

The Gift of Berlin

“The Fall of Berlin and the Rise of a Myth” by Donald E. Shepardson, in *The Journal of Military History* (Jan. 1998), Society for Military History, George C. Marshall Library, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Va. 24450–1600.

Almost as soon as Soviet troops hoisted their flag over the Reichstag building in Berlin on April 30, 1945, a myth arose that only American naiveté (in contrast with British realism) had prevented British and American forces from taking the German capital first. Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger

month had encountered fanatical Japanese resistance, and the atom bomb’s effectiveness was still unknown. Moreover, the Allied leaders were reluctant to alienate Joseph Stalin. They were counting on Soviet support in the war against Japan. A confrontation over Berlin would have shocked the American public, which had come to look on the Soviet Union as a gallant ally. In Britain, it would have split Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s coalition government, since his Labor Party partners would never have supported it.

In a 17-day campaign that began on April 16, the Red Army captured Berlin, paying a huge cost: 80,000 dead or missing, 280,000 wounded, 2,000 artillery pieces destroyed, and more than 900 aircraft lost. But Stalin also felt constrained by the need to maintain a united front against Japan, and thus did not challenge his allies over the division of Berlin to which they had agreed at Yalta in February. In



In 1945, as World War II drew to a close, war-weary Americans were in no mood to confront their Soviet ally over Berlin.

July, American, British, and French forces took possession of their respective zones. “Here was a gift,” Shepardson says.

recently expressed this view in his 1994 book *Diplomacy*. Shepardson, a historian at the University of Northern Iowa, replies that, faced with hard choices amid the rush of events in the spring of 1945, General Dwight D. Eisenhower and his superiors were more realistic than their later critics.

Eisenhower finally decided on April 14, 1945, to halt his forces at the Elbe River, 50 miles west of Berlin. The United States, Shepardson notes, wanted to defeat Germany quickly with minimum casualties, not only for humane reasons but so that U.S. troops could be deployed to the Pacific, where the situation appeared grim. The invasion of Okinawa that

The gift—which bedeviled Stalin and his heirs for the next 45 years—would not have been necessary if the Soviets had attacked Berlin before the Yalta Conference. By the end of January 1945, the Red Army was camped less than 50 miles from Berlin. But Stalin decided to pause. In later years, Shepardson dryly notes, Soviet critics would fault Marshal Georgi Zhukov for not persuading Stalin to press on. The two Soviet leaders, the critics said, should have been more realistic.

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The Present Danger

“Global Utopias and Clashing Civilizations: Misunderstanding the Present” by John Gray, in *International Affairs* (Jan. 1998), Chatham House, 10 St. James’s Square, London SW1Y 4LE, England.

The end of the Cold War has transformed the world—but not in the ways por-

trayed by two prominent scholarly prophets, contends Gray, a professor of European