The Yalta Conference took place from 4-11 February 1945. Alan Bullock calls it ‘the high point of the alliance’. Certainly, it was the time the three leaders got on best and made most progress – it was at Yalta where the Big Three thrashed out the principles of the post-war settlement.

Stalin was, again, in the strongest position. Not only were his armies sweeping towards Berlin, but – because he told Roosevelt and Churchill that his doctor had forbidden him to travel – the conference was held inside the USSR. In addition, he was well-informed about his allies. In Britain, a group of spies known later as ‘the Cambridge Five’ provided him with all the classified Foreign Office documents he needed. And from America, Alger Hiss [a Soviet spy working for the U.S. State Department] actually succeeded in becoming a member of the American delegation.

Roosevelt was the weakest player. He was not well (he was to die of a cerebral haemorrhage on 12 April), but most of all, he believed that he and Stalin had a special friendship, and that that friendship would prevent Stalin from bad faith:

So Roosevelt ignored the advice of Churchill (and many people in his own government) that he had to stand up to Stalin. His military advisers were telling him that the conquest of Japan would take many months and a million American casualties, and Roosevelt wanted Russian help in the Pacific ... whatever the cost. Consequently, Roosevelt agreed a deal with Stalin whereby, in return for entering the Pacific War, the Soviet Union would gain Sakhalin and the Japanese Kurile islands, and zones of influence in Manchuria and North Korea. And as for Europe, Roosevelt told his advisers that he wanted to stay out of the European settlement. So, again, it was left to Churchill to argue with Stalin about what would happen to Germany, about reparations, and about Poland.

However, at Yalta, Stalin appeared reasonable. He was friendly and affable. There are few stories of him baiting Churchill – indeed, he let Churchill win many of the negotiations. For example, Stalin wanted Germany ‘dismembered’, but agreed with Churchill to leave this to another discussion. He agreed with Churchill to set up a reparations committee. And as regards the governments of eastern Europe, he agreed the Declaration of Liberated Europe and suggested that free elections could be held within a month.

Churchill was becoming increasingly alarmed that Stalin intended to establish a Soviet empire in eastern Europe. At the conference, Churchill disagreed with Stalin about many issues - he believed that Stalin had to be prevented from conquering all of eastern Europe. However, Churchill came away from the Conference believing that he had negotiated a workable deal with Stalin, and that he could trust him. After the conference, Churchill wrote a thank-you note to Stalin, thanking him for ‘all the hospitality and friendship extended to British delegation’.

The Potsdam Conference took place from 16 July to 2 August 1945.

Churchill went to the Conference in bullish mood. He had completely fallen out with Stalin since Yalta – accusing him of being insulting in his letters – and he had spent the intervening 5 months bombarding the Americans with messages about what the Soviets were up to in eastern Europe. However, on 28 July, Churchill was replaced by Clement Atlee who – although not as weak as Churchill suggested and sceptical of Stalin – did not play a major part in confronting Stalin.