyanide into each of their mouths, breaking it first. Then she kills herself.

There are few crimes in history that compare in sheer moral decay and harshness with what that pair of murderers did. Like scorpions in a tight corner, they stung themselves to death.

After my tour of the ruins of Berlin, I came to the Potsdam conference table with impressions of destruction still fresh in my mind.

Now that the enemy had laid down his arms, one would have expected the atmosphere at Potsdam to be triumphant; but instead protocol reigned. The heads of delegation greeted each other and expressed their proper pleasure at meeting, but at the round table there was not the warmth that the world wanted to see and that the sacrifice of the fallen demanded.

The conference sessions were chaired by each head of delegation in turn. From the outset, the US President and the British Prime Minister showed caution and coldness, and the further we progressed, the plainer this became. On almost every main question there was disagreement: for most of the time, the talks were tense, and although nobody actually banged the table, it was clear to all that the path to understanding would be a stony one, and that some questions might not be agreed at all. Throughout the talks Stalin and the Soviet delegation showed respect to their partners, and tried to introduce a feeling of trust. To some extent this softened the harsh atmosphere created by the other two delegations.

We in the Soviet delegation watched Truman intently. After all, although he had exchanged messages with Stalin, he had not yet had to discuss questions of principle at this high level. We wanted to see what made him tick, what were Washington’s aims in Europe, especially in Germany, and what was their foreign policy in general.

Our common opinion finally was that Truman had come with the aim of conceding as little as possible to the USSR and of maximising the possibilities for tying Germany in to the Western economy. In his opinion, for example, Roosevelt had given too
much to Stalin at Yalta on the German reparations question: he viewed potential agreement only within that framework, and it goes without saying that in this respect Churchill was his trusted ally.

Long before the conference, the USA had been making intense efforts to develop the atom bomb, and later, when many facts pertaining to its invention were made public, the behaviour of Truman and Churchill at Potsdam became clear. The US Secretary for War, Stimson, wrote in his memoirs that Washington had thought it essential to delay deciding post-war European and other problems until the USA had the trump of the nuclear weapon in its hand.

Certainly, until the timetable for making the bomb had been met, the American President tried to delay the Potsdam meeting, and it was in fact postponed at his request from June to July. He waited impatiently for the results of the test and when he finally got them — on 16 July 1945, secretly, just one day before the opening of the conference — he obviously felt he would be able to take a tough line in the talks.

This was immediately apparent in the initial discussions on eastern Europe. Truman loudly made the unsubstantiated claim that the Soviet side had not fulfilled the obligations agreed by the three powers in the Crimea. We firmly rejected this assertion, as well as Washington’s attempts to interfere in eastern Europe which reflected its expansionist ambitions there and in other areas of the world.

The US side was therefore compelled to recognise that, without the bomb as an open political factor, in effect as blackmail, nothing would come of their tough stand. Accordingly, a few days later, on 24 July, as Stalin was making his exit after the session, the President held him back and said: ‘I have something to tell you in confidence.’

Stalin stopped and waited. Truman said, ‘The United States has built a new weapon of great destructive power which we intend to use against Japan.’

Stalin took the news calmly, showing no emotion — a reaction which apparently disappointed Truman.

Very soon afterwards, however, a meeting took place in Stalin’s residence at Potsdam which has etched itself in my mind. Only Stalin, Molotov, Gusev (the Soviet ambassador to Britain) and I were present. When we entered, Stalin and Molotov were waiting, and it was evident they had already been discussing the questions to be raised with us two ambassadors.

Stalin’s first question was: ‘Well, what about German reparations to the Soviet Union?’

Molotov immediately jumped in and reminded him in broad outline of what the Allies had said on this topic at the end of the Yalta conference. He spoke harshly about Churchill’s position: ‘Churchill has obviously made up his mind not to allow any agreement on this. I still think we have to raise the question again at Potsdam, and insist categorically on a realistic level of compensation for the appalling damage done to our economy.’

Stalin agreed: ‘Britain’s position, and America’s, for that matter, is unjust. It’s not the way allies should behave. The USSR is being cheated, cheated because the Americans have already shipped out the best equipment, complete with all its documentation, for the various technical laboratories in the sector occupied by Anglo-American forces. I don’t know what Roosevelt’s attitude would have been had he been alive, but Truman doesn’t even know the meaning of justice. So the question of reparations must be discussed at Potsdam. It is of fundamental importance.’

Molotov asked me for my opinion and I told him I considered the Soviet position well founded and convincing, and in my view it should be defended at Potsdam. Stalin then raised the matter which turned out to be the main point of our meeting.

‘Our allies have told us that the USA has a new weapon, the atom bomb. I spoke with our own physicist, Kurchatov, as soon as Truman told me they had tested it successfully. We will no doubt have our own bomb before long. But its possession places a huge responsibility on any state. The real question is, should the countries which have the bomb simply compete with each other in its production, or should they, and any other countries that acquire it later, seek a solution that would mean the prohibition of its production and use? It’s hard at this moment to see what sort of agreement there could be, but one thing is clear: nuclear energy should only be allowed to be used for peaceful purposes.’

Molotov agreed and added: ‘And the Americans have been doing all this work on the atom bomb without telling us.’

Stalin said tersely: ‘Roosevelt clearly felt no need to put us in the picture. He could have done it at Yalta. He could simply have told me the atom bomb was going through its experimental stages. We were supposed to be allies.’
I should now like to touch on some other aspects of the Potsdam conference which have been dealt with inaccurately in Western sources.

The Polish question aroused heated discussion, as it had at Yalta. All three leaders knew it would come up, and so it did, almost every day.

Shortly before the conference opened, a Provisional Polish Government of National Unity, headed by Edward Osobka-Morawski, had been formed in accordance with the decisions at
Yalta, and, while the USA and Britain had been compelled to establish diplomatic relations with it, they were dragging their feet over dissolving the Polish government in exile.

Detailed discussions concerning the formation of the provisional government took place, and the conference noted the views of an invited Polish delegation, headed by Boleslaw Bierut. The three powers then accepted a resolution expressing their satisfaction at the creation of the provisional government. The resolution also stated that the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USA and Britain and the Polish provisional government terminated their recognition of the former Polish government in London, which in fact no longer existed.

This was clearly in Poland's interest, since it facilitated the consolidation of the provisional government's position. Among the members of that government, however, were some, like S. Mikolajczyk, who did not merit the nation's confidence. Ignoring Poland's national interests, they would take a path which led to total political bankruptcy.

Realising that consolidation of the provisional government in Poland had dashed their hopes of turning that country into a 'cordon sanitaire' against the Soviet Union, the USA and Britain then tried to evade a Potsdam decision on the location of Poland's western border. They did not succeed. Thanks to Stalin's arguments for a border along the Oder-Neisse line, and the weighty reasoning of the Polish delegation which manifestly demonstrated the justice of their case in terms of history, economics and security, and also taking into account the situation on the ground in the territories which had been ceded to Poland, Churchill and Truman finally agreed that the Oder-Neisse line should be accepted as Poland's western border.

Even so, their agreement was conditional upon the Soviet delegation's acceptance of their positions on German reparations, and these became one of the most contentious issues at the conference. The Soviet case for compensation was more than well founded. From the northern Caucasus, the Volga, Moscow and Leningrad to the western frontier lay a zone of virtually scorched earth, ruined cities and villages, piles of bricks and twisted metal where factories and office buildings and apartment blocks had stood. More than that, Hitler's Luftwaffe had also bombed towns that lay between Moscow and the Urals, and it all had to be rebuilt, in many cases from the ground up. Yet neither Churchill
nor Attlee nor Truman was prepared to acknowledge the Soviet position; they insisted that Germany should not have to pay reparations.

During a break, Stalin said privately to his own delegation: ‘The English and the Americans want to throttle us. But never mind, we got through the civil war – we’ll get through this too.’

As a result of the talks, however, the USSR did make definite concessions on reparations and thus made possible agreement on Poland’s new western border, as it had been proposed by the Polish delegation. Thus, for the first time in her history, the problem of Poland’s state frontiers was finally and justly settled.

The inviolability of this frontier later received ratification in international law in the treaties between Poland and East Germany (1950) and West Germany (1970), the Soviet–West German treaty (1970) and the Final Act of the Meeting on European Security and Co-operation (1975).

Our side was less successful, however, in achieving agreements on the democratisation, demilitarisation and de-Nazification of a united Germany. In promoting the idea of Bizonia, then Trizonia, and then a separate West German state, Washington, London and, in due course, Paris all showed that they did not want a united, genuinely democratic, demilitarised Germany. Later Soviet proposals along these lines were unfailingly rejected. As a result, after a number of intermediate stages, two independent German states emerged, the GDR and the FRG.

Today, in the countries which were our allies during the war, there are people who argue for the reunification of the two Germanys, and they attack the USSR for opposing such unification. They are being dishonest. What they really want is for West Germany to swallow up East Germany. They know perfectly well that it was the Western powers who crudely broke the spirit and the letter of the Potsdam agreement on the future of Germany by drawing West Germany into NATO.

All Germans, wherever they live, should remember that the Soviet Union never wanted the dismemberment of Germany. It was the USA and Britain who at the three-power Allied conferences proposed tearing Germany apart.

The Potsdam conference did not consist only of talks. The heads of delegation arranged various events to show their mutual respect, such as luncheons and dinners, souvenir photographs, and at all of them Stalin, Truman, Churchill and then Attlee gave the newsmen plenty of photo-opportunities.

There is a photograph of the Big Three at the conference table at Potsdam that has stuck in my mind. It has a special quality that derives, I think, from the electricity in the air. Everyone at the round table clearly feels the nervous tension. It can be seen in their faces, especially the faces of those in the front row, where the special staffs are seated. We are all in a state of extreme concentration, and this shows: nobody is smiling.

I remember another, happier occasion, when Truman had arranged a dinner. After we all got up from the table he sat down at the piano and played something he had evidently practised very carefully – he was of course well known as an able amateur pianist. When he’d finished, Stalin praised him and said laughingly: ‘Ah yes, music’s an excellent thing – it drives out the beast in man.’

To be truthful, it wasn’t quite clear whom Stalin had in mind as the one whose beast had been driven out. Even so, Truman chose to be very pleased at his words.

Only my heightened awareness of the historic occasion can explain why I still have so many images in my mind from that conference. I particularly remember the first day.

There is Truman. He is nervous but he mobilises all his self-control so as not to show it. It looks at times as if he is about to smile, but this is a false impression. I have the feeling that the President is somehow huddled into himself. No doubt the fact that he has no experience of meetings at such a high level, and never met Stalin before, plays a part. But to give him his due he is never rude or discourteous. He is helped by the fact that all his major statements are prepared in advance, so he only has to read them. In discussion his extempore comments are usually brief, but his advisers and experts are in constant consultation with each other and from time to time pass him notes.

And Churchill. That veteran politician makes only short statements, as a rule, but he loves to stretch out individual words. The words he wants to underline are pronounced harshly. He almost never uses a prepared text. It is said that he likes to learn his speeches by heart, and my impression of him is certainly of an experienced orator who knows how to present his rhetorical stock-in-trade.

Attlee. Our delegation is right in its prediction: if Labour
gets in, they’ll follow essentially the same policy as the wartime Coalition. At the conference Attlee scarcely speaks. Maybe when the delegation discusses domestic policy he speaks up, but mostly he’s quiet as a mouse. Maybe the experienced Labour leader is afraid of saying something that the press would pick up, and of losing Labour some support.

Stalin. He looks calm and steady. So does the Soviet delegation as a whole.

Also interesting were the dinners at which the three leaders met either to work or to relax.

One did not have to be a psychiatrist to see that each of the Big Three knew his part. Certainly two contrasting worlds – capitalist and socialist – were represented, but all three men still had to find some understanding.

Everyone listened carefully when Roosevelt spoke. We studied the twists and turns of his thinking and his sharp judgements and jokes. What he said was important for the future of the world, and we knew it.

When Churchill spoke he knew how to sparkle and make a joke, and he expressed his ideas well. One felt he was on familiar terms not only with politics but also with history: he had after all fought in the Boer War at the beginning of the century.

Then, quietly, almost casually, Stalin would begin to speak. He spoke as if only the other two were in the room. He showed neither restraint nor any desire to make an effect, yet every word sounded as if it had been specially prepared for just this occasion and just this moment.

It was noticeable that, when Stalin was speaking, even when the subject was not high policy, Roosevelt would often try to convey his attitude to what was being said, either with nods of his head or by the expression on his face.

Even at that time, it would have been hard for even the most unobservant person not to notice the authority and respect that was accorded to Stalin by the other leaders. First and foremost, this was clearly due to the unexampled feats of the Soviet people in the war. The monolithic unity of the Soviet people had made an enormous impression: the working class, the peasantry and the intelligentsia in a single upsurge had risen to defend the country against a powerful enemy.

Creating the United Nations

Even during the war, the Allies had already recognised the need for some sort of united nations assembly, an organisation whose main task would be to preserve peace more effectively than the League of Nations had been able to. From a preliminary exchange of ideas on the creation of such a body, the Allied powers soon went on to detailed talks about its nature, its structure, its rules and obligations. The basic work on the United Nations Charter was done at the Dumbarton Oaks conference of 21 August to 7 October 1944. I represented the Soviet Union and our approach was clear: we were determined to create such an organisation and we were determined that it should be effective. The three delegations met in a cozy house in Dumbarton Oaks, which is a suburb of Washington: Britain and the USSR were represented by their ambassadors in Washington, and Assistant Secretary of State Stettinius represented the USA.

The work was exceptionally intense. Plenary sessions, working groups, meetings of heads of delegation and many other kinds of meetings took place. The participants all knew they must reach agreement and one by one all but the most difficult questions were settled.

The Dumbarton Oaks conference agreed 90 per cent of the issues concerning the creation of the UN, the main question left unsettled being that of the division of powers between the Security Council and the General Assembly. This controversy reflected the participants’ different positions on the question of the need for unanimity among the five permanent members of the Security Council, the body which would bear the main peace-keeping responsibility. The US position was that, should one member of