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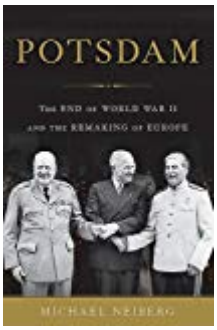

Michael Neiberg. *Potsdam: The End of World War II and the Remaking of Europe.* New York: Basic Books, 2015. 336 pp. $29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-07525-6.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

War is a fantastically messy human endeavor that is deceptively easy to start but often difficult to end on satisfactory terms. The total collapse of the Axis powers by the end of World War II brought about a seemingly rare opportunity for the victors to shape a global postwar order in their collective vision. The length and costliness of the Cold War that emerged just a few years later has obscured the durability of several elements of the postwar world and also the process by which the Allied leaders reconstructed the international system while seeking to ensure that a third war for German hegemony in Europe would not occur. As Michael Neiberg relates in his masterful *Potsdam: The End of World War II and the Remaking of Europe*, the process of building a new order culminated in the July 1945 meeting of the Big Three in Potsdam, Germany, on the outskirts of Berlin.

With only two previous, now-dated studies on Potsdam (Herbert Feis's *Between War and Peace: The Potsdam Conference* [1960] and Charles L. Mee's *Meeting at Potsdam* [1975]), a fresh historical reassessment of the conference was sorely needed. Neiberg, a prolific historian perhaps best known for his multiple volumes of work on World War I, proves an ideal fit for the subject matter because of his strong command of European history. *Potsdam* also provides a historical corrective that stresses the conference's importance in shaping the future of Europe especially because the Yalta Conference has emerged in the public consciousness as the critical wartime meeting due to its often incorrectly understood relationship with the Cold War.

Potsdam follows a thematic structure in telling the story of the conference, yet there is a clear divide between chapters describing events before and during the conference itself. While some readers may lament the loss of the day-to-day progression of the conference sessions, Neiberg's emphasis on how the leaders of each of the Big Three nations assessed the critical issues facing them provides crucial depth to the analysis. This structure also allows Neiberg to display his gifts as a writer; he is deftly able to incorporate

the nuances expected of academic history while laying out his narrative with ample clarity to allow this book to appeal to the wider reading public.

In Neiberg's assessment, the Soviet delegation led by Joseph Stalin approached the conference with cagey confidence and used their status as occupiers and hosts to maximum advantage, even to the point of encouraging the other Allied delegates to take tours of bombed-out Berlin and other nearby sites to foment greater sympathy for harsher Soviet occupation policies. Meanwhile, Harry Truman and his advisers fare surprisingly well in Neiberg's analysis despite the new president's inexperience with foreign affairs as America's advantageous postwar position allowed the president and his advisers to project an air of confidence throughout the summit. Meanwhile, the British entered the conference with a weak geostrategic position and with weary leadership. By 1945, Winston Churchill was exhausted, drinking heavily, and thoroughly aloof from the British people who sought to move into the postwar era following the destruction of the Nazi threat in Europe. This situation did Churchill no favors at Potsdam, and the ill-advised calling of early elections led to the unthinkable result of Churchill and his protégé Anthony Eden returning home following a thoroughly humiliating electoral loss to be replaced by the seeming afterthought, Clement Attlee. Despite these key differences in tone and strategic goals, Neiberg stresses that none of the participants had any expectation that the relationship would completely unravel over the next few years.

Neiberg succeeds in placing the conference within its own context and not as a harbinger of the Cold War. Instead, as Neiberg writes, "If the men who met at Potsdam in the summer of 1945 could not predict the future, they at least knew the past they were desperately trying not to repeat" (p. 256). The shadow of the Paris Peace Conference loomed large over the meeting in Potsdam and influenced the thoughts and actions of nearly every major participant. No one desired a return of the harsh, ineffectual terms of the Treaty of Versailles nor the confused, rudderless international system of the interwar period. Thus, nearly every facet of Potsdam differed significantly from Paris. Rather than fostering an air of inclusiveness as Woodrow Wilson had done a quarter century earlier, Truman, Stalin, and the British leaders knowingly and deliberately sought to shape the postwar order themselves with little to no input from others. For those accustomed to modern notions of public diplomacy, Potsdam may seem like an insular anachronism, but the conference resulted in the Big Three agreeing on a host of critical issues including German occupation and the transformation of Poland and Eastern Europe.

With ***Potsdam***, Neiberg has simultaneously elevated an overshadowed and controversial historical event and placed it within its specific historical context free of any hint of presentism. This is an outstanding book that sets a new standard for histories of the Second World War and of early postwar Europe.