Telegram from the British Embassy in Prague to the Foreign Office, London, on the possibility of Soviet annexation of Czechoslovakia, dated 7 October 1948

SECRET

British Embassy, Prague

Sir,

In my despatch No.211 I have surmised that one of the topics under discussion at the recent meeting in the Crimea between Soviet leaders and President Gottwald was the contingency of the annexation, in some form or another, of Czechoslovakia to the Soviet Union. It is true that there are no facts available to confirm that the Soviet Government have any such plan in mind, or to indicate, if the topic were discussed, what decision was taken in regard to it. The contingency cannot, however, be ruled out and as it raises wider issues. I feel justified in examining them at the risk of appearing to build too much upon admittedly flimsy indications. The main point which I have in mind is to consider how the interests of His Majesty’s Government would be affected by such a development, and whether there are any steps which we could take to forestall it.

2. Annexation might take several forms, and even the Soviet Government might hesitate to proceed to an outright act of rape. It is believed by some Allied observers in Prague that the next major development in Soviet policy will be the formation of a Federation or Confederation of the Satellite States (less Yugoslavia) under Soviet leadership, in which foreign affairs, defence, transport, and posts and telegraphs would be pooled and under central direction. Although in such an event the Soviet Government and the Satellite States would doubtless try to make out that this form of “Eastern Union” was merely the counterpart of the “Western Union”, in practice it would mean the disappearance of the individual sovereignty of the Satellite States and would in fact amount to annexation in another form, since it would to the Soviet Government’s control of the vital services of the State and enable them to use Czechoslovak and other Satellite territory and resources at will. The Western Missions would no doubt find their position untenable, and sooner or later would have to be withdrawn. In what follows the term “annexation” is intended to cover any of the forms, direct or veiled, under which it might suit the Soviet Government effectively to take over the country.

6. If only for the reason that annexation of this country would appear to offer considerable advantages to the Soviet Union, it seems clearly to be in our interests if possible to frustrate it and to maintain the titular sovereignty of Czechoslovakia. It is by no means certain that there are any effective means open to us to frustrate such a move, since it must be assumed that the only method which might have some certainty of success must be excluded, namely a threat to the Soviet Union that if they proceeded to vary the sovereign status of Czechoslovakia by whatever form of annexation, veiled or direct, His Majesty’s Government would feel obliged to go to war. It is obvious that we should not wish to commit ourselves in advance to war with the Soviet Union or to enter into a commitment which would automatically bring about war at a moment of the Soviet Government’s choosing. Nor are we bound even by a contingent commitment, as we were in 1939, to go to the help of Czechoslovakia, where moreover the present government which would no doubt indignantly reject any attempt on our part to make Czechoslovakia a casus belli between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers.

7. I am therefore driven to the conclusion that there can be no question of His Majesty’s Government entering into a commitment entailing action against the Soviet Union in the event of the annexation of Czechoslovakia. There may none the less be methods open to us which, while not committing His Majesty’s Government to any such course in advance, might raise sufficiently serious doubts as to our intentions in the mind of the Soviet leaders as to make them hesitate to embark on the step. This could perhaps be done by the use of propaganda, utilising all the resources of the B.B.C., the British press and perhaps also whispers; in other words through a political warfare campaign on the war-time model. The method would be to ventilate the contingency of the annexation of Czechoslovakia through a series of inspired articles, press messages and rumours, and thereafter to indicate the probable reaction of the Western Powers. I am not in a position to judge whether the contingency of the annexation of other Satellite States should also be brought within the scope of such a political warfare campaign.

8. I venture finally to recommend, for your consideration, that, in the event of His Majesty’s Government’s embarking on a “grand remonstrance” with the Soviet Government, touching on all the issues which divide us, Czechoslovakia, both as regards what she has suffered and what she may still be called on to suffer at Russian hands, should not be forgotten.

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