A telegram sent by the USSR ambassador to Britain, I.M. Maisky, to the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, dated 24 April 1943.

I handed Stalin’s letter (dated 21 April[[1]](#footnote-1)) to Churchill in the evening of 23 April. As it was Easter, Churchill was not in the city. Given the importance of the issue, I decided not to send a message through the Prime Minister’s office, but to personally go where Churchill was staying (at his own estate, about 50 kilometres south of London). Churchill had with him his aide, Minister of Information, Bracken.[[2]](#footnote-2) Comrade Stalin’s letter aroused great concern in Churchill. He immediately divulged the letter’s contents to Eden on the phone, who also became agitated. At the moment I arrived, Churchill was actually about to send a message to Comrade Stalin regarding the very same Polish question. In this letter, Churchill spoke of how the British government is concerned about the deterioration of Polish-Soviet relations and how the Germans have used this deterioration for their own interests. In particular, with the help of such "stories" as the killing of Polish officers near Smolensk, Polish troops stationed in Syria and Palestine have become greatly agitated, as their families are detained in the USSR, and that in order to mitigate Polish-Soviet tension, as well as to strengthen the combat capability of the Polish troops in the Middle East, it would be very desirable for the Soviet government to consent to the evacuation of the just-mentioned families from the USSR, as well as about 40 thousand fit-for-combat Poles who are still in the Soviet Union.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, after reading Comrade Stalin’s letter, Churchill shelved his already well-prepared message and declared that he would now send a new one in response to Comrade Stalin’s letter. Then followed a long discussion, during which Churchill and Bracken primarily spoke. The gist of Churchill's statements can be framed as such:

1. Churchill considers it necessary at all costs to prevent the further aggravation of Polish-Soviet relations, as it would only benefit the Germans. On the contrary, Polish-Soviet relations need to be repaired. The first prerequisite for this is to keep under wraps as to what happened. Churchill requested of me that until further (?)[Sic], the Soviet government should not publish anything about its rift with the Polish government. Bracken will take care that the English press also keeps silent about this.

2. Churchill does not believe that there is any agreement between the Polish government and Hitler. The Polish government is simply caught in a trap set up by the Germans. And they got caught in it because the Poles are generally "bad politicians", but now that they are in exile they have completely "lost their heads". Churchill believes it to be damaging and absurd for the International Red Cross to undertake an "investigation" on German-occupied territory of the murder of Polish officers.[[4]](#footnote-4) Right there and then and in front of me, he gave Bracken directives to "kill" this venture through the radio and other means.

3. Churchill is not much concerned that the story of Polish officers and the position taken by the Polish government in this regard will have serious impact on public opinion in England. Here, the British government is strong enough and has the authority to counteract the poison of German propaganda. Churchill, however, fears that the situation in the US will be much more complex: Roosevelt’s position there is very delicate, since there are a lot of Poles in the country, and they have 6 daily newspapers and produce a large number of voters. Besides, there are 33 million Catholics in the US, who can easily support the Poles. All of this is especially [important] in connection with the upcoming presidential elections, which can strongly bind Roosevelt’s hands and lead to a deterioration of relations between the US and the USSR.

4. Churchill believes that, at present, Sikorski’s position[[5]](#footnote-5) is extremely difficult, as the Polish "extremists" (of whom there are many in England and also includes among them the Polish ambassador to Washington[[6]](#footnote-6)) are systematically attacking him for his "weakness", which he has supposedly demonstrated, in regards to the USSR. What they perceive as the main manifestation of this "weakness" is the fact that Sikorski was unable to get permission for the families of Polish soldiers in the Middle East to leave the USSR. Churchill fears that if the current aggravation in the Polish-Soviet relations is not swiftly quashed, Sikorski will be forced to resign, and those very same extremists who are at present opposing Sikorski will then become part of the Polish government.

5. Churchill recognizes the need to "subdue" the Poles, and to prevent them from further poisoning relations between the Allies, in particular between the USSR and Britain. In this spirit, he gave Bracken directives regarding the press and would like to talk to Eden on the very same subject.

6. Churchill thinks that the Soviet government could greatly contribute to the easing of tensions and eliminate harmful effects of the German lies about the murdered officers, if it agreed to allow the evacuation of families of overseas Polish soldiers, as well as the above-mentioned 40 thousand fit-for-combat Poles. Such an act, in Churchill’s opinion, would give America a very favourable impression of the USSR. In this case, the British government’s propaganda apparatus in the United States (as well as in England) would make every effort to make the most of this fact in the interests of the Soviet Union and its allies.

7. Churchill said that he certainly does not believe the German lies about the murdered Polish officers. However, in conversation on a few occasions I felt that in his heart he had some "mental reservation" in this regard.[[7]](#footnote-7) For example, one day, off the cuff, he said: "Even if the Germans’ allegations proved to be true, it would not in any way change my relationship to you, because you are a courageous nation and a great ally, and Stalin - a great warrior. I presently approach all the issues as a soldier who is primarily interested in the victory over the common enemy.” I, of course, attacked Churchill, and he immediately hastened to assure me that he has no doubts about the falsity of German propaganda. Nevertheless, I have the impression that Churchill does not have absolute confidence in our innocence. The reason is, apparently, Sikorski: a little earlier in the conversation Churchill mentioned that the other day a Polish general told him, that while in the USSR in December 1941 he asked the Soviet government about the whereabouts of several thousand Polish officers, but could not get a satisfactory answer .[[8]](#footnote-8)

8. Although it is not directly related to the Polish question, I want to note that, in the course of the conversation, Churchill said, among other things: "I hate Hitler. I want to destroy him. Yes, to physically destroy him. But not on the gallows, not against the wall - all these are forms of death, which may contribute to the creation of the Hitler legend. Indeed, in the past, how many truly great people have died in this way and later became poeticized progeny. I want Hitler to die on the electric chair as a criminal. Such a death cannot poeticize; a legend cannot be born from it."

MAISKY 24.IV.1943

[FPARF, f. 059, inv. 10, fold. 8, file 64, pp. 115–120]

Keywords: Poland

1. In this letter Stalin gave a harsh assessment of the Polish government’s actions, which, in response to the German announcement on 13 April of the discovery of Polish officers’ remains at Katyn, appealed to the International Red Cross on 17 April to conduct an independent investigation of the incident. Stalin informed Churchill that the Soviet government decided to sever relations with the Polish authorities. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bracken, Brendan (1901 – 1958) – British statesman and politician, Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Prime Minister (1940 – 1941), Minister of Information (1941 – 1945), First Lord of the Admiralty (1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These and previous questions were points of contention between the Soviets and the Poles. They were clearly evident, among other things, during Molotov and Sikorski’s conversation in London, in June 1942 (O.A. Rzheshevsky, *Stalin and Churchill*, pp. 329-332). Information briefings about the mood of Polish officers and soldiers in the Middle East - reported to Moscow by intelligence and other channels - constantly emphasized their anti-Soviet attitude. See: O. Orestov, Poles in Iran, October 26, 1942 // WUA Federation. F. 94. Op. 30. P. 75. D. 12. P. 47-53; Phytin - Manuilsky, June 26, 1944 // Russian archive: The Great Patriotic War. Vol. 14 (3-1). The USSR and Poland. M., 1994. P. 100-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Kremlin, however, hastened the publication of the notes about the suspension of relations with the Polish government. An indirect confirmation of this was the fact that the note was printed not in the national newspapers, as usual, but in the evening of 26 April, in the newspaper "Evening Moscow". [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sikorski, Władysław (1881 – 1943) – Polish statesman, Commander-in-chief of the Polish Armed Forces, Prime Minister of the Polish Government-in-Exile (1939 – 1943). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ciechanowski, Jan Maria Włodzimierz (1887 – 1973) – Polish diplomat, Polish Ambassador to USA (1941 – 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the course of 1943 even stronger "reservations" arose among members of other British agencies - the Office of Special Operations and the Foreign Office, where Cadogan and British Ambassador to the Polish government, D. O'Malley, advanced the idea of Soviet culpability in the events at Katyn. See: D. Dilks, *Churchill and Company: Allies and Rivals in War and Peace*. London, 2012. Ch. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sikorski indeed raised this questions with Stalin during their meeting in Moscow, on 3 December 1941. See: DWP. June 22, 1941 - January 1, 1942 T. XXIV. M., 2000, pp 466-467. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)