

## and the Moscow Conference of December 1945

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**Abstract:** *The compromise in Moscow essentially followed the lines roughed out by the State Secretary. Even if he was aware of the magnitude of the concessions he had to make, especially in Eastern Europe, he was equally convinced that the end result – the restoration of US-Soviet relations – was to be perceived, even by his critics at home as a great breakthrough. Byrnes greatly overestimated his ability to generate a consensus in support of the Moscow agreements. The issues of Eastern Europe and the extended Middle East, exactly those where he took a step back or chose to neglect, would in the following months lead to a consensus, only not the one he was seeking.*

**Keywords:** Cold War, Eastern Europe, James F. Byrnes, U.S. Foreign Policy

The Moscow Tripartite Conference of December 1945 has been rightly seen as a crucial point in the outbreak of the Cold War. It is nonetheless a paradox that a high level meeting which ended in compromise on many points also deepened the fractures separating the troubled Anglo-American partnership from their wartime ally. As we have demonstrated elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, US policy with regard to the composition of the Romanian and Bulgarian governments, a policy responsible for the stalemate at the London session of the Council of Foreign Ministers, was being gradually abandoned by State Secretary Byrnes starting with the last few days of September.

In the aftermath of the failure in London in September 1945 it was vital to restart the peace-making machinery. The London Council of Foreign Ministers had adjourned without the negotiators being able to agree on the path to follow with regard to the peace treaties with Germany's ex-allies. Consequently, in Moscow both procedural and substantive issues were at stake, although it was obvious for

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<sup>1</sup> Alin-Victor Matei, "În căutarea compromisului: relațiile interaliate sub impactul eșecului Conferinței de la Londra (septembrie-decembrie 1945)", in Laurențiu Constantiniu (ed.), *In Memoriam Acad. Florin Constantiniu. Smerenie. Pasiune. Credință*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2013, pp. 421-449.

some of the contemporaries that the procedural debates were part of the Soviet power play. Soviet refusal to allow peace-making to continue was thus a brutal but effective way to pressure the Anglo-Americans into accepting the pro-Soviet governments in Romania and Bulgaria.

Part of the difficulty however resided in the way American foreign policy was constructed. While Britain had already determined to keep a low profile in the conflict surrounding the composition of the governments on Bucharest and Sofia and had concluded that the only chance to limit Soviet influence in that region was to conclude the peace treaties as fast as possible, US policy had veered towards a more confrontational stance. The latter was not necessarily the result of a fledgling consensus in Washington regarding the way to approach the emerging Soviet sphere of influence but rather the result of the somewhat chaotic Soviet policy of the State Secretary Byrnes. He had come to London determined to instrumentalize the peace treaties and thus limit Soviet influence on the post-war evolution of Germany's former allies. Byrnes had been right to consider the peace treaties as the most powerful means at his disposal, but his determination did not survive the several rough meetings with Molotov and by the end of the session he had already effectively abandoned the policy of resistance and offered a way out of the stalemate which preserved the Soviet position in Romania and Bulgaria while providing the US the meagre possibility to save face.

This abrupt change in policy was partially and deliberately obscured by the State Secretary who saw himself congratulated instead for his support of a principled foreign policy. In that he was assisted by the Soviets who refused to acknowledge the massive concessions. Choosing to concede to the Soviets in Eastern Europe, Byrnes was nonetheless distancing himself from the public image of his behaviour in London.

Prolonging the stalemate could permanently damage inter-Allied relations and this simple conclusion was the main impetus to organizing a new conference of the three foreign ministers, this one outside the institutional framework laid out at Potsdam. It was to be an almost informal reunion, far from the eyes of the American press, offering the perspective of gaining direct access to Stalin. It was to be an opportunity for personal diplomacy, in line with Byrnes' expectation to act with as little interference as possible from the President or the State Department

bureaucracy. The downside of course was that there was no one else to share responsibility with in case of failure<sup>2</sup>.

The US domestic politics were influencing heavily the policies Byrnes was following in Moscow with regard to the governments in Romania and Bulgaria, the issue of atomic energy or the Far East. First of all he intended to follow a strictly personal policy, one avoiding presidential control or any influence admiral Leahy, the president's chief of staff, could exercise as the latter had done under Roosevelt<sup>3</sup>. Both in style and intention, Byrnes managed to antagonize most of the career diplomats. Suspicion was mutual and many of his subordinates were hostile to any substantial change in US policy towards the Soviet Union when compared to the approach taken in London. Kennan could be scathing in his criticism<sup>4</sup>.

Under the circumstances, the form the compromise would take was even more important from Byrnes' point of view because its essence was a *de facto* acceptance of the Soviet position in exchange for the doubtful promise of organizing free elections in the near future, especially in Romania. Even a satisfactory face-saving formula was difficult to obtain since for the Kremlin language was equally important. Turning nominal concessions into real advantages for the Anglo-Americans and the democratic forces in Romania and Bulgaria could result at best in a protracted political crisis in Bucharest and Sofia.

The Moscow conversations with regard to the recognition of the Romanian and Bulgarian governments started on 18 December with an unconvincing attempt to use the Ethridge report to put pressure on the Soviets. Its obvious lack of effectiveness in this first informal meeting with Molotov<sup>5</sup> means that Byrnes' attempt can be considered part of the epilogue to the policy he had followed during

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Messer, *The End of an Alliance: James F. Byrnes, Roosevelt, Truman, and the Origins of the Cold War*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1982, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Weapon in the Cold War, 1945-1950*, New York, 1982, pp. 88-89; W. Averell Harriman, Elie Abel, *Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, 1941-1946*, New York, Random House, 1975, p. 524; Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929-1969*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1973, p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> Fraser J. Harbutt, *The Iron Curtain. Churchill, America, and the Origins of the Cold War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 139; C. E. Black, "The View From Bulgaria", pp. 86-87, in Thomas T. Hammond (ed.), *Witnesses to the Origins of the Cold War*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, pp. 60-98; George F. Kennan, *Memoirs (1925-1950)*, London, Hutchinson, 1968, p. 287.

<sup>5</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States. 1945. Volume II. General. Political and Economic Matters* (hereafter *FRUS 1945 II*), Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1967, pp. 644-645.

the first phase of the London Conference. It was however more than that. Given the evolution in the Secretary of State's thinking since the end of September it is more likely that the Ethridge report was now used not to bring about an extensive change in Soviet policy but to pressurize Moscow into accepting a compromise in form. Moreover, the State Secretary was coming around to a point of view which he and the State Department had repeatedly refuted throughout the summer of 1945 in their conversations with the British. The aim was now to negotiate the peace treaties as fast as possible so as to create the conditions for a withdrawal of the Red Army and a gradual improvement of the political development of the concerned states<sup>6</sup>. It is difficult to say if this new strategy was more than a simple pretext used to justify what some in the administration, Congress or the public opinion might have viewed as a drastic transformation of a policy dating back to the refusal to recognize the newly installed Groza government.

Byrnes' tactics with regard to the composition of the Romanian and Bulgarian governments were also different when compared to the London CFM. If in London he had been the one offering solutions and these varied from a radical reorganization of the two governments and Groza's resignation to the simple inclusion of a few democratic politicians, in London he would constantly aim to force the Soviets to come with the solution themselves. First of all, however, he had to signal that his own attitude was changing. In that first informal meeting with Molotov on December 18 Byrnes drew attention to the Ethridge report which seemed to confirm his reasons for refusing the recognition of the two governments. At the same time, he confessed to Molotov that he had decided not to publish the report yet and that he expected the Soviet side to help him break the stalemate.

Although there is no doubt that the States Secretary could have used the Ethridge report in a more forceful way, he also doubted that such a course would have led to any positive results. Instead, he was effectively telling the Soviet commissar that there could be trouble ahead in the Soviet-American relationship and that there was considerable flexibility in the American position. Publishing the

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<sup>6</sup> Eduard Mark, "American Policy toward Eastern Europe and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1946: An Alternative Interpretation", *The Journal of American History*, vol. 68, no. 2, 1981, pp. 329-330; Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power. National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992, p. 48; Ronald Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance: American Isolationism, Internationalism and Europe, 1901-1950*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1991, p. 174.

highly critical report<sup>7</sup> would have made a compromise impossible in the absence of massive Soviet concessions. Refusing to publish for the moment the report seemed to offer only advantages: presenting it informally during the Conference could make the Soviets a little more flexible. On the contrary, in the case of a failure in Moscow, publication would provide the most solid defence for the Secretary of State's policy. Byrnes' intention to use the document to advance his personal policy meant that few other persons had read it. The Secretary of State had not informed the President of its content, while London, despite the British diplomats' in Bucharest and Sofia cooperation with Ethridge<sup>8</sup>, knew only what they and Clark Ker in Moscow had reported. Thus, on December 18, after being provided with a partial translation of the document, the Soviets knew more about it than either Truman or Bevin.

Byrnes needed a lot more than the Ethridge report to put Molotov on the defensive. By the time when on December 19 Byrnes proposed the withdrawal of Allied troops from Austria<sup>9</sup> (the request was significant since the Soviets constantly used the necessity of keeping lines of communication with the Soviet troops in Austria to justify for the massive presence of Red Army troops in Romania and Hungary), the Soviets had already adopted an obstructive stance on the issue of the Council of Foreign Ministers' structure, had brought forth the presence of American troops in China and of the British troops in Greece and even Indonesia, had declined to discuss atomic energy, all in a successful attempt to counter American pressure. It was obvious that the Soviet representatives had no intention to answer Byrnes' pleas and present their own plan for a compromise.

Consequently, on 20 December, during the fifth formal meeting, the US delegation presented two documents establishing conditions for the recognition of the Romanian and Bulgarian governments. Both had to be reorganized by integrating representatives of the main democratic parties<sup>10</sup>. The restructured

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<sup>7</sup> See the text of the Ethridge report, included the somewhat diluted part destined for publication, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945. Volume V. Europe* (hereafter *FRUS 1945 V*), Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1967, pp. 633-642. For the very critical remarks relating to Soviet policy in the area see page 637.

<sup>8</sup> P. Ward, *The Threat of Peace: James F. Byrnes and the Council of Foreign Ministers 1945-1951*, Kent, Kent University Press, 1979, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> *FRUS 1945 II*, pp. 669-671.

<sup>10</sup> In Bulgaria representatives from the parties which had been part of the Fatherland Front in September 1944 had to be included while in Romania the US delegation mentioned representatives

governments would organize elections as soon as possible based on a new electoral law, the ministries responsible for the elections being depoliticized<sup>11</sup>. The American projects were thus following most of the recommendations made by Ethridge in mid-November, in a context in which it had already become clear that the elections in Bulgaria would not be delayed<sup>12</sup>.

The US proposals and the exchanges that followed during the plenary meeting on December 22 resembled many of the conversations in London. It is unlikely however that even Byrnes took them seriously since they relied on the highly unlikely possibility that the Soviets would practically pass over the results of the rigged elections in Bulgaria in order to bring the opposition back into government. Molotov made it extremely clear: the US documents were “unacceptable”<sup>13</sup>. There was no longer a political crisis in Bulgaria and the one in Romania was entirely artificial, the result of outside intervention. On the contrary, the latest developments in Bulgaria should have guaranteed the diplomatic recognition of the government in Sofia. Moreover, the Soviet commissar reverted to one of his favourite themes: why was there no Ethridge mission in Greece? Why was Romania so different from Greece?<sup>14</sup> In an ironic twist which must have seemed grotesque to those present, Molotov finished his defence by declaring that any tripartite solution would mean meddling into the affairs of the two states which was contrary to the Yalta Declaration of Liberated Europe.

In the midst of this charged atmosphere Molotov offered the first clues to a possible settlement. Even if the Soviet government could not accept under any circumstances to cancel the results of the Bulgarian elections, it was still possible that Romania would not object to including one or two apolitical personalities if the three powers agreed to sign the peace treaty as soon as possible. Romania could also be advised to organize elections based on a new electoral law<sup>15</sup>. As for depoliticizing the Interior Ministry, this would have represented an unjustified interference in Romanian domestic affairs and would “undermine the authority of

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from the National Liberal Party and the National Peasant Party (the document explicitly excluded Maniu, Brătianu and Lupu given the negative reaction of Molotov in London).

<sup>11</sup> *FRUS 1945 II*, pp. 700-702.

<sup>12</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945. Volume IV. Europe* (hereafter *FRUS 1945 IV*), Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1968, pp. 377-378.

<sup>13</sup> *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Conferences and Conversations 1945, Series I. Volume 2* (hereafter *DBPO I 2*), London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1986, p. 825.

<sup>14</sup> *FRUS 1945 II*, pp. 728-730; *DBPO I 2*, pp. 825-827.

<sup>15</sup> *FRUS 1945 II*, pp. 731-733.

the King”<sup>16</sup>. Molotov was now becoming the main defender of the Romanian monarchy!

Despite the fact that the two delegations seemed to be as far apart as at any time in the previous negotiations, the 22 December meeting brought the first step toward a compromise: the Soviet side had accepted the principle of government enlargement for Romania and this allowed the State Secretary to build on it to create the appearance of a compromise, even if the Soviet concession was likely to be again symbolic.

The next day Byrnes’ expectations regarding the usefulness of direct conversations with Stalin seemed to be fulfilled. Although he proved as immune and ironic when confronted with the Ethridge report, going as far as to suggest that the Soviet Union could at any time send someone like Ehrenburg to write another impartial report on conditions in Romania<sup>17</sup>, Stalin seemed willing to pose as more moderate than his Foreign Minister. Byrnes’ perseverance paid off and Stalin went a step further in accepting to advise the Bulgarians to include a few members of the “loyal opposition” into the government. Furthermore, Soviet position with regard to Romania seemed to be changing. Stalin accepted that the Romanian government had to be enlarged by including members of the liberal and peasant parties although Maniu, Brătianu or Lupu were unacceptable and those selected had to be “loyal”.

The Soviet leader had just offered the concessions Byrnes needed back home. All that was left was to find the method used to implement the decision and in fact the two needed only a few minutes to agree on the creation of a tripartite commission which would go to Bucharest and assist the Romanian political forces in the “reorganization” of the government. As for Bulgaria, the commission would be replaced by the “friendly counsel” of the Soviet Union<sup>18</sup>.

The agreement on the structure of the Romanian and Bulgarian governments was a purely Soviet-American affair, although Byrnes’ desire to exclude the British was reinforced by the low profile policy that Britain had been following in South-Eastern Europe since the crisis in US-Soviet relations caused by the Groza government. To this one must add Britain’s reluctance to engage in a diplomatic conflict in Romania and Bulgaria at a time when the focus of Anglo-

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<sup>16</sup> *DBPO I 2*, p. 831.

<sup>17</sup> *FRUS 1945 II*, pp. 752-753.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 754-756.

Soviet tensions seemed to be moving towards the Middle East. Moreover, notwithstanding the lack of resources which discouraged and independent British policy in the Balkans, the policy now advocated by the US State Secretary was identical to the one the Foreign Office had been putting forward since Potsdam. In fact, while the Secretary of State was having talks with Stalin, the US delegation received a short message from Ernest Bevin outlining briefly his views on a possible solution. The conclusions closely matched those of the State Secretary<sup>19</sup>.

The remaining differences were hammered out over the next few days, although even this very limited negotiation proved to be very strenuous. On December 24 both the US and Soviet delegations put forward draft agreements which closely mirrored the views expressed by Stalin and Byrnes the previous evening<sup>20</sup>.

The US stance had evolved considerably over the past several days. Most of the guarantees required to ensure free elections had been abandoned. More important – and predictable – the US delegation had given up demanding new elections in Bulgaria. Despite these significant changes, there remained perceptible differences between the two sets of documents, although their practical importance was doubtful. The laborious negotiations that followed could only demonstrate the degree to which Soviet concessions were insignificant and yet extremely reluctantly offered. One such example was the loyalty criterion required by the Soviet side to establish which politicians could or could not be included in the two governments. Even more revealing for the techniques the Soviets were using in Bucharest was the formula “1-2 loyal representatives, in relations to the present Government, of groups of National-Peasant and Liberal parties (not including Maniu, Brătianu, Lupu) which are not participating at the present time in the Government”<sup>21</sup>. According to this interpretation, it was possible to designate members of the dissident groups that had broken away from the two democratic parties and had effectively become fellow travellers of the Romanian communists.

It seemed that the less significant the stake the more intense the debates became. Christmas Day was spent by Molotov, Byrnes and Bevin arguing over the meaning of the word “loyal”, discussing the opportunity of qualifying “representative” with “truly” and the like. In fact, wording was crucial for Byrnes

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 758-759.

<sup>20</sup> The US project in *Ibidem*, pp. 770-771; the Soviet ones in *Ibidem*, pp. 772-773.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 773.



and his ability to submit successfully the agreement both to the American public and the main decision-makers.

More significantly, there was the problem of the relationship between the government changes in Bucharest and Sofia and the international recognition of the two governments. For the Soviets the solution was straightforward and recognition would have followed immediately following the fulfilment of the agreement whereas the US draft only committed the US and British governments to review the issue of diplomatic recognition. The Soviet stance would prevail once more<sup>22</sup>.

In the end, the arduous negotiations over the formal issues contrasted markedly with the ease with which Byrnes had given up on the guarantees for free elections present in the initial US draft. The debates over the inconsequential wording of the agreement was regarded with disgust by many in the US delegation, most of them being opposed to accepting Stalin's concessions which they rightly saw as farcical. Reflecting later on the results of the Moscow conference, Kennan could not hide his contempt for the "absurd" belief that changing one or two ministers and mentioning some unconvincing diplomatic procedures could hide the nakedness of the Stalinist dictatorship<sup>23</sup>. Given the attitude of those surrounding him in Moscow, it is even more difficult to comprehend today the State Secretary's belief in his ability to "sell" the agreement to the rest of the American administration and the general public.

Despite the final favour of agreeing to include in the final communique the formulas commonly agreed upon but which the Soviet Secretariat of the Conference had conveniently forgotten to update<sup>24</sup>, Molotov confessed to being pleased with the results. In a conversation with the Romanian ambassador in Moscow, Iorgu Iordan, on December 27, the Romanian diplomat noticed that the Anglo-Americans had only been searching for a superficial exit from the crisis. Molotov agreed pointing out that there was to be no significant political change in

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 768, 788-789.

<sup>23</sup> Averell Harriman, Elie Abel, *op.cit.*, p. 525; Charles E. Bohlen, *op.cit.*, p. 349; George F. Kennan, *Memoirs (1925-1950)*, London, Hutchinson, 1968, pp. 284, 287-288. Kennan saw Byrnes as profoundly cynical, not at all interested in the real impact of an agreement he was pursuing solely for its domestic US benefits.

<sup>24</sup> *DBPO I 2*, pp. 869-873; *FRUS 1945 II*, pp. 781-795, 813-814.

Bucharest<sup>25</sup>. As ambassador Harriman was to observe during his stay in the Romanian capital, the Soviets had absolutely no intention of accepting two popular and influential politicians from the democratic parties. The very negotiations surrounding the fulfilment of the Moscow agreement led him to believe the democratic parties would not have any chance in the coming elections<sup>26</sup>. Throughout the final months of the war and during the several months that followed VE Day the US had constantly overestimated its ability to influence developments in Eastern Europe. The Moscow Conference put an end to this trend.

From a certain perspective, Byrnes' policy was as realistic as it could be: for both Romania and Bulgaria an inter-Allied agreement was unlikely to change the situation on the ground and the promise to organize free elections was the maximum that could be obtained. The advocates of this line of reasoning, be they contemporaries or historians, are right only up to a point. However, Byrnes' negotiation behaviour does not fully support the thesis that his concessions were informed by the realization of the fact that even an unsatisfactory agreement was enough to lay the basis for a longer term strategy, one which included concluding peace treaties as fast as possible and could lead to a diminution of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. Instead it is more likely that he saw the stalemate as a threatening the US-Soviet relationship in general and even his role as peacemaker. Byrnes' options were first of all personal options, not supported by the experts of the relevant divisions inside the State Department or the American diplomats in the region concerned, the latter being deeply hostile to any compromise<sup>27</sup>. The isolation of the State Secretary should not obscure the fact that his dilemma was very real: how could the US-Soviet cooperation be preserved to a reasonable level when the very foundation of this cooperation seemed to be undermined by Soviet behaviour in Eastern Europe and elsewhere?

Choosing such a policy left a multitude of questions unanswered: were the Soviets really intending to withdraw their troops? Could these states develop

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<sup>25</sup> David R. Stone, "The 1945 Ethridge Mission to Bulgaria and Romania and the Origins of the Cold War in the Balkans", *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2006, p. 106.

<sup>26</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946. Volume VI. Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union* (hereafter *FRUS 1946 VI*), Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1969, pp. 559-560.

<sup>27</sup> *FRUS 1945 V*, pp. 642-644; *FRUS 1945 IV*, pp. 410-412; Hugh de Santis, *The Diplomacy of Silence: The American Foreign Service, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War, 1933-1947*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp. 163-164.

functional liberal regimes when the Soviet occupation was likely to leave behind what the diplomatic reports from the region already described as “police states”? Was it not that these concessions, justified by the simple fact that the United States and Britain could only afford a strategy with long term objectives in Europe, were in reality undermining these very objectives?

Ambiguity was the dominant note. Byrnes must have understood the precariousness of the agreement and the fragility of the guarantees accepted, especially in the case of Romania where the Anglo-Americans had given up on their most powerful levers: the refusal to recognize the Groza government and the determination to make diplomatic recognition dependent on the organization of free elections<sup>28</sup>. Acknowledging the importance of this instrument, Harriman, now in Bucharest as part of the tripartite commission, believed that the United States were in no way committed to recognize the government resulting from the future elections if the latter were not properly organized<sup>29</sup>. In fact, such a threat was of little or no consequence once the diplomatic relations would be established. The ineffectiveness of this proposition was to be proved by the very way in which the Moscow settlement was implemented. While in Romania the tripartite commission turned out to be extremely useful – especially from the Soviet point of view – in convincing the democratic leaders and the King to accept the settlement and end the political crisis, in Bulgaria the democratic politicians refused these paltry concessions and implicitly their symbolic participation in the Fatherland Front government. As a consequence, the US government refused to recognize the Bulgarian regime until the autumn of 1947 without this having any effect on the Communization process in the country<sup>30</sup>. Inside the State Department itself reactions were mixed. While Acheson referred to Byrnes as “Saint Nicholas”

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<sup>28</sup> Geir Lundestad, *The American Non-Policy towards Eastern Europe, 1943-1947. Universalism in an Area Not of Essential Interest to the United States*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1975, pp. 245-246. In his public statement on the Conference’s results Byrnes reverted to a theme already present in his pre-Conference speeches: the necessity to take into account the security interests of the Soviet Union. Thus, according to the State Secretary, the withdrawal of the Red Army was unlikely if the Soviet Union did not trust these governments. See *A Decade of American Foreign Policy: Basic Documents, 1941-1949*, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1950, p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> *FRUS 1946 VI*, p. 557.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Ethridge, C. E. Black, “Negotiating on the Balkans, 1945-1947”, in Raymond Dennett, Joseph Johnson (eds.), *Negotiating with the Russians*, Boston, 1951, p. 203; Elizabeth W. Hazard, *Cold War Crucible: United States Foreign Policy and the Conflict in Romania, 1943-1953*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 143-144.

bringing gifts from Moscow, US diplomats in Bucharest spoke of “betrayal” and thought about collective resignation<sup>31</sup>.

Similar developments in Bulgaria and Romania were in the end an argument for the defence of the State Secretary’s actions in Moscow. The instrument of diplomatic recognition could only be effective if inter-Allied remained one of the priorities of Soviet foreign policy and this involved maintaining a certain degree of consensus in Eastern Europe. The worsening of inter-Allied relations and the Soviet policy’s slide towards unilateralism meant that the perspective of continuing cooperation lost any of its potential moderating influence on Soviet behaviour. Implementing any policy regarded by the Soviets as contrary to their vital interests would have required the threat or the actual use of force. In defence of the State Secretary it must be said that a similar strategy seemed to be bearing fruit in Hungary. The announcement of diplomatic recognition of the government in Budapest was followed by municipal and legislative elections in conditions deemed acceptable in the West.

From a certain perspective, peace treaties were really important if they could have an impact on the political development of Romania in Bulgaria via a transformation of their relationship with the USSR. The Soviet side could not abandon the gains it had already made with the armistice conventions and could not allow the diplomatic debates surrounding the peace treaties weaken it hold on East European countries. The defeat in Moscow of the US attempts to use the peace treaties to influence the political struggle in Eastern Europe meant that many of the arguments surrounding the East European peace treaties lost their relevance. The treaty with Italy moved to the forefront accordingly.

### **The Limits of Compromise**

Byrnes gave up in Moscow what he did not have. Geographical proximity and their presence on the ground provided the Soviets with a decisive advantage. Notwithstanding this simple observation, Byrnes’ exercise in rooseveltian realpolitik was clearly at odds with the principles of the Atlantic Charter and other documents to which the US had subscribed. After the Moscow Conference, the

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<sup>31</sup> Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace. The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1977, p. 152; C.E. Black, *op.cit.*, p. 149.

Secretary of State had to confront a President who has been finally able to read the Ethridge report and a Congress more and more willing to find for itself a role in foreign policy-making in the post-war era. Equally important, Byrnes' aloofness from his own Department encouraged many diplomats to build an alternative image of the Soviet intentions, one that was considerably more pessimistic about Kremlin's policies in Eastern Europe, Iran, the Mediterranean or Germany.

Trying to repeat the Yalta success that he witnessed first-hand, the State Secretary fell victim to the dictum that history never repeats itself<sup>32</sup>. The comparison with Yalta can be developed further. Roosevelt had sought Soviet cooperation in the Far East and in establishing the UN and had settled on a vague formula for the Polish government and the relationship between the USSR and Eastern Europe in general in order to avoid endangering the general agreement. The compromise had been almost entirely Soviet-American, and Roosevelt had deliberately and repeatedly dissociated himself from the British. The British, although still enjoying considerable influence, had proved unable to give more substance to the Polish settlement. In Moscow, Byrnes fulfilled most of his Far Eastern aims and attempted to ensure that the Soviets would cooperate with the American multilateral projects (the UN commission for atomic energy, a peace conference with large participation). In exchange, he basically accepted the Soviet point of view in Eastern Europe and neglected British appeals for support on the Iranian issue.

Byrnes could declare himself satisfied for obtaining everything he aimed for in China, Japan or Korea or in setting up an international regime for the control of atomic energy thinking that the concessions in Eastern Europe were more apparent than real. Roosevelt too had believed at the time at Yalta that there was not much that could be done against the Soviets in Eastern Europe. Byrnes' compromise however was not politically sustainable. He had done nothing to build a consensus inside the administration favourable to making those concessions, he failed to appreciate immediately the importance of the Iranian issue, he attracted the hostility of the most important republicans in Congress influential in foreign policy-making and managed to bring Anglo-American relations to their lowest point since December 1941<sup>33</sup>. In some ways this state of affairs was paradoxical

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<sup>32</sup> Robert L. Messer, *op.cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>33</sup> In January 1946 senators Vandenberg and Connally were telling Harriman in London that they didn't know how lucky they have been to have Stettinius until Byrnes became State Secretary

since Byrnes' policies in Eastern Europe was actually closer to the British officials' thinking than to that of the State Department experts.

In the end, Truman was correct to describe the Moscow successes as “not real”<sup>34</sup>, although this evaluation present in his memoirs was no doubt coloured by subsequent experiences. Truman was right in more than one sense since the agreements on Japan, Korea or atomic energy were focused on establishing a general framework for inter-Allied cooperation but did not detail the policies to be implemented. The exclusion of the Iranian issue from the final communique combined with the State Secretary's failure to better explain his East European policy completed the picture. Byrnes was also the heir of rooseveltian ambiguity with regard to Eastern Europe and ultimately his main strategy was to preserve that ambiguity as much as possible

From a Soviet point of view, the reunion had been a remarkable success. The decisions vis-à-vis the Far East, if strictly interpreted, seemed to ensure a more than formal role for Soviet representatives in Japan. The Soviet position in China and Korea had been preserved, even if the Soviet delegation could not demand forcefully the withdrawal of US troops from northern China for the simple reason that it would have weakened its negotiation strategy in Iran and Eastern Europe. Soviet demands in the Straits and the Mediterranean had been restated. A delayed decision on Iran meant more time to use the Red Army for political and economic advantage. The setting up of the Atomic Energy Commission did not translate into political advantages for the American side. The participation to the mechanisms for negotiating the peace treaties was kept as restricted as possible. The conference and the preparatory activity had also revealed that a correct mixture of firmness and concessions could force apart with relative ease the Anglo-Americans. Finally

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(Averell Harriman, Elie Abel, *op.cit.*, p. 530). In February, during the UN debates in London, Bevin enjoyed a better press including in the United States than Byrnes who was increasingly being seen as an appeaser. *Dallas Times Herald*, admittedly not one of the largest media outlets in the US, commented that Truman should give Byrnes to the British in exchange for Bevin and throw in the balance as many old destroyers as the British wanted to close the deal. (Ronald Powaski, *op.cit.*, p. 176; Hugh Thomas, *Armed Truce. The Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-1946*, New York, Atheneum, 1987, p. 471). See also Randall Bennett Woods, *A Changing of the Guard: Anglo-American Relations, 1941-1946*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1990, pp. 292-294. For the worsening relationship between Truman and Byrnes, see John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 282-289; David Robertson, *Sly and Able. A Political Biography of James F. Byrnes*, New York & London, W.W. Norton & Co., 1994, pp. 457-459.

<sup>34</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs. 1945. Year of Decision*, New York, Signet Books, 1965, p. 604.

– and most importantly – US activism in Eastern Europe had been countered and the Moscow Conference provided the Soviets with a way out of their Romanian dilemma by putting an end to the political crisis in Bucharest without the need for the Soviet Union and the local communists to adopt an even more confrontational stance towards the King and the democratic parties.

Observing closely the developments in Moscow and having almost daily conversations with Bevin and Byrnes, the French ambassador, general Catroux, concluded on the last day of 1945: “It is beyond doubt that at this conference [...] the Soviets were the main beneficiaries”<sup>35</sup>.

In London however reflecting on the Moscow Conference gave no reason for satisfaction. If Byrnes’ attitudes had not been remarkably consistent throughout the meeting, he had persevered on the contrary in neglecting the British interests and points of view. Even the members of the US delegation were troubled by the ease with which the Secretary was passing over British sensibilities: he presented the draft for the international control of atomic energy ahead of the schedule agreed upon with Bevin, he decided not to provide the British with a copy of the Ethridge report, he supported Molotov’s request to exclude India from the future peace conference and – worrying for Bevin – failed to give any coherent support on Iran. Bohlen and Harriman went as far as apologizing for the behaviour of the State Secretary which they attributed to inexperience and try to reassure their British counterparts that this was not part of a deliberate US policy<sup>36</sup>. Isaiah Berlin, himself a member of the British delegation, found out from Kennan and other American officials about their attempts to convince Byrnes to change policy. Kennan even expressed the hope that Bevin would try to confront the State Secretary<sup>37</sup>.

The failure to recreate the intimacy which had often characterized Anglo-American relations during the war had been predictable from the very way Byrnes organized the Moscow reunion. Several British aims remained unfulfilled. While the compromise on Eastern Europe, on the resumption of the work of the CFM and the form the future conference of peace would take was considered by most in British decision-making circles as the best obtainable, this was entirely eclipsed by

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<sup>35</sup> *Documents Diplomatiques Français. 1945. Tome II (1er Juillet – 31 Decembre)* (hereafter *DDF 1945 II*), Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 2000, p. 995.

<sup>36</sup> *DBPO I 2*, pp. 803-804.

<sup>37</sup> Isaiah Berlin to Clark Kerr, December 21 1945, PRO FO 800/501.

the manifest failure to find a temporary solution for the Iranian problem or even the framework for reaching a settlement. Equally essential was the failure to mobilize US power in support of British policy in Iran. Also disturbing was the fact that there was nothing to show for the much anticipated discussions with Stalin “with the cards on the table”. Lacking American support, Bevin simply did not have the clout to reduce the gap between verbal assurances Stalin and Molotov offered and Soviet actions on the ground. Said differently, with the third player inactive, Stalin kept his cards close to his chest.

The perceived weakness of Britain’s position and the inability to attract US assistance led the British officials to question the mechanism of the tripartite conferences. French ambassador in London Massigli could witness personally their despondency: the Moscow agreements were regarded as mediocre, too favourable for the Soviets, while Soviet refusal to discuss seriously Iran or Turkey had not diminished current threats to international peace<sup>38</sup>.

The Moscow Conference did result in the resumption of the peace treaty-making activities and it thus achieved one of its original objectives. Of central importance however was the compromise over the composition of the Romanian and Bulgarian governments. In fact soon after the beginning of the second session of the CFM in Paris Molotov declared unceremoniously that he had no objection to French or Chinese participation to any of the negotiations taking place. In his memoirs Byrnes leaves the impression that he was fully aware of the drawbacks of the decision to convene a Conference of the Foreign Ministers in Moscow at the end of 1945<sup>39</sup>. The compromise in Moscow essentially followed the lines roughed out by the State Secretary. Even if he was aware of the magnitude of the concessions he had to make, especially in Eastern Europe, he was equally convinced that the end result – the restoration of US-Soviet relations – was to be perceived, even by his critics at home as a great breakthrough, sufficiently important to justify his yielding to the Soviets on the fate of the Groza government. Byrnes greatly overestimated his ability to generate a consensus in support of the Moscow agreements. The issues of Eastern Europe and the extended Middle East, exactly those where he took a step back or chose to neglect, would in the following months lead to a consensus, only not the one he was seeking.

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<sup>38</sup> *DDF 1945 II*, pp. 970-971.

<sup>39</sup> James F. Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1947, p. 109.