Cabinet memorandum by the Foreign Secretary, E. Bevin, reviewing Soviet Policy, dated 5 January 1948

TOP SECRET

CABINET

REVIEW OF SOVIET POLICY

Introduction

The breakdown of the Council of Foreign Ministers and other recent events seem to point to the increasing difficulty of reaching any agreement with the U.S.S.R. on political topics. It therefore seems worthwhile to review the situation generally and to see what conclusions can be drawn about Soviet policy.

Conclusions

2. From the following review of Soviet and Communist activities in recent months, certain deductions may be drawn regarding Soviet policy: -

(a) The present policy of the Soviet Government is based on the assumption that the Marshall Plan will and must fail and that, as preached by Marx, the Capitalist Powers will quarrel among themselves and then power will disintegrate as a result of slumps and depressions. If these assumptions are proved by events to be untrue the Soviet Government might radically change its policy, but not till then. As things are at present they have proclaimed their idea of two worlds in conflict and are opposed to reconstruction in the West on the only terms on which it seems to be practicable.

(b) The Soviet Government have ruthlessly consolidated their position within their orbit and in Eastern Europe. They have made a mockery of their many pledges about free elections, &c., in the Yalta and Potsdam Agreements. Throughout Eastern Europe, the same pattern of a Soviet and Communist-dominated political and economic structure is becoming increasingly obvious. Even Czechoslovakia is now threatened[[1]](#footnote-1). All opposition organisations within the Soviet orbit have been or are being liquidated. Contact with foreigners is everywhere being reduced to a minimum. Western, and particularly British and American, interests and influence are everywhere being eliminated. The former satellites of Germany are, in fact, now the satellites of the Soviet Union. Even in our trade relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe we must remember that such trade will always be subject to Soviet and Communist political requirements and therefore liable to sudden interruptions. It may even be used as a means of bringing political pressure to bear against us.

(c) Soviet accusations against us at the Council of Foreign Ministers as to our action in Germany seem designed to cover up what they are themselves doing in their zone, while trying to saddle us with responsibility in the eyes of the German people for the partition of Germany.

(d) They have given up hope of the Communist parties achieving power in France and Italy by legal means. For the moment the Communists somewhat premature attempt at direct action in France has failed, though they have inflicted grave economic injury on the country.[[2]](#footnote-2) We must expect them to take some action in Italy, possibly a coup for which arms and specialists are believed to be held in readiness in Yugoslavia, possibly a wave of continuing industrial unrest on such a scale as to make Marshall aid or any attempt at reconstruction fruitless. We must expect a further attempt to get our troops out of Trieste, where they are an obvious impediment to Soviet policy.

(e) As the Soviet Government have decided to do their best to prevent the success of the Marshall Plan in France and Italy, we must now expect them to do the same in Western Germany. But so far as Western Germany is concerned the methods to be used and their timing are still not clear. This applies also to the policy which they are likely to pursue in Eastern Germany.

(f) A further Communist effort seems to be imminent in Greece with the establishment of the so-called Democratic Greek Government[[3]](#footnote-3) and an attempt to detach large parts of Northern Greece is foreshadowed. This would bring Russian influence down the Aegean, and Turkey would not long remain independent.

(g) The undermining of British and American influence is the keystone of Soviet policy in the Middle East, as elsewhere. By supporting partition in Palestine the Soviets may well hope to encourage disorder in the Middle East. Their attitude would not prevent them later on from supporting the Arabs if it suited their general policy.

(h) There are signs that the Soviets may shortly stir up trouble afresh in Persia, particularly in Azerbaijan.

(i) If the Soviets secured control of France and French North Africa, of Italy, and of Greece, particularly if they could undermine our position in the Middle East, they would effectively dominate the Mediterranean and could (if they wished) deprive us of access to extensive markets and raw materials, especially oil, without which our economic recovery would be difficult or impossible and the strategic position both of ourselves and of the United States gravely jeopardised.

(j) We must beware of the far-reaching effects of colonial propaganda even where it is disguised as support for nationalist aspirations.

(k) It seems that we must expect the U.S.S.R. to pursue their forward policy in Sinkiang[[4]](#footnote-4), Manchuria and Korea. There is a distinct danger that the Communists may succeed in dominating the whole of China, which would present a considerable threat to the territories of South-East Asia.

(l) If the U.S.S.R. could gain control of China, France and a few other countries for international purposes, it would shift, politically, economically and strategically, the whole basis of power both in the United Nations and in the world at large.

General Outline of Soviet Policy

3. The first objective of Soviet policy is probably to advance and to hasten their own reconstruction. At the same time they wish to overtake the material prosperity of the West and to draw out of the post-war confusion in the world a number of important advantages for themselves. I do not believe that the Soviet Government would consciously wish to risk a war for this purpose, particularly while the secret of the atom bomb is a monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon Powers. They probably consider that they can get what they want by “cold war” methods. In carrying these into effect they can rely, both in the Soviet orbit and beyond, on the unquestioning obedience of the agents whom they have trained in Russia for years past, and whom they place in positions of authority wherever practicable (e.g. Marshal Tito[[5]](#footnote-5), M. Modzelewski[[6]](#footnote-6), M. Thorez[[7]](#footnote-7)).

4. The Cominform Declaration published on 5th October proclaimed openly to the world with the greatest publicity the doctrine that the world was divided into two opposing camps which were in conflict. It called on Communists everywhere to close their ranks, not to underestimate their strength, and to intensify the struggle. It denounced the “Truman-Marshall Plan as a component part of the general policy of the United States and Great Britain for “strengthening imperialism and stifling democracy”[[8]](#footnote-8). It called upon the European Communist parties to head the resistance to these plans, to rally and unite their efforts on the basis of a common programme, for which new coordinating machinery was established. M. Zhdanov[[9]](#footnote-9) in his speech to the Cominform Conference, which was also given the widest publicity, said that “As for the U.S.S.R., it will make all efforts to see to it that the (Marshall Plan) is not realised”.

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Keywords: post-war USSR, post-war order, great power relations, Cominform

1. The influence of communist ministers in the government of Czechoslovakia at this time was very strong, with Klement Gottwald assuming the post of prime minister in 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This refers to the wave of strikes in France in November 1947, organised by the General Confederation of Labour, which was under the communist influence. As a result of these strikes a total of more than 23 million man hours were lost during the period from June to November. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Referring to the so-called ‘Provisional Democratic Government of Greece’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Xinjiang (East Turkestan), a region in north-west China. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tito, Josip Broz (1892 - 1980) - Yugoslav revolutionary, war-time resistance leader, statesman and Marshall. Prime Minister of Yugoslavia (1944 - 1963), General Secretary / President of the Yugoslav Communist Party / League of Communists of Yugoslavia (1938-1980), President of Yugoslavia (1953 - 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Modzelewski, Zygmunt (1900 - 1954) - Polish communist politician. Polish Foreign Minister (1947 - 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thorez, Maurice (1900 - 1964) - Leader of the French Communist Party, PCF (1930 - 1964), Vice Premier of France (1946 - 1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A quote from the communiqué of the meeting of representatives of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the Bulgarian Workers’ Party (communists), the Communist Party of Romania, the Hungarian Communist Party, the Polish Workers’ Party, the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), the French Communist Party, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the Communist Party of Italy on the international situation, 28 September 1947. The meeting established Cominform. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Zhdanov, Andrei (1896 - 1948) - Soviet politician. Full member of the Politburo (1939-1948), Chairman of the Soviet of the Union (1946 - 1947). After the war, considered to be successor-in-waiting to Stalin. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)