From the record of the meeting in the Parliamentary Office of the Prime Minister, C. Attlee, 5 November 1946[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. THE RUSSIAN SITUATION

MR. CHURCHILL, at the request of Mr. Attlee, opened the discussion. He emphasized that no Party question was involved in this meeting, and that he had no complaints to make about the rate of demobilization. He had, however, received certain confidential information, which might, or might not, agree with that in the possession of His Majesty’s Government, and he had therefore deemed it his duty to make it known to the Prime Minister.

Mr. Churchill then read out a telegram which he had dispatched to President Truman on 12th May, 1945[[2]](#footnote-2)

[…]

Continuing, he said that what he had foreseen in this telegram had now come to pass, but he repeated that no blame attached to the Government for having demobilized, as they had done. The Conservative Government would have done precisely the same – perhaps more so. Democracies must demobilise – despotisms had no need to do so[[3]](#footnote-3).

During his recent visit to Switzerland[[4]](#footnote-4) he had found that the Swiss were very frightened of Russian intentions, and that there was great tension in that country. He had been told that the Swiss plan was to abandon the plateaux and the civilian population, and to hold the fortified National Redoubt with about 600,000 men. The Swiss had said that the Germans had shrunk from attacking Switzerland, not only because of the diversion of strength that this would have involved, but also because it had been made clear to them that the St. Bernard and Gothard Tunnels would be blown up at the very first sign of German aggression.

Mr. Churchill then read the paper at Annex II. This had been given to him by a Swiss Staff Officer, with the consent of the Swiss High Command. He emphasised most earnestly that knowledge of the contents of this paper should be limited to the smallest circle.

Mr. Churchill also read a note which he had received from a British Officer who had recently returned from Romania in regard to Russian dispositions in that country.

[…]

THE PRIME MINISTER thanked Mr. Churchill for his information and said that he would have it examined in secrecy by the Chiefs of Staff. He explained that he had not felt able to answer the Question which had been posed by Mr. Churchill[[5]](#footnote-5) in the House of Commons in regard to the number of Russian troops in certain countries for two reasons. In the first place, if the estimate of our military advisers was correct, the Russians would become alarmed and tighten up their security measures. Secondly, it was impossible to translate our estimate of numbers into terms of Divisions: nor did we know how far these troops were on a war footing.

The Swiss figures seemed to be exaggerated. In Romania, for example, they estimated the Russian numbers at 750,000, whereas our estimate was 275,000. Our estimate of the total numbers in the countries mentioned by Mr. Churchill was 1 ½ million or, roughly, 99 Divisions.

It seemed to him that the Russian authorities had three reasons for keeping such large numbers outside Russia. In the first place, the men had seen a much higher standard of life than that which existed in their own country[[6]](#footnote-6) and there might be repercussion if too many of them returned home at once. Secondly, they were living in foreign countries: and, thirdly, it all helped on the war of nerves.

The Russians were undoubtedly playing “Power Politics”, but, in addition, they were trying to build up a glacis of countries under their influence – Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, etc. and thus keep any future war as far as possible from Russia.

The Swiss seemed to think that the Russian forces were keyed up for an attack to the West; whereas, in our view, they had no intention of resorting to war at the present time. There were reports that the internal situation in Russia was somewhat difficult and that their war industries were not working too well. The danger was that they might chance their arm too far.

The Swiss reference to an Allied plan of action was entirely fictitious. No plans of this character had been worked out. It was impossible for us to keep large forces on the Continent, having regard to the fact that we were tied up in so many areas – Greece, Palestine, Indonesia, etc. Nor were our difficulties confined to the provision of man power. These garrisons abroad involved a tremendous drain on our dollar resources, and it was our aim to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

MR. CHURCHILL intervened to say that, if he were in power, he would come out of Greece, Palestine and Indonesia forthwith.

Continuing, he said that in his view the deterrents to a Russian attack were twofold – first, their knowledge of the enormous latent strength of Great Britain and the United States of America; and, secondly, the Atom bomb. We ought to have about 50 of these bombs in Britain, and were entitled to them on the basis of our signed agreement with President Roosevelt[[7]](#footnote-7). If the American would not let us have them, we ought to make them ourselves. He added that he might say this in public.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the United States were being very difficult at the present time, and that our strategic position, with London stuck right out, was not a very happy one[[8]](#footnote-8).

MR. CHURCHILL asked whether it was true that the railways in Czechoslovakia were being broadened to the Russian gauge: and MR. EDEN asked whether we had any information about the Russian air forces in the countries west of Russia.

THE PRIME MINISTER said he would look into both these points.

MR. CHURCHILL thanked Mr. Attlee for having been so good to receive this deputation from the Opposition and repeated his anxiety lest the existence of Annex II might leak out.

[…]

TOP SECRET

ANNEX II

The Bulletin of the 30th July last drew attention to the important movements of Soviet troops which had been observed during the course of the months of May and June 1946.

The information which has reached us since then has enabled us to assess the new dispositions of the Russian forces in Europe. This Bulletin takes into account changes up to the end of July 1946.

It is important to emphasise that this Bulletin does not claim to be exact in all details but gives the general magnitude and allocation of the forces. However, we are convinced that no foreign information service is in possession of any more accurate information than ourselves.

The question of an invasion of Western Europe is often being discussed. In certain French, British and American circles one even talks of possible action in the direction of the Pas de Calais and Le Havre[[9]](#footnote-9). That is to be explained by the fact that the Russians continue to be in a position to engage in this possible theatre of operations an immediate strategic force consisting of 60 divisions supported by 20 Armoured Brigades. These are stationed in Germany under the orders of General Sokolovski[[10]](#footnote-10).

This operation could be covered on its southern flank by the use of the forces stationed in Austria and Hungary. These consists of 25 Divisions supported by 9 Armoured Brigades under the command of Marshal Koniev. This army could operate on the axis Munich – Stuttgart, and equally well in the direction of the Swiss Plateau.

In the second echelon there are the troops of Marshal Rokossovski, stationed in Poland. These comprise 23 Divisions and 9 Armoured Brigades. In addition, there are, if needed, the troops in the Baltic States – Leningrad Sector, comprising 25 Divisions and 12 Armoured Brigades.

This makes a total of about 130 Divisions and 50 Armoured Brigades. This is certainly more than is necessary to overcome the resistance of the 25 Allied Divisions of occupation in Germany, of which 9 to 10 American Divisions are nothing but a police force.

It is true that recent information, emanating from superior British and American Officers, indicates that measures are being taken to resist possible Soviet ambitions. The Anglo-American military staffs appear to have in mind the employment of powerful air forces which undertake the following operations:

During the first phase, lasting one day:

Destruction of bridges, railway stations, railway tracks, nodal points on the main lines of communication in a Zone A, comprising the territory between the Elbe – Danube and the Vistula.

In a second phase, lasting three days:

Air effort would be concentrated on Poland (Zone B) whilst continuing tactical operations in Zone A. It seems that it is intended to employ for these purposes the following forces:

400 Mosquitos[[11]](#footnote-11) (for which, in addition to stocks of other bombs, there would be available 200 atomic bombs)

2,000 Medium bombers

2,000 Heavy bombers

1,200 Fighter planes, armed with rockets. (It is known that the effectiveness of these fighters is very great)

The available air reserves for these first four days of fighting would include:

120 Mosquitos

500 Medium bombers

500 heavy bombers

1,000 fighters armed with rockets.

The American and British staffs reckon that this counter-action should have the effect of paralyzing the points of departure of the Soviet offensive for a period of 30 to 45 days. This delay would, in their judgment, suffice to allow forces to be brought up which would be capable of carrying out a defensive resistance. Later, it would be their intention to concentrate sufficient troops to beat back the Russian forces.

We are not in a position to express any judgment upon the Anglo-American plans. What would be of greater interest would be to know whether the Anglo-American staffs are in a position to put the plan into execution. For it would seem that the Americans who would have to provide the greater part of the resources during the initial phase, will not be ready to engage air forces on this scale before June 1947. These remains also the problem of obtaining suitable airfields in Europe and equipping them, which would entail a considerable effort between now and next summer.

Thus, an examination of the European theatre of operations alone leads us to the conclusion that the Russians still retain their relative superiority and that a conquest of Western Europe by the Soviet must be considered as a practical possibility, particularly in the next ten months.

The European front is not the only one to be considered. The theatres of operation in the Middle East and Far East also deserve attention[[12]](#footnote-12).

[TNA, PREM 8/342]

Keywords: post-war USSR

1. Apart from Attlee, the meeting was attended by the First Lord of the Admiralty A. Alexander, but also Churchill as the leader of the opposition and former prominent members of his War Cabinet: Eden, the former Secretary of State for the Colonies, O. Stanley and Lieutenant-General Ismay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This was his message to Truman numbered №44 in which, among other things, he posed the question: ‘What will be the position in a year or two, when the British and American armies have melted and the French has not yet been formed on any major scale, when we may have a handful of divisions mostly French, and when Russia may choose to keep two or three hundred in active service?’ (Defending the West. p. 75). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Churchill underestimated the socio-economic factors that determined the slow pace of Soviet demobilisation; Soviet authorities found it difficult to simply release officers and men from the armed forces when industry and agriculture were in a state of ruin. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Churchill visited Switzerland in September 1946. The speech he gave at the University of Zurich on 19 September has become one of the most famous episodes from the trip. In it, he called for the strengthening of European integration, the creation of a ‘United States of Europe’, and Franco-German reconciliation. It is accessible at: <http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/astonish.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The question was posed by Churchill during a session in the Commons on 23 October: ‘Is it or is it not true that there are today more than 200 Soviet divisions on a war footing in the occupied territories of Europe from the Baltic to Vienna, and from Vienna to the Black Sea?’ (Hansard. Parliamentary Debates. 5th Series. Vol. 427. Col. 1690. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Attlee’s thinking here resonates with one of the theses put forward in an earlier report of the Joint Intelligence Committee. See the report of 1 March 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Churchill appears to have in mind the note entitled Aide-memoire of Conversation between the President and the Prime Minister at Hyde Park, dated 18 September 1944, about the continuation of atomic cooperation between Great Britain and the USA after the war (cited in: Putꞌ k Velikoi Pobede. S. 636–637). There is no mention in it of 50 atomic bombs for Great Britain, however. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Attlee expressed a similar idea in an earlier memorandum, ‘Foreign Policy and the Flying Bomb’ dated 26 July 1944. In it, he acknowledged that ‘as a small island with its most vulnerable point, a city of 8 million inhabitants, close to the Continent, we ought to have organized the defense of Europe with a view to its [London’s] protection’. In this sense, Attlee was commenting favourably on some Soviet actions as well: ‘Stalin is now engaged in Finland and in the Baltic States in doing for Leningrad what we must do for London’ (W.P. (44) 414, Memo by Attlee, 26/07/1944 // TNA, CAB 66/53). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A similar scenario was also touched upon in a meeting between Attlee and the Chiefs of Staff on 12 July. In it, the Prime Minister acknowledged that between Russia and Great Britain there is arranged only a series of ‘ill-prepared states]’, he asked ‘whether it was right to assume, therefore, that Russian forces, in the event of a war, would be in possession of the coasts immediately threatening the United Kingdom.’ The military planners, with some reservations, stated that, at that moment defending Western Europe was a practical impossibility. See: Lewis J. Op. cit. p. 273–274. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sokolovskii, Vasilii Danilovich (1897 – 1968) – Soviet military leader. Marshal of the Soviet Union, during the war he was Chief of Staff on a number of fronts, Commander-in-Chief of the Group of Soviet Occupation Forces in Germany and Supreme Commander of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (1946 – 1949), First Deputy Minister of War СССР (1949 – 1952; before 1950 – First Deputy Minister of the Armed Forces of the USSR), Head of the General Staff, First Deputy Minister of Defence of the USSR (1952 – 1960; before 1953 – First Deputy Minister of War). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. British multi-role combat aircraft. Produced in 1940–1950. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Attlee reacted to the information of the Swiss General Staff with sufficient seriousness to send it for examination by the services chiefs of the British armed forces. See the report dated 23 November 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)