Cabinet memorandum by the Foreign Secretary, E. Bevin, regarding the Berlin elections, dated 11 November 1948

SECRET

CABINET

GERMANY: BERLIN ELECTIONS

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs

I am circulating to my colleagues, as an annex to this memorandum, a paper on the subject of the Berlin municipal elections due to be held on 5th December.

As the paper shows, the Soviet authorities have made their approval of these elections dependent on the fulfillment of a number of unacceptable conditions. The non-Communist parties are, however, determined to hold these elections in spite of the Soviet attitude. If the Berlin authorities are not to be forbidden to hold the elections, the risk has to be taken that elections in the Western sectors only will bring about the final division of the administration in Berlin and an exacerbation of relations with the Soviet Government.

I am, however, of opinion that we must face this risk in the conviction that it is the duty of the Western Allies to give all possible support to the non-Communist parties, and in particular to the Social Democrat party, who are playing a leading part in Berlin in the struggle to maintain the freedom and independence of the city and its inhabitants.

ANNEX

Berlin Elections

1. Under the Provisional Constitution of Berlin dated July, 1946[[1]](#footnote-1), the City Assembly and Magistrat were elected for a period of two years, and were to remain in office until a new election had been held. The two-year term of office of the Assembly and Magistrat came to an end on 20th October.

2. The City Assembly originally decided to hold elections on 24th October, but as a result of the delays in handling the election arrangements and Russian obstruction in the Soviet sector of Berlin, the date was postponed until 5th December.

3. The Soviet authorities and the Socialist Unity Party (Communists) have from the outset been hostile to the proposal to hold elections in Berlin. Their campaign against the Berlin City authorities has been based on the contention that these are no longer representative of the wishes of the people. Free elections would undoubtedly result in a resounding victory for the non-Communist parties and would thus destroy the basis of the Russian case against the Berlin City authorities. The unpopularity of the Russians and of their communist tools in Berlin would be made manifest throughout Germany and to the world at large. The Russians, however, have not openly rejected the proposal to hold elections. General Kotikov, the Soviet Commandant in Berlin, in his letter to the Lord Mayo, of 20th October, stated that elections could be held throughout the City on 5th December, providing certain conditions were carried out. An analysis of these conditions makes it clear, however, that they are so clearly unacceptable as to amount in fact to a refusal. For example: -

(a) Permission was demanded for the Free German Trade Union Organisation (F.D.G.B) to re-form in the Western sectors. We did not ban this organisation in the British sector, but recognised the Independent Trade Union Organisation which was formed by the non-Communist trade unionists in protest against the dictatorial methods of the Communist-dominated F.D.G.B. The T.U.C. fully approve of our policy on this matter. Agreement to this Soviet request would therefore bring into question our support of the Independent Trade Union Organisation. The F.D.G.B. has been banned in the United States sector.

(b) The demand was made that militarist and Fascist propaganda in the Press must stop and war-mongers must be struck off the electoral lists. Since the leading members of the non-Communist parties and the editors of almost all Western-licensed Berlin newspapers have appeared on a black-list produced by the Soviet-sponsored “Anti-war-mongering Committee”, it is clear that acceptance of this demand would mean the prior elimination of a large number of the opponents to Communists and would reduce the elections to a farce.

(c) It was demanded that the unity of the City Administration, and particularly of the police, must be restored after the latter has been purged of Fascist and militarist elements. The unity of the City’s Administration is already gravely endangered as a result of the obstruction and terrorisation by the Communists with Soviet approval of the Administration in the Soviet sector. As regards the police it became necessary for the Magistrat to suspend the Chief of Police when it was found that the latter obeyed the orders not of the Magistrat, but of the Soviet authorities only. The Chief of Police refused to accept his suspension and a division of authority arose between himself and his legally-appointed noting successor. The police in the Soviet sector has been ruthlessly purged of non-Communists and in particular all Social Democrats. The purge of Fascist and militarist elements in the police demanded by the Soviet authorities would therefore amount to the establishment of a Communist-dominated police force for the whole of Berlin. The events in Czechoslovakia last February show only too clearly the meaning of this demand.

4. The reaction of the leaders of all the non-Communist parties in Berlin to General Kotikov’s letter was immediate and unequivocal. Although they believed that it amounted to a virtual ban on the holding of elections in the Soviet sector, they re-affirmed their will to hold elections on 5th December.

5. When this question of elections first arose, my original feeling was that, in order to avoid any provocative or aggressive action in Berlin, we should either allow elections for the whole of Berlin or else arrange that the present City Council should carry on the caretaker Government. It soon became evident, however, that the Germans felt bound by their Constitution to hold these elections, even if this were only possible in the Western sectors, fearing that the present City Council, if it remained in office beyond its legal term, would be pronounced by the Communists to be unconstitutional and unrepresentative. In view of the determined and unanimous attitude of all the non-Communist parties, the British and United States authorities in Berlin have represented that it would be impolite to attempt to prevent these elections even if they were limited to the Western sectors only. It is true that the Soviet authorities are almost certain to declare the new City Council unconstitutional, and will probably set up a Communist-dominated Council of their own nomination in their own sector. This will mean the final division of the City Administration. It may cause incidents and it will certainly aggravate relations between the Russians and the Western Allies at a time when we are most anxious to reach a settlement over the problem of Berlin.

6. If by forbidding the holding of elections I were able to prevent this split in the Berlin Administration and to heal the breach between the Communist and non-Communist parties, I would be in favour of taking this step. All the evidence in my possession shows, however, that the Soviet authorities are determined to undermine and destroy the authority of the popularly-elected legal Administration and to replace it by one of their own nomination. They will, I fear, persist in this aim whether elections are held or not.

7. As I have said before, I have also to consider the effect that the prohibition of these elections would have on the non-Communist population who represent, I believe, ninety per cent of the inhabitants, and who up to now have shown considerable courage and skill in dealing with the present difficulties. They would, I have no doubt, interpret this step as a sign of weakness, and their resentment and loss of morale would be very great. If we lose the confidence and support of the Berlin population, which we now enjoy, our presence in Berlin will become intolerable and also pointless.

8. In these circumstances I have come to the conclusion that to allow these elections to be held in accordance with normal democratic procedure and with the arrangements already made by the outgoing City Council of Berlin is a vital part of our case for maintaining our position in Berlin. In spite of the risk of trouble being caused, I do not think we should be justified to interfering to prevent the holding of these legally authorised elections. Moreover, if we give way to Soviet pressure on this issue we shall not only betray the non-Communist population of Berlin who look to us for support, but we shall weaken our whole position in the city and in any future negotiations with the Russians over the question of Berlin.

9. I therefore ask my colleagues to agree that the elections which it is planned to hold in Berlin on 5th December should not be stopped.

10. If my colleagues concur in this policy, I think that full publicity on the lines of this paper should be given to the whole question of these elections and to the reasons why the conditions imposed by the Russians are not acceptable, not that our people and the world at large be made aware of the issues at stake.

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1. A provisional constitution had been approved by the four occupying powers prior to the elections in the fall of 1946. Article 36 of this constitution stipulated that the enactment of all legislative decisions, as well as the appointment of senior officials had to be approved unanimously by all four occupying powers. See D.M. Giangreco and Robert E. Griffin, *Airbridge to Berlin - The Berlin Crisis of 1948, its Origins and Aftermath* (Presidio: Indian, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)