

Oral History Interview
with
GENERAL LORD ROBERTSON OF OAKRIDGE

Deputy Military Governor, Germany, 1945-48; Commander-in-Chief and Military Governor, 1948-49; United Kingdom High Commissioner, Allied High Commission, Germany, 1949-50; and Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Land Forces, 1950-53.

Appended (page 23) is Lord Robertson's biographical sketch taken from the *International Yearbook and Statesmen's Who Who*, 1974.

Gloucestershire, England
August 11, 1970
by Theodore A. Wilson, University of Kansas

The Harry S. Truman Library
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WILSON: As I said when we were driving in, the list of questions which I sent you was just intended to suggest some subjects. What I would hope that you might comment upon would be the sorts of questions, the sorts of topics which you think would be most important in dealing with this problem of the political and economic effects of the aid program. They were very

closely inter-related, of course, and we can proceed any way you wish. If you wish me to ask you some of the questions which I've listed here, those you wish to comment upon, or if you wish to just talk generally about the subject.

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ROBERTSON: Well, perhaps it would be a good thing if I start by talking generally. And it's easier for me to talk generally, because when I come to talk in detail I will find difficulty about remembering exactly what I did think at that time.

I think it's important for somebody like yourself to realize the background, particularly at the start of this exercise. That is to say, when we went into Germany and found the country beaten to its knees -- not enough food, not enough coal, and very miserable, no government -- we went in under instructions, as indeed did the American mission. Basically their instructions were not much different from ours. But they differed in some important respects. Our instructions, broadly, were that the Germans must be put in their places, that we must denazify them, that we must remove the weapons of war and the means of obtaining new ones. We must be careful because the country would be starving, and it might

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be full of disease, and our troops must be careful and we shouldn't allow troops to fraternize, as it was called, with the German Frauleine. We had to try to stop that and, of course, were quite unsuccessful. The Americans had much the same instructions, in different words, of course.

I think that it is reasonable to say -- perhaps General Clay mightn't agree with me altogether -- but I think it's reasonable to say that we ourselves realized that these instructions were no good, rather more early than did the Americans. The Americans were going through, at that time, a period, a sort of honeymoon period, with the Russians. It's strange that General Eisenhower's own book ends up with two chapters on his relations with the Russians and his visit to Moscow and all the rest of it. It's only a short time before the American nation went through the period of McCarthyism, that was extraordinary. I recall a conversation I had with General Lucius Clay in the very early days. He said, "Brian, it's just too bad isn't it;

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whenever I really think that I've got something to put you in your place, that darn fool Sokolovsky throws the whole kitchen stove at our heads."

And this was true, that the Americans in the early days, I think at least I'm right, were completely misled by the Soviet attitude. They were very shocked, when in due course they found what indeed was the Soviet attitude. The thing which made them realize it, more than anything else, was the Soviet attitude towards the Potsdam Agreement and common economic policy for Germany. It was necessary that we should go through that period. Otherwise, the Americans, I think, would never have realized what was at the back of all this. Whereas, as I say, I think that we woke up to the truth of the situation a little more early, and that applies particularly to the question of food and coal.

On the other hand, when they had seized what the true situation was, the Americans were more quick than we were, and this is an important aspect

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of the thing, to realize the importance of turning over authority to the Germans. We clung onto the thing too long. We rather fancied ourselves as colonial administrators, I suppose, and we were pretty good at it. But we kept too many people there, and too long. And it led to quite a lot of trouble in the end. Denazification was a thing which we didn't turn over to the Germans until very late, whereas the Americans did earlier.

The truth of the matter was that in those early days we were fighting a battle over the soul of Germany. And we didn't realize that; if we lost that battle, well, Germany might have been where she is today, but she might be on the other side, as it were, of the Oder-Neisse line entirely.

I think that's the chief thing I want to say about the early days. I might add one other word which has occurred to me, to say to you. In an exercise such as this, men are all important. You must have good men to run an exercise of this sort. We were fairly lucky, I think,

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though we also had some passengers and less useful people. But we were fortunate in having a number of good men, and it stood us in good stead. People like Cecil Weir, for example -- splendid man, a great Christian, a man of very high ideals. The Americans had some splendid chaps too. But if you don't mind my saying this, the Americans had one tendency which I sometimes had to deplore of it -- that in their selection of men for important jobs, they do sometimes allow political influences, partisan political influences, to play too important a part. I know it's difficult to avoid it, but it's a thing you've got to avoid in a case like this. And though there are various accusations that have been made against the British on that point in Germany, one which is completely off net, is an accusation that the Socialist Government of England was pushing things for a Socialist future.

Well, they didn't, I can assure you. All the time that I was there England had a Socialist

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Foreign Secretary. There's his picture, Ernie Bevin, and he never pushed me that way, ever. Ever. And I'm quite sure that is a thing that I can say with confidence.

Well, I think those are my general remarks.

WILSON: The question that occurs to me to ask first is to ask you to elaborate on this last point you've made, which I think is extremely important. Any historian normally deals with dead paper; he deals with such things as the Morgenthau plan, and the Potsdam protocol, and JCS-1067, and to try to attempt to understand how these policies, or proclamations were implemented, means that the historian has to get at what men did, what human beings did. How would you say, thinking back about these first years, were the Americans with whom you dealt?

Were they more wedded to the pieces of paper which had been given them, than perhaps the British counterparts? Did they try to follow the Potsdam protocol very rigidly at

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first? You suggested that perhaps they did, hoping to work with the Russians.

ROBERTSON: General Clay was a very powerful character. He was highly thought of in his own country. He was given, not at first, not immediately, but he was quickly given, or took, a degree of authority which had never been intended. I am not such a strong character, perhaps, but maybe I have a way of getting my own way. However it may be, it is certain that policy in Germany, in fact, emanated very largely from General Clay and myself. And some of the things that happened, particularly with regards to the formation of the German Government, the giving up of the dismantling program, things of that sort, went through because General Clay and I pushed it through. I think that General Clay was on particularly good terms with Secretary [James F.] Byrnes; it seemed to me he was. That helped him a great deal. No doubt he had many other friends in the Pentagon, but it seemed to me that he was particularly

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well-placed with Byrnes. Whatever it may be, he was certainly allowed a great deal of authority. Our Foreign Office, for example, had the greatest objection to him, and probably to me too, because they worked things out, and they issued splendid papers. But things didn't happen that way.

Well, I think that can be taken to explain some of the things that happened, or didn't happen.

WILSON: Yes. How well-informed were the British and Americans about the situation which they found when they initiated the occupation?

ROBERTSON: Well, the British had assembled a party in London for a year or more. They had chosen the men, very often because they were men who were not in any other job. Anyway they were chosen, and they had chosen a deputy military Governor to be their head, a very able man -- General Sir Ronald Weeks.

When I was in Italy, I was suddenly sent for. I was told to take over this job, and I

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went to Germany the next day. I didn't speak a word of German; I'd never been in the country before. I had been in South Africa for a half a dozen years or more. I knew nothing about the situation at all, nothing, nor had I taken any part of the great preparatory work that had been carried forward in London. So the question is very easily answered as far as I am concerned. I think Lucius probably was better prepared than I was. I wasn't prepared at all. But still there were some men under me who had been prepared. Another thing which was well done on our side, was that military government handed things over carefully to the Control Commission, and in an intelligent manner. We had some very good men in military government, who did extremely well and were most useful, when we moved to the next phase.

WILSON: Is it fair to suggest that at the beginning, aside from the political -- the denazification program, for example, and perhaps the decartelization

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programs -- that American and perhaps British policy was negative in its approach to the German question? That there was just this "disease and unrest position"? -- send in enough food to keep them alive, but not think much more than that, at the beginning?

ROBERTSON: I don't think that I can agree with that. You must realize that this was a difficult matter for the British, much more difficult for us than for the Americans because we had far less money. And the sums of money involved were very considerable. Rations were short in England, too, and it was no easy thing to persuade the government to spend large sums of money on feeding Germans.

No, I don't think we did too badly, and I don't think that the Germans today can look back on our period there and say that we were too little forthcoming or too stingy. At the time, of course, they did, but that was only natural. I had considerable trouble with Cardinal [Josef]

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Frings, for example, and Pastor [Martin] Niemoeller, too. But we were doing our best, and as I say, I don't really think that we did too badly.

WILSON: I think the record speaks for itself, particularly in a time when Great Britain was in very great difficulties -- economic difficulties. One of the questions which I had on my list was this matter of occupation costs, and the American role, perhaps in providing certain of the occupation costs which were necessary. That was a rather long controversy -- not controversy, but a difficult problem to work out.

ROBERTSON: Yes, it was. But General Clay was awfully good about that.

WILSON: Did you have, when you went in, much appreciation of the magnitude of the refugee problem, which would arise?

ROBERTSON: Enormous problem. That arose, like a

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thunderclap. I don't think there was any real appreciation of it before we arrived. But once we got there it descended upon us in no small measure. And, of course, it affected us far the worst, more even than the Americans. We had a very bad time, as did the refugees.

Well, whether we did what we should do about that, I don't know; we did our best. We turned the army on to it, in a big way. An army transport was put at the disposal of the organization, and every attempt was made to provide housing and work and so on, which one has to do. But to say that we solved it, would be an exaggeration.

WILSON: How much importance should one give to the role of private agencies in helping with the refugee problem, the church agencies in the United States and Great Britain? There was a considerable amount of assistance in food parcels and this sort of thing, from some of these private philanthropic agencies. It seems that there was some confusion

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about how it should be sent, who should get it, how it should be distributed at the time. Was it an important aspect or not? Not. [You say.] Okay, very good?

When the Americans recognized what was the Soviet position, and turned about, what were their hopes at the time? You said in your first statement that they began rather more quickly than the British to work with the Germans, with possible German government. Was there still though in this period of 1947-48, hope or belief that some kind of four-zone economic, and perhaps even political, arrangement might be worked out? Or did the curtain descend at this time?

ROBERTSON: The curtain descended fairly quickly. It was the Moscow Conference I think that finally decided that issue. Marshall was the American representative and Lucius [Clay] was there as was I, myself. And Lucius said to me, "Well, we now know where we are," using my own words, not his. But that really settled the thing I

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think.

WILSON: And soon after came the blockade and other things...

ROBERTSON: Well, that's perhaps going a little fast. It came fairly soon afterwards, it is true, but it wasn't associated with it. The blockade was brought about by disagreements generally with the Russians, and in particular over currency reform.

WILSON: Would you say that when this turnaround occurred -- this may be an artificial question, but it's one that some historians have raised -- that the United States then gave almost exclusive importance to creating a viable, bizonal, or with the French zone, trizonal, West German state? That they became obsessed with the importance of Germany in Europe and in East-West relations?

ROBERTSON: I don't think that that is fair as a criticism, certainly not of General Clay, but

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he was very keen on it, I would agree, as I was myself. We even talked about what might be the future of Germany, and when there would be a united Germany again at some time. I wouldn't think that he was more keen than I was, and I wouldn't even think that the American nation, as far as I know, was more keen than we were.

WILSON: It's clear that one of the critical achievements of yours and General Clay's tenure was to make American leaders, particularly, aware that there could be no recovery of Europe without the recovery of Germany -- to put this in its context.

ROBERTSON: That's right.

WILSON: And I suppose in a way that both you and General Clay were lobbying for this, as the experts on the spot.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

WILSON: You had, I know, very many congressional

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leaders come through the American zone and the British zone, on tours and this sort of thing. How would you characterize their knowledge of the German problems at the time you first met then?

ROBERTSON: American Congressmen are not much different from British MPs. Some of them are more knowledgeable than others, and some of them are more silly than others. I certainly wouldn't wish to draw any comparisons between them.

WILSON: Yes. How should we approach the question of French policy in this period?

ROBERTSON: I find that rather a difficult one. I have many French friends, and I am very fond of France. To this day I am a director of companies in Paris. I have many friends there, including Francois-Poncet, who was my colleague as High Commissioner. I'm going to answer your question by saying that certainly in the early days, and

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that is right up to the time when a German government was formed, the French attitude was not at all helpful. I didn't even think that it was very sensible.

After all, we had done a lot for the French. The French had no zone. They got a zone, thanks to us, with the cooperation of the Americans. I think you will find I am correct in saying that. It was we who, as it were, pleaded with the Russians that the French must be given a part of this business, and then it was eventually agreed that they should have a zone and that that zone should be provided by carving bits out of the British and the American zones.

In spite of that and many other things of that sort, the French were not helpful, and even on currency reform itself, they weren't so helpful in the early days.

WILSON: You stated that you wanted to make the point that despite the fact that a Labor Government was

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in power for the entire time you served in Germany that you did not get pressure from this Government to create a Socialist state in Germany. What about the reverse of that? Was there anti-Socialist bias on the part of the American occupation authorities?

ROBERTSON: I wasn't aware of it. I rather suspected that it existed in the rear of the front as it were. General Clay was not any part of it. He probably was what we would call a conservative; he probably was, and the soldiers as well, greatly. But he never brought that out to the fore in his discussions with me. There were some men who certainly were strong on the political side of what they were doing. I think that we had trouble particularly over the revival of the German economy under Erhardt, not as Chancellor but as Minister of Finance, the German "miracle." It was largely Erhardt, supported by Americans, which brought that about, and the pace was a bit fast for us sometimes.

WILSON: The pace and the approach?

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ROBERTSON: Yes.

WILSON: One of the ironies is that the approach was to put emphasis upon consumer goods, that is to make sure that Germans had a variety of consumer goods at the time that the British and others were still tightening their belts.

ROBERTSON: That's right. That was a bit fast for us.

WILSON: Yes. Yes, I can see that.

The general problem that I face, maybe I'm making too much of this, in looking at the American side of the occupation, relates to something that you said earlier; that General Clay, his own person, received, or quite possibly took, rather more authority than the papers that gave him his instructions would have given him. And this happened, of course, in Japan, as well, with MacArthur. I think General Clay was much more adept in using the authority which he took than was General MacArthur. What view did you have

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at the time about the relations between Washington, between the administration and the occupation authorities of Germany? One could, from the documents we've seen, one could almost say there was very little, at least on the day to day basis. There was very little concern or interest or involvement on the part of Washington in what was happening in Germany and perhaps...

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APPENDIX

ROBERTSON, Lord, of Oakridge (Bran Hubert Robertson), GCB, GBE, KCMG, KCVO, DSO, MC. British General. Born 22 July, 1896. Education. Charterhouse; Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. Married 1926, Edith Christina Macindoe. Son William Ronald. Daughters Christine Veronica Helen, Catherine Fiona. Commissioned Royal Engineers 1914; served World War I, France and Italy 1915-18; Bengal Sappers and Miners 1920-25; Staff College, Camberley 1926-27; Military Intelligence, War Office 1928-31; member, United Kingdom Delegation to

Disarmament Conference, League of Nations 1932-33; retired 1934; Managing Director, Dunlop South Africa Ltd. 1934-40; served World War II, East and North Africa, Italy 1940-45; Deputy Military Governor, Germany 1945-48, Military Governor and C.-in-C. 1948-49, United Kingdom High Commissioner 1949-50; C.-in-C., Middle East Land Forces 1950-53; Chairman, British Transport Commission 1953-61. Dr., Dunlop Rubber Co. Ltd., 1961-69; Cie. Intle. des Wagon Lits. Comdr., Legion of Merit (U.S.A.); Comdr., Legion of Honour (France).

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