Introduction: Private Polowsky's Oath

He was in the lead jeep when they first spotted the Russians, stretched along the east bank of the Elbe River. His commanding officer saw the sun glinting off the soldiers' medals and remembered hearing that the Red Army wore their decorations in combat. Certain now that these were Soviet troops and not Germans, the elated Americans shot up two green flares and shouted their greetings into the stiff wind that was blowing across the water. It was 11:30 in the morning, April 25, 1945.

On the other side of the world, in San Francisco, the delegates to the founding meeting of the United Nations were asleep in their hotels. For these Allied representatives this was to be a historic day, the occasion for establishing a new international organization dedicated to the preservation of peace. Yet on the eve of their conclave, the Second World War was a continuing reality. Inside Germany the obstinate Wehrmacht was battling on, as the massive armies of Generals Zhukov and Eisenhower closed in from east and west.

The man standing in the first jeep was Private Joseph Polowsky of Chicago, a rifleman with G Company, 273rd Infantry, Third Platoon, Sixty-ninth Division, First Army. Polowsky had been awarded a Bronze Star in the Battle of the Bulge and was part of a unit that had fought its way across Germany. One day earlier the men had reached Trebsen, a town twenty miles west of the Elbe. There, G Company had been ordered to dispatch a patrol in the direction of the river to obtain more precise information about the location of the Red Army. The soldiers were under instructions not to attempt an actual link-up, lest there be accidental casualties.

The reminiscences of Private Polowsky are contained in Scott and Krasilshchik, Yanks Meet Reds, 77–82; and Terkel, The Good War, 444–49. Also helpful in the preparation of this segment were recollections and materials provided by Leroy Wolins, a friend of Polowsky and vice commander of Veterans for Peace.
Introduction: Private Polowsky’s Oath

But the emotions of the moment had proved overwhelming. In the final stage of the most devastating war in human history, the prospect of actually meeting the Russian troops and helping sever the German army was irresistible. On the morning of the 25th the group’s leader, Lieutenant Alfred “Buck” Kotzebue, chose to ignore headquarters’ restriction and to push ahead to the Elbe. Later the same day, two other patrol leaders from the Sixty-ninth Division would also ignore their instructions, as their troops surged forward in search of the Red Army.

Kotzebue’s men were the first to make contact. Joe Polowsky had been placed in front so he could talk to the Russians. Because nobody in the unit knew their language, the lieutenant was counting on Polowsky’s German to permit communication.

As they pulled up to the Elbe the Americans were perplexed about how to get across. The closest bridge had been obliterated in an earlier battle and the river, which was swollen by the spring rain, was flowing swiftly. Suddenly Kotzebue spotted some small boats chained to the shore. Unable to unfasten them by hand, he balanced a grenade on the knot of chains, pulled the pin, and took cover. The explosion released one of the sailboats, and six of the men eagerly climbed in. Using makeshift oars, they paddled through the heavy currents and reached the eastern bank.

An appalling spectacle met their eyes as they tried to disembark. Extending along both sides of the ruined bridge were hundreds of corpses of German civilians. These old men, women, and children had been fleeing the Red Army in horse-drawn carts. The previous night the Russians had seen the light of their encampment, and mistaking the people for German soldiers had bombarded the location with their artillery. Now the bodies were “piled up like cordwood” along the water.¹

In order to greet the Soviet soldiers, the Americans “literally waded knee-deep through the bodies of the German refugees.” Private Polowsky later recalled being overcome by the scene, unable to remove his gaze from the body of a young girl who was lying on the ground, clutching her doll with one hand and her fallen mother with the other.

Despite the surrounding horror, there was a feeling of exhilaration as the Americans recognized that their rendezvous spelled the defeat of the Third Reich. Visibly moved, Kotzebue turned to his translator proposing that we “make a resolution with these Russians here,” that “this would be an important day in the lives of the two countries.” Polowsky recollected that the suggestion was “very informal, but it was a solemn moment. There were tears in the eyes of most of us.... We embraced. We swore never to forget.”

¹ See account of Buck Kotzebue in Scott and Krasilshchik, Yanks Meet Reds, 23–28; Terkel, The Good War, 446.
² Ibid.
Introduction: Private Polowsky’s Oath

The Russians quickly produced some bottles of vodka along with German wine and beer. In a tumultuous outpouring of excitement, hope, and grief, the six soldiers from G Company joined the men from the Red Army in repeated toasts and pledges. Standing beside the bodies of the slain civilians, they promised that they would remember the destruction and forever honor the memory of the Elbe. With impassioned words flowing from many lips, Private Polowsky found his work unexpectedly arduous and affecting.

Company G had encountered the Russians in the town of Strehla, sixteen miles south of Torgau. Because there were no reporters present, this first linkup received little publicity. Four and one half hours later a second American patrol, headed by Lieutenant Robertson, found the Red Army at Torgau. Hundreds of reporters were nearby, and it was this meeting that was immediately immortalized in the Allied press by photographs of the first handshake.

The euphoria at Strehla was replicated at Torgau. Bill Robertson later remembered that

We three Americans were standing with the Russians on the river bank laughing, shouting, pounding each other on the back, shaking hands with everyone. Frank, George and I were shouting in English, our hosts in Russian. Neither understood the other’s words, but the commonality of feeling was unmistakable. We were all soldiers, comrades in arms. We had vanquished a common enemy. The war was over, peace was near. All of us would live for another hour, another day.4

Andy Rooney, reporter for the army's Stars and Stripes, described “a mad scene of jubilation on the east and west banks of the Elbe at Torgau as infantrymen of Lieutenant Courtney H. Hodges, First U.S. Army, swapped K rations for a vodka with soldiers of Marshal Kornian's Ukrainian army, congratulating each other, despite the language barrier on the link-up.”5 Later the men from the Sixty-ninth Division sat in warm sunshine on the banks of the Elbe, with the enemy guns finally silent, passing around bottles with their new Russian friends and watching the soldiers of the Red Army dance and sing. Reflecting on this panorama, Rooney wrote, “You get the feeling of exuberance, a great new world opening up.”

Between them the two Allied armies had traversed a distance of 2,200 miles. The Russian forces had begun at Stalingrad on the Volga, the Americans at Normandy. When they came together in the heart of Germany, they had split the remainder of the German army through the center of “a shrinking corridor” from the North Sea to the plains of northern Italy.6

Wherever they stood on the Elbe that day, to the Americans and Russians

4 Bill Robertson, oral history, in Scott and Krasilshchik, Yanks Meet Reds, 51.
5 Quoted in Terkel, The Good War, 449.
6 “Yanks Meet Reds,” The Stars and Stripes, April 28, 1945.
Introduction: Private Polowsky’s Oath

who were there, April 25 was a glorious moment of triumph and brotherhood. For some, like Joseph Polowsky, it was a transforming experience, an entry into history, a perception of human possibility and obligation.

Contrary to the forecasts of Andy Rooney, “a great new world” did not open up in the aftermath of the Second World War. And as the Grand Alliance dissolved, the symbolism of the Elbe became a liability in the United States. In the shadow of the Cold War, it was embarrassing to remember the awe, the excitement, the affection, and the optimism of that earlier time.

As for Private Polowsky, he returned to Chicago, registered for some college courses under the GI Bill, worked for a period in his parents’ business, and eventually became a full-time cabdriver in the city. Although he was a Taft Republican, he could never shake off the emotions of the Allied meeting. As the international atmosphere deteriorated, Polowsky clung to his memories of the Red Army. It seemed to him calamitous that the Oath of the Elbe should be lost to posterity.7

In 1949, using borrowed funds he made his way to New York, where he persuaded three governments to introduce a UN resolution marking April 25 as a special day of peace.8 This motion would have recognized the coincidence of the meeting at the Elbe and the formation of the United Nations. Polowsky was convinced that there were enough votes to secure passage. But in the summer of 1950, when the motion was slated for discussion, the North Koreans marched south, ending any prospect that the Allied linkage of 1945 and the fraternal feeling it evoked would be celebrated.

Over the next several years, Joe remained in touch with old army buddies and continued to correspond with some of the Russians he had met at war’s end. In 1955, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary, the Soviet government extended an invitation to American veterans of the Elbe to come to Moscow to commemorate Victory Day. Though willing to issue passports for the men, the U.S. State Department was not prepared to offer assistance. Under Polowsky’s leadership, a group of twelve vets from different sections of the United States gathered in Washington and decided to make the trip. Lacking funds, the former GIs called a press conference and solicited public support for their mission. A producer of the TV program “Strike It Rich” invited them on the show, and their winnings paid for the price of the plane tickets. Two days later, the men were in the air to Moscow, the first delegation of private citizens to go to Russia since 1945 with official recognition from both governments.

Introduction: Private Polowsky’s Oath

In 1958 Joe Polowsky arranged for a return visit from Soviet veterans to the United States. With Cold War tensions still unabated, the project elicited little outside interest or financial support. The Soviet government paid the transportation costs for their military representatives, while Joe and his GI associates borrowed money for entertainment. Under these conditions, the event made no public impact. The Russian veterans toured New York and Washington, unnoticed and unacclaimed. The one breach of anonymity occurred at Yankee Stadium, when a sportscaster announced that the World War II soldiers were in the stands. As 15,000 fans gave a standing ovation, the Russians were brought to home plate to meet slugger Mickey Mantle.

The 1958 trip represented the high point of Private Polowsky’s peace-time activities. With unbroken tenacity, during the next twenty-five years, Joe remained faithful to his oath. He wrote hundreds of letters to world leaders and politicians proclaiming the need for international friendship. A stubborn and lonely figure, he conducted his own private vigil each April 25 on the Michigan Avenue Bridge in downtown Chicago. There he passed out flyers to his fellow citizens, explaining his encounter in Germany and its meaning for humanity.

In 1983, at the age of sixty-five, Polowsky learned that he was dying of cancer. Undaunted, he told a friend, “I finally have a way to make sure they can’t forget the Elbe.” In the months that were left, he busied himself with the complex negotiations entailed in a plan to have himself buried in East Germany. When he passed away, his family was not surprised to learn that Private Polowsky had requested a funeral in Torgau, just a few miles north of where he had met the Red Army thirty-eight years before. As he explained in a letter just prior to his death, “My view is that my burial ground at Torgau . . . was paid for with the spilling of the blood of the soldiers of World War II Allies of East and West.”

On November 26, 1983, under a cold, rainy sky, Private Polowsky was buried by a bed of pine branches in a cemetery near the Elbe. His silver-gray coffin was draped in an American flag and carried by six military pallbearers – three Russian and three American war veterans. At the ceremony, the Reverend William Sloane Coffin read to the international mourners from the book of Micah: “and it shall come to pass in the better days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be raised above all

---

8 Alexander Gordeyev, oral history, in Scott and Krasilshchik, Yanks Meet Reds, 216.
9 “Joseph Polowsky Wants America to Link Up with the Russians Again,” Chicago Tribune, April 21, 1983.
6

Introduction: Private Polowsky’s Oath

mountains, and nations shall come and beat their swords into pruning hooks. And nation shall not lift up sword against nation."

Polowsky’s son Ted, a lay minister from Chicago, presented the Soviet delegation with a Russian Bible and gave a German Bible to the town’s mayor. Major-General Aleksei Gorlinsky, the senior Soviet officer, eulogized Joe as “a grass-roots American” who had dedicated his life to “furthering friendship between the people of the United States and the Soviet Union so that wars would never happen again.” Trembling in the chilly air, Gorlinsky declared, “We affirm our allegiance to the spirit of the Elbe.”

As he had arranged, Private Polowsky’s funeral was a moving and inspiring affair. The American and Russian veterans who attended made arrangements for a more ambitious commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of their linkup in 1985.44 And, though he had been obscure in life, the private’s death was featured in a front-page story by the New York Times, “Russians and Americans Bury G. I. by the Elbe.”

At the time of Joe Polowsky’s death, there were few who treasured the symbolism of the Elbe. That sudden explosion of fraternal feeling as the Allied armies joined in Germany had been virtually buried in historic memory. Yet in April 1945, the import of the occasion had been evident not only to the soldiers who were there, but to millions of people around the world.

In a period darkened by vast atrocities and unimaginable suffering, the linking of American and Soviet troops was a source of inspiration, signifying the potential for human cooperation across barriers of language, nationality, and social systems. Amidst the ruins of the European Continent the urgency of international friendship, trust, and mutual accommodation required little explanation. And as battered veterans wept and danced and told their stories, the preciousness of peace was never more apparent.

Under the influence of the Cold War, historical studies of the Grand Alliance have generally emphasized the sources of future discord.45 The Western powers and the Soviet Union had been hostile to each other before the Second World War. The partnership had been dictated by absolute necessity. The Soviet Union was fighting for its life and needed all the help it could get. The United States and Britain saw the Red Army as the last hope for stopping Hitler. Despite a surface collaboration, each of the principals continued to nourish private resentments, ideologies, and plans. Even at the height of their cooperation, Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill had quarreled over many issues.

44 Scott and Krasilshchik, Yanks Meet Reds, 185–87.
45 In this respect revisionist and mainstream historians frequently converge. Two outstanding examples, written from a left and right perspective, are Gabriel Kolko’s Politics of War and Herbert Feis’s Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin: The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought.
Introduction: Private Polowsky’s Oath

All of these elements seem more important in hindsight than they did at the time. When the war ended, the compelling fact was that the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union had worked together successfully to defeat Germany. Faced with a common peril, they had submerged differences of experience and ideology. Whatever the discomforts of the Alliance, bonds of sympathy and appreciation had been forged among the participants, and the publics of all three nations had come to value the connection.

Like the dramatic imagery of the Elbe encounter, these hopeful developments were nearly erased from historical consciousness. But in disregarding this part of the past, the meaning of subsequent events is also lost. What is forgotten is how unwelcome and unexpected the U.S.-Soviet rupture really was. From our present standpoint we are apt to see the Cold War as an automatic by-product of the divergent patterns of society and governance, an inevitable resumption of hostilities once the specter of fascism had been exorcised. During the Second World War, however, there were many wise people on both sides of the Atlantic who were convinced that such divergences could be managed peacefully. This assessment flowed directly from the knowledge, born of the Grand Alliance, that heterogeneous societies – even Marxist and capitalist ones – could compromise when survival required it.

By recalling these original perceptions, we can penetrate the cloud of inevitability that hangs so heavily over the Cold War, and observe that the East-West conflict was the product of human decisions. In 1945 other aspirations had existed and other outcomes had seemed possible. To understand why the Great Powers failed to establish a durable peace, it is necessary to focus on the choices that were made, the reasons for their adoption, and the identity of the choosers. Though this is no longer the fashion, the search for Cold War origins must entail the exploration of responsibility.

In the pages that follow, I look at the emergence of the Cold War in the place where it assumed its most menacing form: occupied Germany. It was here that the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was most graphically expressed in the division of the country and the line across Berlin.

Though the division of Germany was one of the most crucial decisions of the postwar period, it has received little serious study in the United States.16

16 Although there has been no full study of U.S. policy and the division of Germany during the 1945-49 period, there are a number of fine monographs, which treat important segments of the story. See especially Backer, The Decision to Divide Germany: American Foreign Policy in Transition and Winds of History: The German Years of Lucius Durbignon Clay; Gimbel, The Origins of the Marshall Plan; Gottlieb, The German Peace Settlement and the Berlin Crisis; Kuklick, American
Introduction: Private Polowsky’s Oath

This omission is especially curious because the division of Germany was not only the most dramatic embodiment of the collapse of Great Power cooperation; it was also a fundamental cause of global polarization. So long as the Allies were controlling Germany in a unified way, there was hope of reconciling other European quarrels. Leaders on both sides recognized that a pacific, neutral German nation could be a model for the rest of the Continent, as well as a bridge between eastern and western Europe. Furthermore, Germany was the place where both the United States and the Soviet Union had their greatest stakes. If they could satisfy important interests in this arena, less weighty controversies might be defused.

Once Germany was cut in two, these prospects disappeared. With U.S.-Soviet aspirations embodied in rival German sovereignties, the European split proved irreversible. Superimposed on the preexisting tensions was a powerful new anxiety on the part of Americans and Russians: that Germany would be reunified on principles favorable to the other. In muted form, this had been a concern since the inception of the occupation. But it became far more serious once the major powers were actively strengthening two rump states. From this apprehension sprang two military alliances and the fortification of the blocs with the most lethal weapons ever deployed.

In investigating the sources of the German partition, I am approaching the subject as an American diplomatic historian. My central focus is the development of U.S. policy toward Germany during the 1944–49 period. For this purpose, I have relied heavily on the rich and still largely untapped materials in American government collections. Also invaluable were the Foreign Office documents in the British Public Records Office, which frequently provided more candid and detailed descriptions of both American and British policies in this field.

I have elected to tell the story within the framework of a chronological narrative. Occasionally, I step out of sequence in order to give coherence to some of the significant subplots. As much as possible, I try to highlight the order in which events occurred, for it is in the evolution of attitudes and the pattern of action and response that explanations can be found.

The American approach to the question of German unity and collaboration with Russia was intimately linked to their ideas about Germany’s internal development. One of the major aims of this study is to integrate the story of Germany’s division with an exploration of U.S. occupation policy. At war’s end, American policy makers disagreed among themselves about the kind of society Germany should become – a difference that

Policy and the Division of Germany: The Clash with Russia over Reparations; Smith, Lucius D. Clay: An American Life.

17 Especially valuable and so far underutilized are the vast collections of the Office of U.S. Military Government and the U.S. political advisor, held at the Federal Records Center in Suitland, Maryland.
partly reflected divergent domestic agendas. As we shall see, the way they resolved this dispute and conducted the occupation in their zone had profound implications for the partnership with the Soviet Union.

The resulting tale is one of exceptional fascination and complexity. Yet certain judgments emerge sharply. At the risk of anticipating the subsequent narrative, let me outline briefly the book’s main themes.

My most important conclusion is that the division of Germany was fundamentally an American decision. The Soviet Union was strongly opposed to this development because the effect was to exclude it from the most populous, powerful, and wealthy part of the nation. While the United States was supported by Britain, other West European nations had serious reservations about the American course, fearing that West Germany could become a new military threat. Indeed, American leaders did not even have the support of their own public. Most ordinary citizens simply assumed that if Germany was dividing that this was a Russian policy.

At the time of surrender, U.S. policy makers had intended to cooperate with the Soviets in the supervision of a unified Germany. However, their ability to reach agreements at Yalta and at Potsdam was conditioned by the lingering influence of New Deal liberals over American foreign policy. The combined efforts of Henry Morgenthau Jr., Harry Dexter White, Harry Hopkins, and President Roosevelt himself had tilted U.S. directives toward a program of deindustrialization and draconian reform. This seemed to meet Stalin’s economic and security requirements, and to provide him with an incentive to curb the German Communists.

With Roosevelt’s death and the conclusion of the Second World War, however, the liberal New Dealers disappeared from the highest counsels. Administration conservatives such as Henry Stimson, John McCloy, and William Clayton, who were looking toward the establishment of a new multilateral trading order, consolidated their control over German policy. Though they favored collaboration with the Soviets and the maintenance of unity, they were also determined to rebuild postwar Germany so that it could be integrated with the capitalist economies of Europe.

Not surprisingly, the ascendance of this group led to increasingly bitter conflict with the Soviet Union. There were also serious tensions with the French, who were opposed to German reconstruction, and with the British, who preferred to socialize Germany’s major industries. Under these conditions, the Allied Control Council was quickly paralyzed and the German economy stagnated.

By the beginning of 1947 American distress over this state of affairs was intensified by the emerging economic crisis in Western Europe. U.S. officials were convinced that without a dramatic increase in German productivity, free markets would disappear and the Continent would be plunged into chaos. To remedy the stalemate, they were drawn to the idea of partition. This would eliminate Soviet constraints, improve the prospects
for congressional appropriations, and create a more favorable environment for managing differences with the British and French.

Interestingly, the strongest objections to partition came from General Clay and his conservative associates in the Office of Military Government. They believed that concessions on reparations might yet induce the Soviets to accept capitalist democracy in Germany. This would be a worthwhile bargain because it would salvage the freedom of the eastern zone. Back in Washington, Clay’s approach had little appeal. In the prevailing anti-Soviet atmosphere his analysis of Russian intentions was discounted, while anxiety over western Europe created pressure for immediate action. The probable effects of partition on the eastern zone, so troubling to members of Military Government, carried less weight at home.

With the presentation of the Marshall Plan in June 1947, the American course was set. U.S. policy makers were determined to include a separate West Germany in an integrated plan for West European recovery. Yet, having made this decision, they faced severe obstacles to its implementation. In an unwitting alliance, both the French government and the politicians of western Germany were reluctant to form a new state. Not until the following June was the project uneasily launched.

The Soviets had by then made it clear, through the formation of the Cominform and the militant activities of the European communist parties, that they would exact a high price for exclusion. With the implementation of a western currency reform and the summoning of a Parliamentary Council, they began their historic blockade of Berlin. Although the stated goal was to arrest the momentum toward partition, the initiative backfired. Once the Western powers were able to supply the city by air, the confrontation in Berlin provided a dramatic demonstration of Soviet brutality and American humanitarianism. Under cover of the blockade, U.S. officials were finally able to consolidate international and domestic support for their West German agenda.

This rendering of events contrasts sharply with more conventional notions of how Germany came to be divided. The old orthodoxy was that it was the Soviets who had forced partition. That view persisted in popular consciousness and seemed continuously validated by the existence of the Berlin Wall. Among professional historians, there has been some softening of the indictment and a mounting sense that perhaps it was too much to expect that a communist country and three capitalist ones could work together within the boundaries of one nation.

I wrote this book without access to the Soviet documents. Yet from the American and British records, it was apparent that during most of the occupation the Russians were pushing for unification. It was also clear that U.S. policy makers decided to divide Germany, at a point when communism was weak in the West and the Soviet desire to bolshevize the country