Record of a conversation between Comrade I.V. Stalin and E. Bevin, Foreign Secretary, 24 March 1947

Top secret

Attendants: V.M. Molotov, Zarubin, Peterson, Dixon, P. Smith.

[…]

Bevin says that, the Supreme Soviet delegation is now in Yorkshire […]

Comrade Stalin remarks that the delegation members are rather happy with the way they are received in Britain.

Bevin expresses his regret that he is not in Britain and cannot personally welcome the delegation.

Comrade Stalin remarks that Bevin may still have time to do this.

Bevin says that this will depend on when it will be possible to come to an agreement at the Council of Foreign Ministers.

Comrade Molotov says that he has decided to concede to Bevin on every issue.

Bevin replies that in any case, he never tries to mislead the Soviet government and wants to come to an agreement. Bevin asks when it will be possible to finish the work in Moscow.

Comrade Molotov answers that it may be during March.

Bevin expresses hope that it will be so. However, there are some rather simple issues demanding solution, such as the issue on reparations.

Comrade Stalin remarks that the Soviet Union does not demand much.

Bevin replies that it depends on meaning of "not much". Bevin does not object to reparation payment if it’s done at the expense of Germany, but not at the expense of Great Britain.

Comrade Stalin says that reparations should of course be paid at the expense of Germany, and that the Soviet government would not object to Great Britain receiving reparations from Germany on par with the Soviet Union. Germany is able to increase the payment of reparations. These reparations constitute no more than 1/10 of what Germany had spent on the War.

Bevin expresses concern about the possible rebuilding of Germany’s military capacity.

Comrade Stalin replies that we should not try to recreate the German military potential.

Bevin says that, in his opinion, after the last World War, the Allies themselves recreated Germany’s military potential.

Comrade Stalin pointed out that when the First World War came to an end, no Ally set foot on German territory. But now the situation is completely different.

Bevin asks what should be the nature of the new Germany created by the Allies.

Comrade Stalin replies that it should be a peaceful Germany, one having the civil industry and agriculture to support itself, as well as producing a minimum amount of metal, coal, chemical products, etc. for export. It should not be a “Greater Germany”.

Bevin asks for Comrade Stalin’s opinion on the question of population density in western Germany, and expresses concern over the fact that the German-Polish border - advanced west to the Neisse River, as was done after the Potsdam - creates a precarious situation due to the extremely high population density[[1]](#footnote-1).

Comrade Stalin replied that many Germans were killed in the War and the population of Germany was considerably reduced. The Germans will be able to live, if they have their own industry. In any case, the population density in Belgium is higher than in Germany, and Germany itself is to blame for what happened.

Bevin expresses concern about the emergence of an irredentist movement if the Polish border keeps being pushed so far to the west.

Comrade Stalin remarked that, an irredentist movement among Germans would be unlikely to emerge. Of course, the Germans will be looking to regain their old land and capture new ones. But for them this will not come to pass.

Bevin asks whether it will be possible to establish economic unity in Germany.

Comrade Stalin answers that, it would be good to come to an agreement on economic unity. The Soviet government is seeking ways to come to an agreement on this issue.

Bevin says that it would be good to establish economic unity with freedom of movement across all of Germany, proper political organisation of the country and to balance the economy so that the Allies could return what was spent.

Comrade Stalin answers that, this is what the Soviet government is striving towards.

Bevin says that during I.V. Stalin's meetings with Churchill and Roosevelt in Tehran and Yalta it was suggested to divide Germany, though representatives of the Labour Party who at that time were members of the coalition government, were always against such a decision. In Potsdam, the Soviet delegation modified its position and raised the issue of Germany’s political unity. The British government is concerned that excessive political centralisation of Germany may threaten common security.

Comrade Stalin says that, the project submitted by V.M. Molotov for consideration of the Council of Foreign Ministers does not in principle contradict what Bevin is talking about. This project provides centralisation of power and decentralisation of government. Such a situation existed before Hitler's coming to power and was stated in the Weimar Constitution. Hitler seized power only after the cancellation of the Weimar Constitution. It would be possible to recover this centralisation of power and decentralisation of government. It is necessary to object to the restoration of some articles of the Weimar Constitution. For example, one of the articles of this constitution gives almost absolute power to the president, and this article gave Hindenburg a chance to make a revolution. This article should definitely be excluded. However, one can take from the Weimar Constitution the position that there is decentralisation when there are Landtags, to grant rights to the Lands, to establish two chambers of the central government without the military and navy departments. All this should be controlled by the Allies. What is dangerous about this? Comrade Stalin does not see any danger in this. In any case, we want the government in Germany to be less centralized than, for example, in Japan or Italy nowadays[[2]](#footnote-2).

Bevin remarks that, there’s no big difference between his and Molotov’s project and he believes it’s possible to come to an agreement on this issue.

Comrade Stalin answers that, he too believes it’s possible to come to an agreement.

Bevin says that in Potsdam and here, in Moscow, during the Council of Foreign Ministers session, the Soviet delegation brought up the question of establishing a special form of government in the Ruhr[[3]](#footnote-3). The French are also promoting this actively. According to the British government, the German industry in all the occupied zones should be under the same kind of control. The Ruhr and all of Germany should both be viewed from the same perspective. Bevin believes that in Britain there will opposition against the Ruhr being treated differently from other German regions, or for it to be separated, or for it to have a special form of governance. The British government is ready to subordinate the Ruhr to the Control Council provided that this control would deal with industry in all the zones, and not just with Ruhr’s industry. Bevin reflected a lot over this issue and would like to formulate his thoughts as follows: if an agreement is achieved on economic unity and on the creation of central administration, then the British authorities will agree to the Ruhr’s production and distribution of goods being subject to this central administration under the same conditions as the other regions in Germany. Then the Soviet authorities would know about everything that is happening in the British zone, and the British authorities would know everything that is happening in the Soviet zone. The central administration would be controlled by the Allies.

Comrade Stalin answers that this issue should be discussed. Bevin is probably right, but Comrade Stalin cannot make a final statement on it now, as it is a new approach to the issue. In Potsdam the discussion was only about establishing special control over the Ruhr. In any case, the Soviet government does not want to do anything with Ruhr that could be to the detriment of Britain., that’s for sure.

Bevin says that, the French insist on special control being established in the Ruhr. This was also mentioned by I.V. Stalin, as if it happened on the last evening of the Potsdam conference. At that time Bevin was just appointed as Foreign Secretary and thus kept his opinion to himself. Afterwards, he thought over this issue a lot, and to him it now seems possible to come to an agreement.

Comrade Stalin answers that he also thinks that it is possible to come to an agreement. But this issue should be further thought over.

Bevin remarks that he brought up this issue so that I.V. Stalin could consider it.

Bevin would like to know the Soviet government’s opinion concerning the four powers pact once suggested by Byrnes. The British government thought a lot over this issue and considers the conclusion of such a pact to be useful, so that all four powers are responsible for the Germany’s future. The British government favours such an approach to the German issue. It will create a basis for mutual work concerning Germany.

Comrade Stalin says that, Soviet representatives have made some critical remarks concerning this project. Byrnes seems to have agreed to take these remarks into consideration. These were concerned with democratisation, reparations and the terms of agreement. If these critical remarks are taken into account, the Soviet government will not object to such an agreement in principle. It will be necessary to make some amendments to Byrnes’ proposal, as reparations are not taken into account and the mentions of democratisation and denazification are worded poorly. Perhaps other issues will arise in connection with this draft. However, it would be good to have such an agreement.

Bevin says that the British ambassador in Moscow talked with Vyshinsky about modifying the British-Soviet agreement on the Council[[4]](#footnote-4). The British government is ready to begin exchanging opinions on this issue and to renew the agreement in accordance with the correspondence between Bevin and I.V. Stalin.

Comrade Stalin says that, this is very good, as the Soviet government wishes this as well.

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Bevin says that, at the last meeting with I.V. Stalin he raised the issue of Egypt. For a long time, the British government carried on negotiations with the government of Egypt and tried to conclude a new agreement. Bevin has been entrusted to say that the Government of Great Britain is against the unilateral denouncement of the agreement, and until the conclusion of a new agreement, it will adhere to the 1936 agreement. Egypt is and will be in Britain’s sphere of interest, until the United Nations can establish complete control over all the corresponding issues. The matter of fact is that a line of communication is very important to the British, and they, therefore, intend to keep in force the 1936 Agreement[[5]](#footnote-5). Great Britain twice defended the Allies’ interests in Egypt. It is a rather a vulnerable region from a military perspective. He, Bevin wants to emphasise that British actions in this area are purely defensive in nature, and to dispel any impression that these measures are directed against any of the Allies.

Comrade Stalin says that, he fully understands this. Comrade Stalin already said to Ambassador Peterson that had Egypt not been under Britain’s influence, the Egyptian government would support Germany. The Soviet Union has no intention of interfering with British policy in Egypt.

Bevin says that, during the previous conversation with I.V. Stalin he touched upon the issue of Persia and, in particular, the issue of Soviet concessions in the north of Persia, in Azerbaijan. On the basis of some newspaper messages, one could draw the conclusion that the Government of Great Britain interferes with this issue. Bevin would like to assure I.V. Stalin that the British government believes that its interests are focused in the south of Iran, and, as he had already had the opportunity to specify to Zarubin, Britain is not going to interfere in the issue of Soviet concessions in northern Iran just as it’s not going to interfere in Iran’s internal affairs.

Comrade Stalin thanks Bevin for this statement.

Bevin apologises that he is raising so many issues during the conversation and reminds that during the previous meeting with I.V. Stalin Bevin brought up the issue of India. The British government wants to give India independence. This is a very difficult question because of various contradictions and strife within India. Britain, of course, wants to maintain ties with India, which have existed for so many years. She also wants for India to be a centralized state. But the British government will not prevent the establishment of friendship between an independent India and the other Allies.

Comrade Stalin remarks that, the issue of India is a difficult one.

Bevin agrees, and points out that many dangers could arise, if not proceeded with caution.

Comrade Stalin says that the Soviet Union does not intend to interfere with the issue of India and wishes Great Britain success in their undertakings in India.

Bevin declares to proceed to the issue of trade. The British government would like to send its representatives to Moscow as soon as the Soviet Union is ready to negotiate with them. The British government in particular would like to purchase timber materials from the Soviet Union. In Britain, just like in the Soviet Union, many houses were destroyed due to military operations, and timber is required for improving the housing situation. The British government would like, in addition to Soviet Union orders for capital equipment being placed in advance, to avoid a situation in which the British industry is overburdened and unable to quickly fulfil the Soviet Union’s orders. Bevin asks Generalissimo Stalin to promote the beginning of negotiations between the USSR Ministry of Foreign Trade representatives and the British representatives.

Comrade Stalin answers that the Soviet government does not object to the beginning of negotiations and is ready to start them. Comrade Stalin believes that the Soviet Union will have the goods necessary for Great Britain, and Great Britain will have the goods necessary for the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union could supply Great Britain timber and grain, as the drought in the Soviet Union will not last forever[[6]](#footnote-6). Comrade Stalin would like Bevin to answer one question, if he has the data. The Soviet Union needs narrow-gauge rails, steam locomotives and platforms. It is necessary to build a lot of such railways in the Soviet Union. It is a very simple order. The Soviet Union does not have enough metal, and it would be good if Great Britain could supply 30-40 thousand km of rails and rolling stock for narrow-gauge railways. If Britain could assist the Soviet Union with this thing, it could shortly receive timber from the Soviet Union.

Bevin answers that he will review this issue.

Comrade Stalin says that it is a light order.

If British representatives are ready, it will be possible to begin trade negotiations.

Bevin answers that, Wilson will be the British representative. During the previous conversations with I.V. Stalin, Bevin raised the issue establishing a mutual airline between the Soviet Union and Britain. He would like I.V. Stalin to consider the issue of direct air transport between Moscow and London or any other city in Britain.

Comrade Molotov says that, there have already been negotiations on this issue and the Soviet Union suggested arranging such air communication between London and Moscow, but with a joint airdrome in Berlin.

Bevin answers that, the big modern planes can fly between Moscow and London directly without a joint airdrome in Berlin.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Comrade Stalin specifies that, in that case it will be necessary to give this right to everyone.

Bevin says that, Great Britain now enters into agreements concerning the airline with all the countries, and it would especially like to have such airlines with its Allies, including the USSR. British people like visiting Moscow very much, and it is necessary to encourage it.

Comrade Stalin remarks that, this issue should be discussed in more detail and, perhaps, something will come out of it.

Bevin says that he would like to touch upon the exchange of students and teachers between Britain and the Soviet Union. It is necessary to improve teaching of Russian language in British schools and of English language in the Soviet Union. It would be very useful develop mutual understanding between the two countries. Bevin already wrote about this to V.M. Molotov and hopes for a positive decision on this issue.

Comrade Stalin remarks that, English language has already been widely taught in the Soviet Union for a long time. Comrade Stalin does not see obstacles for a positive resolution of this issue, since such a decision is of mutual interest for both countries.

Bevin has expressed a desire for this issue to be further discussed in more detail. He apologises for taking so much time, but Attlee asked to raise one more question during the conversation, namely, the question of Soviet citizens - wives of British citizens. Bevin knows about the adoption of a new law prohibiting Soviet citizens marrying foreigners. But in the Soviet Union there are still several women who got married before this law was issued, who want to join their husbands who are in Britain. In view of the new law, permission to leave the Soviet Union would not create a precedent for the future.

Comrade Molotov points out that, it would not be good to issue such a permit on the occasion when a new law has been issued. Bevin specifies that the law should not have a retroactive effect.

Comrade Stalin says that, it’s an old issue, and that for raising it he was twice criticised by the Supreme Soviet Presidium. They are very negative about this issue.

Bevin joked that, probably, it is necessary to turn these wives into diplomats. He’d like to ask that the Soviet government consider this issue once again, as it’s only about fifteen women.

Comrade Molotov remarks that, the Soviet Union’s population fell, and, perhaps, they do not want Soviet citizens to leave the Soviet Union, as it will lead to a decline in the population.

Bevin specifies that it is the issue of only fifteen women.

Comrade Molotov says that, it will set a bad example.

Comrade Stalin remarks that, he does expect any outcome from this.

[…]

Bevin says that, he has finished his list of questions and asks whether I.V. Stalin has any questions.

Comrade Stalin asks whether in Britain there is really a serious coal crisis or it’s just the press exaggeration.

Bevin answers that, the situation really is serious. There are two reasons. First, during the War Great Britain exported a considerable amount of electrical equipment to the Allies and did not repair its own equipment. After the War ended, the consumption of electricity increased by 68%, but there was no new equipment. The second reason is that during the period between the Wars mines were neglected and miners worked in extremely harsh conditions. British workers did not want their sons to take up hard work in the mines. When Bevin became the Minister of Labour in Churchill's office in 1940, he discovered that the salary of miners is in the 84th place and that thus miners are worse off than other workers. Bevin changed this situation and made miners the top priority. But young people, coming back from the War, remember the old state of affairs and do not want to take up work in the mines. Besides this, it is necessary to upgrade equipment in the mining industry. Ever since the Labour government came to power, they did not have the time to significantly improve this situation. It will take another two years to overcome all difficulties.

Comrade Stalin remarks that, there was a similar situation in the Soviet Union around ten years ago, but at present, miners are getting big wages, even bigger than skilled metalworkers.

Bevin adds that, the situation was complicated by a big snowfall[[8]](#footnote-8). In Moscow they seem be very fond of snow, but in Britain it caused a great disaster. Besides everything mentioned, in the past Great Britain counterbalanced its economy by external capital investments. Now these capital investments abroad have disappeared, and British people need to counterbalance their economy with labour. Bevin believes that it will make a good impact on the country. But at present the situation is such that Britain needs to mine coal which it used to import.

Comrade Stalin remarks that, we also do not like the snow. Britain could receive coal from the Ruhr as reparations.

Bevin answers that France and Belgium demand the Ruhr’s coal.

Comrade Stalin says that Germans should be forced to produce coal both for Britain and for Russia.

Bevin says that the Ruhr mines are severely damaged and require repair.

Comrade Stalin specifies that the Germans should be forced to repair the damaged mines and extract more coal.

Comrade Stalin says that he has no more questions for Bevin, as Bevin himself asked all the questions which Comrade Stalin wanted to ask.

Bevin thanks for the conversation and expresses hope that relations between Great Britain and the Soviet Union will improve. If the Soviet government has any doubts and if it thinks that the British government behaves incorrectly, it would be better to send Zarubin to Bevin or to call Peterson in order to settle any misunderstanding. Such methods will promote development of mutual understanding between the two countries and strengthen the bonds of friendship between them. In relations between Great Britain and the Soviet Union there are no difficulties which cannot not be overcome.

Comrade Stalin agrees with Bevin and thanks him for the conversation.

The conversation lasted for 1 hour and 15 minutes.

[RSASPH, f.558, inv.11, f.285, p.50-62]

Keywords: post-war Germany, inter-allied relations, post-war Middle East, Iran, post-war Asia

1. A review of the eastern border of Germany led to a mass deportation of ethnic Germans. A total of more than twelve million people were removed from Eastern Europe (largely from Silesia, Pomerania, East Prussia and the Sudetenland). See Merten, U., *Forgotten Voices: The Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern Europe After World War II* (New Brunswick, 2012); Douglas, R. M., *Orderly and Humane. The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At the time the conversation was taking place, Italy and Japan were in the throes of drawing up new constitutions and had no formalised organs of government. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The issue of the Ruhr Basin was raised by the Soviet side as early as the Potsdam Conference, when Stalin offered to exchange coal from the British Zone of Occupation for foodstuffs from the Soviet Zone. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The British-Soviet Alliance Treaty of 1942 was concluded for 20 years and formally remained in force until 7 May 1955 when the USSR renounced it because of the admission of the Federal Republic of Germany into NATO. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Anglo-Egyptian treaty signed in London, on 26 August 1936. Under the terms of the treaty, the United Kingdom was required to withdraw all its troops from Egypt, except those necessary to protect the Suez Canal and its surroundings. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The drought of 1946 was one of the contributory factors to a famine that lasted for two years. There are historical assumptions that not all the grain reserves were subsumed into exports, but that a significant proportion of it remained in storage during 1946 and 1947. See Ellman, M., *The 1947 Famine in the USSR in Economic History: A Review*, ed. by L. I. Borodkina. Issue 10 (Moscow: 2005), p. 197–199; Zima, V. F., *Famine in the USSR 1946–1947: Origins and Consequences* (Moscow: 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Aeroflot would begin direct flights to London in 1959. See Davies, R. E. G., *Aeroflot: An Airline and Its Aircraft* (Shrewsbury: Paladwr, 1992) p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The winter of 1946–47 in the UK was marked by significant power outages due, among other factors, to persistent rainfall which hampered deliveries of coal to power stations. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)