

LETTERS FROM POTSDAM

COLONEL JOHN S. WISE'S IMPRESSIONS
OF THE 1945 BERLIN CONFERENCE

EDITED BY E. TAYLOE WISE

Letters from Potsdam: Colonel John S. Wise's Impressions of the 1945 Berlin Conference

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	xv
BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN SERGEANT WISE	xvii
MAJOR EVENTS IN 1945	xxiii
EXPLANATORY NOTE	xxvii
LETTERS	
LETTERS #1 & #2	1
LETTER #3	27
LETTER #4	37
LETTER #5	51
LETTER #6	69
LETTER #7	89
LETTER #8	103
LETTER #9	115
LETTER #10	135
LETTER #11	147
LETTER #12	161
LETTER #13	171
LETTER #14	177
LETTER #15	185
LETTER #16	199
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	203

LETTERS FROM POTSDAM

NOTES ON ABBREVIATIONS 207
APPENDIX I 209
APPENDIX II 227
APPENDIX III 243
BIBLIOGRAPHY 247
ABOUT THE EDITOR E. TAYLOR WISE..... 251

INTRODUCTION

Berlin — July 1945. The war in Europe was over. The war with Japan would end in two cataclysmic blasts on August 6 and 9, 1945. It was the beginning of the Cold War—only we didn't know that it had started. The inkling was there—what George Kennan would describe in his now famous “Long Telegram” sent from Moscow to the U. S. State Department on February 22, 1946. It was, as Kennan later elaborated, “designed to arouse the citizenry to the dangers of the Communist conspiracy.”⁹ Less than two weeks later, on March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill would state unequivocally that an “Iron Curtain” had descended across Europe from the Baltic to the Adriatic.

In July 1945 the “Big Three”—Churchill, Stalin, and Truman—would meet in Germany at Potsdam, a Berlin suburb, to settle how the spoils would be divided up. The July 17 to August

⁹ George F. Kennan. *Memoirs 1925-1950* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1967), 294.

2, 1945, Conference at Berlin, aka the Potsdam Conference, would, ultimately, be a failure. Stalin and his Russian army were already in control of Eastern Europe, and he wasn't about to be dislodged no matter what platitudes, or financial inducements, were thrown his way.

The Editor's Father, John S. Wise, was fortunate to be working in the U.S. War Department under General of the Army, George C. Marshall, and accompanied Marshall and his staff to Potsdam. During the brief two weeks of the Potsdam Conference, Wise, who served as an Army Liaison Officer, wrote a series of sixteen highly descriptive letters, dated from July 16 to July 30, 1945, to his wife, Elizabeth T. Wise, who lived in Charlottesville, Virginia. Although the letters were subject to censorship, the Editor has found only two pseudonyms out of the 93 individuals mentioned in them. Less than two pages of the letters have been excerpted, as those portions from several different letters, contained personal family information that was not pertinent to the overall scope of the history of those times.

LETTER # 14

JULY 28, 1945

All of your letters have arrived so far, the last of which was dated the 26th, which I got on the 29th. Pretty fast service from Charlottesville to Berlin, isn't it? I am so glad that you have begun to get the letters and are interested in my long screed.

You continue to complain at the lack of real news from this place and well the world might join you. By now you should have received most of my letters. This should fully explain and account to you for why they have not issued any news of accomplishments. The honest to God truth is that the accomplishments have been so petty and inconsequential that the whole affair has become a farce and a failure.

That is true not alone for this highly touted conference but was equally true with respect to Yalta but there they tried and somewhat successfully so, to pull the wool over the people's

eyes. I pray to God that such will not be the case here. All we have ever gotten from the Russians are a few high-sounding words, a few self-evident platitudes, and the sooner the people of America wake up to the true state of affairs, the sooner our leaders stop trying to paint a rosy picture and tell the truth, the better off we will be.

The Russians are a hard, ruthless, practical people, who have no comprehension whatsoever of the niceties of life. Their general condition and estate is pitiful and they are out to get everything possible for themselves. They do not understand gentlemanly dealing between themselves, or between nations. Because of their enormous manpower and their successes in the war, we and the British have deferred to their expressed desires and have made many concessions in order to preserve a semblance of unity of action and purpose. Now like a spoiled boy who has always had his way, by crying and bravado, they think that they can continue to follow the same line with equal success.

They only understand and respect force. They never make a concession or give up something or some position unless they get something of equal value to them. Roosevelt was kidded and deluded into believing that he was getting somewhere with them, but he had no comprehension of the true state of affairs.

They regard our striving at appeasement as an admission of weakness and therefore demand more and more. If we continue to defer to their wishes, we will wind up in the loser's corner. But if we are fair and firm and insistent upon respect for what we believe to be right, we will get along well together.

We are not necessarily headed for trouble with the Russians. We can live together and develop without conflict, but only if we place our relations on a firm, frank and well determined position. Otherwise, we can only head towards an ultimate and horrible clash. This we can do without being truculent. This we can do without stirring up trouble and ill feeling. If we do not do this, we will, ultimately, be faced with a monster that may well devour us.

We need have no fear of the Russian power. They are a primitive people without an air force and without a navy and without one tenth of the mechanical power to wage war that we have. Their only asset is manpower, and they will spend it freely. But a million soldiers with pop guns would fall before the onslaught of a few well-armed and well-equipped soldiers. We have to stop standing in awe of the Russian might.

We have to evaluate truly our own power. We have to be prepared to stand face to face, to insist upon a respect for our ideals and our wishes, which should not be regarded as

APPENDIX III

WHO WAS ADMIRAL WESTRICK?

There are two possibilities as to the identity of Admiral Westrick referred to in my Father's July 13, 1945, letter.

The 25 villas confiscated by the Soviets were located in Babelsburg on what is known today as Karl-Marx Strasse, but which was formerly known as Kaiserstrasse and later in the Nazi era as the Strasse der SA. The area was known as the Villenkolonie and many of the villas were owned by movie stars, musicians, architects and, as it turns out, some important members who plotted to assassinate Hitler. The Soviets took the upper/northernmost stretch, gave the British the central stretch, and doled out the southernmost stretch to the Americans.

Dr. Ernst-Robert Grawitz (1899–1945) lived in a villa at 59 Karl-Marx Strasse, which still stands today. In 1935 Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945), Chief of the German Police, appointed

Grawitz as Reichsarzt (also Reichsarzt SS un Polizei) the chief doctor of the Schutzstaffel (literally “Protection Squadron”), aka the SS. On December 17, 1936, Wilhelm Frick (1877–1946), the Reich Minister of the Interior (1933–1943), appointed Grawitz to serve as the deputy head of the German Red Cross. Then, in 1937, Frick appointed him as the head (Geschäftsführer) of the German Red Cross, a position he held until he committed suicide in 1945. Grawitz, it turns out, was involved in all sorts of heinous activities, including medical experiments on prisoners, forced sterilizations, and the mass murders of handicapped individuals. He also held the rank of SS-Obergruppenführer and General der Waffen-SS.

Grawitz, a rabid Nazi and “true believer,” made no secret of the fact that he was going to commit suicide once the Third Reich fell. Several weeks before the Fall of Berlin (April 16–May 2, 1945), he had handed out brass containers with cyanide vials to the SS people in his Reichsarzt office. As Berlin was falling to the Soviets, he went to his home at 59 Strasse der SA, on April 24, killed his family, and committed suicide with a hand grenade.

The second, more remote possibility, is that “Westrick” refers to Wilhelm Frick (1877–1946) (W...rick?), mentioned above, the Nazi Minister of the Interior who, after 1943, was

the successor to Reinhard Heydrich (1904–1942) (aka The Butcher of Prague) as Governor of the Reichsprotektorat und Mähren (Bohemia and Moravia). Frick was entirely responsible for the racial policy of Nazi Germany and drafted laws against the Jewish people. While Frick did not live at 59 Strasse der SA, he was a frequent visitor there and, as mentioned above, at least partially responsible for Grawitz's rise to power. Himmler and Frick were rivals and Grawitz was beholden to both men. Frick was tried and convicted of war crimes at the Nuremberg Trials. Refusing to testify on his own behalf, he was convicted and executed by hanging.

It seems highly improbable that Frick would have been the person to kill Grawitz and his children after Grawitz emphatically let it be known that he was going to kill both his family and himself when the Soviets were on the outskirts of Berlin. The Editor believes all the evidence, albeit some of it circumstantial, points to Grawitz as Westrick.

ABOUT THE EDITOR E. TAYLOE WISE

E. Tayloe Wise grew up in Charlottesville, VA. On his Mother's side of the family, he is a direct descendant of Martha Dandridge Custis, whose second husband was George Washington. He is the great, great grandson of Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise. In May 1968 he graduated from Texas Christian University with a degree in Geography, Sociology, and Anthropology. In June 1968 he enlisted in the U. S. Army and was trained to be a combat infantryman, or in military lingo, an Eleven Bravo, which was the job title code for his Military Operation Specialty (MOS). He arrived in Vietnam on May 2, 1969 and was assigned to serve with the 1st Air Cavalry Division, Air Mobile. While with his infantry company, he operated in the jungles of Tay Ninh Province and saw heavy combat. He received an Army Commendation Medal for Heroism and three Bronze Stars, two

of which were for heroism. He also was awarded the Combat Infantryman's Badge and the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross. He ended his tour as an aide to Major General E. B. Roberts, the Commanding General of the 1st Cavalry Division. He left Vietnam on April 8, 1970, after serving 342 days in country. He then worked in his family's commercial real estate business in Charlottesville before retiring in 1989. He was accepted into the Graduate School at the University of Richmond (Virginia) where he earned a Master's Degree in History in 1991. He did post-Graduate work at the American University in Washington, D.C. In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, he taught Asian History at the University of Richmond. His book, *Eleven Bravo – A Skytrooper's Memoir of War in Vietnam* was published in 2004 and is still in print. He has also taught Asian History in Richmond, VA at The Shepherd's Center and The Osher Center, both Open Universities for seniors.