

When East met West – the 1955 Geneva Summit

The summit of the “Big Four” in Switzerland addressed the toughest questions of the Cold War. While the tone was cordial, little was achieved on substance. Still, the meeting had a considerable and lasting symbolic impact.

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The last time they had met, they were still allies. In 1945, the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States had met in Potsdam, a German city just southwest of Berlin, to discuss the post-war reorganisation of Europe.

What followed was a decade of silence between them. It was not until July 1955 that the former Allied powers convened again for a major diplomatic summit – this time, however, as rivals. The conflict between East and West was already in full swing. And the Cold War was not cold everywhere. The Greek Civil War, the Indochina War and the Korean War had all been fought prior to the Geneva meeting.

The parties involved – the US, the Soviet Union, Great Britain and France – known as the “Big Four” – shared an interest in easing tensions in the mid-1950s. On the table were major issues: European security, nuclear disarmament, and the fate of divided Germany.

The so-called “spirit of Geneva”, which is the backbone of International Geneva, was intended to provide a constructive atmosphere and enable diplomatic progress to happen. And in this respect, it worked. Between July 18 and 23, 1955, world leaders and their delegations held talks in full view of the global public, as well as curious locals. In a personal letter, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower thanked the Swiss government for its “warm welcome”.

Could the Cold War have turned out differently?

The meeting in Geneva marked a high point in the policy of détente in the early phase of the Cold War. It was an easing of political tensions between rival blocs.

The very fact that the conference took place at all made a statement. Just a decade after the most devastating war of modern history, the leaders of East and West met face to face.

But the views of the conference participants were “diametrically opposed”, as the Bern-based Dodis research centre **writes**. And the Swiss president at the time, Max Petitpierre, wrote afterwards that the atmosphere had been “peculiarly artificial”.

Could more have come out of the “Big Four” meeting? There is disagreement among historians. In the end, the Geneva Summit of 1955 concluded with an agreement to meet again. In delicate high-level diplomacy, this is generally counted as a success – the main thing is to talk to each other.

As decades of tension followed, these lines of diplomacy remained open – even during the Cold War’s most heated moments.

From an American president's first-ever visit to Switzerland to the crowning of “Miss Geneva Summit”, the Geneva Summit of 1955 caused a stir. Here are some of the scenes.

A cordial mood among the “Big Four”: Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, French Prime Minister Edgar Faure and British Prime Minister Anthony Eden (left to right).

The Geneva Summit of the US, USSR, Great Britain and France took place July 18-23, 1955. Other points of discussion included trade, tariffs, and the Open Skies initiative – a proposed treaty on surveillance overflights, which would not be signed until 1992.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) also made an appearance on the streets of Switzerland. The agents’ behaviour drew criticism. They marched in tight formation to shield the US president from onlookers and pulled spectators’ hands out of their pockets. “It’s like the gangsters!,” one girl told *Time* magazine.

Images of the four main characters appeared all over Geneva during the run-up to the summit and captured the interest of Swiss children. Here, Mr and Mrs Miller answer questions about the men pictured. Mr Miller worked as a caretaker at the villa where President Eisenhower stayed during the conference.

The Canton of Geneva and the Swiss government collaborated in organising an elaborate security operation. While innovative at the time, such measures have now become standard procedure for major summits in Switzerland.

The equipment may have changed, but not the job. Journalists and cameramen capture the arrival of Eisenhower and Dulles at Geneva-Cointrin airport.

Dwight D. Eisenhower served as the 34th President of the United States from 1953 to 1961. A career military officer, he had not previously held any political office. It was the first visit by an American president to Switzerland.

Also part of the proceedings: the newly crowned “Miss Geneva Summit”.