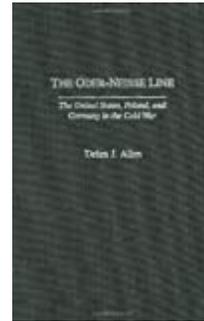




Debra J. Allen. *The Oder-Neisse Line: The United States, Poland, and Germany in the Cold War.* Westport and London: Praeger, 2003. 309 pp. \$67.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-32359-1.



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The Oder-Neisse Border: Valid by Default

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It took some four years to draw and re-draw Europe's borders in the wake of World War I; and still the outcome remained unsatisfactory and unstable. By contrast, the hastily delineated borders of 1945 have now held for nearly sixty years—with the recent exceptions of Yugoslavia and the line between East and West Germany. Such an outcome appears all the more unlikely if one turns, as Debra J. Allen does, to the untidy origins of one contentious boundary, that between Poland and what remained of the German Reich.

Allen's study opens amidst the succession of wartime conferences—Tehran, Yalta, Potsdam. She documents from an early date Roosevelt's willingness to adopt the basic trade-off that shaped Poland's future: a massive loss of territory in the east, to be compensated with lands to the west. But how much of Germany, exactly, should be lopped off and handed to the newly formed government of Polish unity? As Stalin's plans for a line at the Oder and western Neisse became clear, American officials balked at the massive extent of the transfer. Millions of Germans would be displaced, a prospect that awak-

ened a surprising amount of humanitarian concern in Washington and on the ground in Europe. At the Potsdam Conference, the three wartime allies fudged the issue: Poland would administer the Oder-Neisse territories, but the final determination of the border could wait. Not only did American diplomats continue to oppose the Oder-Neisse Line; they actually proposed specific corrections as late as the Moscow foreign ministers conference of 1947 (pp. 72-80).

How, then, did the United States eventually come to accept the permanence of the Polish-German frontier? Allen's book emphasizes the glacial pace of movement on this question. From the late 1940s into the mid-1950s, American representatives found it expedient to avoid the topic whenever possible. Openly endorsing the Oder-Neisse Line was out of the question, for fear of the negative impact on German domestic politics. But the State Department was equally averse to supporting German demands for a return to the Reich borders of 1937 (pp. 158-159). The consistent refrain from Washington—documented in maddening detail by Allen—was that the border could only be affixed in a peace treaty. It was

an ambiguous standpoint that pleased neither Germany's nor Poland's friends in Congress.

Allen writes that the Eisenhower Administration began to reconsider in the second half of the 1950s. The "Polish October" of 1956 generated renewed sympathy for Warsaw and led officials to contemplate how "evolution, not revolution" might be stimulated among the populations of Eastern Europe. In this context, a U.S. decision to recognize the Oder-Neisse line was mooted as a means of reassuring the Poles that the West did not harbor aggressive intentions. According to this reasoning, continuing refusal to recognize the border inadvertently served Soviet interests by forcing Warsaw to rely upon Moscow for security. The case appeared sound, but the timing was problematic: at the height of the Berlin Crisis, with Khrushchev and Ulbricht menacing the status of Berlin, the State Department concluded that the complex problems of German unity should not be addressed in a "piecemeal" fashion. Keeping the Oder-Neisse question open was but one facet of a larger U.S. policy intended to halt the absorption of West Berlin into the GDR and reassure West Germans that reunification was still a viable goal.

By this time, of course, no high-ranking administration figures actually favored a return of Oder-Neisse territory to a future unified German state. Under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, American diplomats labored incessantly to bring about a change in West Germany's line on the border question. As one Policy Planning Council paper from 1965 argued, the Federal Republic would need "at some point ... to make a clean-cut statement recognizing Poland's present Western frontier.... It is fantasy to pretend that this 'concession' can be held out as a bargaining counter in some eventual negotiation on a final settlement" (cited p. 255). Similar arguments would eventually be raised by West Germans themselves, culminating in Willy Brandt's famed "new Eastern policy" of the years 1969-72. Amidst a package of treaties concerning access to Berlin, relations between the two German states and West German relations with Eastern Europe, the Federal Republic did agree to respect the "inviolability" of the Oder-Neisse boundary. Even here, the famous proviso about a future peace treaty remained intact, but its practical significance was nil. Thus one wonders why Allen is so impatient with American officials for clinging stubbornly to the exact wording of the Potsdam Agreement. Surely the United States was well advised to wait on Bonn rather than publicly undercutting its West German ally?

Ultimately, it is difficult to discern how exactly Allen judges this or any other issue, because the book is sorely lacking in analysis. No conclusion is offered, merely a final chapter that races through from "Nixon to Bush." The individual chapters are organized haphazardly, contributing to the poor flow of the narrative. Most problematic is the quaint methodology: for long stretches of the book, every telegram gets its own paragraph (or two). Readers learn far more than necessary about minor differences of opinion between the American embassies in Moscow, Warsaw, and Bonn. At times Allen appears to be merely transcribing box after box of material from the National Archives. All of this detail obscures the broader points Allen might otherwise wish to make.

As a study of American foreign policy, then, the book is a disappointment. This failure is most evident in Allen's extensive use of Polish American and Polish émigré materials. Proclamations by the Polish American Congress and letters to Washington are cited at length, and Allen grasps for evidence that such views were "held in some esteem" by the State Department (p. 155). The muted response by the Eisenhower administration suggests rather the opposite, though, which is hardly surprising, given the incoherence of the positions espoused by these activists. Advocates of Polish causes in the United States rejected the *eastern* border with the Soviet Union (Lvov and other regions seized by Stalin) while at the same time insisting on full recognition of the *western* border along Oder and Neisse. The tone of these pronouncements was oddly parallel to the vocabulary employed by West Germany's equally cranky, equally anti-communist expellee organizations. Both spoke in near-hysterical terms about the West's duty to roll back Stalinism; both advanced legal, moral, and historical arguments about the proper ownership of the Oder-Neisse territories. If the United States ultimately came down on Poland's side, this surely had little to do with the pressure of any domestic lobby. It would appear that Allen herself agrees, but it is impossible to tell.

Allen's book does have the merit of calling attention (indirectly, it must be said) to the potential for a truly international history of the Oder-Neisse question. Such a work would take into account German, Polish, and Russian sources, which Allen does not; and it might explore the following propositions, each suggested by a close reading of Allen's source material.

First, the Oder-Neisse boundary was poorly chosen and soon became a burden to all parties concerned—except perhaps the Soviet Union. Polish efforts to char-

acterize these regions as “recovered territories” only underlined the state’s weak historical claims. In the 1940s, British and American diplomats genuinely believed that Germany should not be shorn of so much farmland; they feared that Germans expelled from these Oder-Neisse territories would be difficult to feed, house, and keep content.

Next, throughout the 1950s, the border’s status remained fluid, reflected in a Polish reluctance to invest heavily in the rebuilding of the Oder-Neisse regions. The Soviets kept alive the option of bargaining away pieces of Poland’s “recovered territories,” and even Polish authorities spoke in guarded terms about territorial adjustments. Might Konrad Adenauer’s government have won concessions from Warsaw (or Moscow) if it had taken a more conciliatory line, rather than speaking indiscriminately about the “borders of 1937”?

Third, in the 1960s, both the Soviet Union and the Western Allies concluded that stability in Europe required an end to the uncertainty over Poland’s borders. West Germany’s slowness to adjust to this new situation resulted in a significant loss of sympathy. Consider the impatience of George McGhee, ambassador to Bonn, writing in 1966: “There are no Germans east of the Oder-Neisse line. Germany does not need *Lebensraum*—it has a deficit in workers” (cited p. 256). As McGhee’s tone indicates, the Federal Republic’s economic dynamism tended to undermine earlier claims that German prosperity rested upon the retention of an agricultural base beyond Oder and Neisse.

Finally, by default, then, the Oder-Neisse line became the only viable boundary between Poland and Germany. From the 1960s onward, it was clear that any adjustments would have reawakened Cold War animosities and generated an unacceptable degree of trauma for the region’s population, now overwhelmingly Polish.

Whether such a progression, sketched out all-too neatly here, would stand up to close historical scrutiny is uncertain. But there is much to be gained from a dispassionate study of the border question, one that does not focus on justifying or denigrating the boundary as such. The resolution of the Oder-Neisse problem did not hinge exclusively upon moral evolution within Germany, as historians of *Ostpolitik* often tell it. The German-Polish border became settled through a complex interaction among the Four Powers, the two German states, and Poland. The consolidation of this border stretched across several decades from the Potsdam Conference to the early 1970s, with the “2 + 4” treaty of 1990 providing the last word. Allen’s work offers an overview of Washington’s role in this process; experts on the subject will dig happily among the extensive source material cited in her book.

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