Cabinet memorandum by the Foreign Secretary, E. Bevin, on the threat of Soviet expansion, dated 3 March 1948

TOP SECRET

CABINET

THE THREAT TO WESTERN CIVILISATION

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs

[1.] The fast increasing threat to western civilisation which Soviet expansion represents impels me once again to examine the extent to which the Soviet Government appear to be achieving their aims, together with the steps we should now take in order to frustrate them.

2. As my colleagues will recall, I circulated four papers to the Cabinet at the beginning of January (C.P. (48) 5 – Policy in Germany; C.P. (48) 6 – The First Aim in British Foreign Policy; C.P. (48) 7 – A Review of Soviet Policy; C.P. (48) 8 – Future of Foreign Publicity Policy).

3. It will be remembered (as set out in the Annex and in C.P. (48) 7) that ever since the European Recovery Programme was devised, the Soviet Government have been carrying on a war of nerves and behind it resolutely using the Communist party to achieve dictatorship. It is their intention to endeavour to expand their activities to cover the whole of Europe at the earliest possible date. So far as we are concerned, we have been proceeding on the basis, which we made quite clear to Stalin, that just as the Russians had built up in the east what they called security. I made all this clear in my speech on 22nd January.[[1]](#footnote-1) But, as we foresaw, events have since moved quickly and aggressively, most recently in Czechoslovakia and now in Finland, and I am convinced that we have to go wider than the original friendly intent of our more limited approach to the Benelux countries, with France, on the basis of the Dunkirk Treaty.[[2]](#footnote-2) It has really become a matter of the defence of western civilisation, or everyone will be swamped by this Soviet method of infiltration. I ask my colleagues, therefore, to give further consideration to the whole situation and decide whether our policy should not now be broadened so that we can proceed urgently with the active organisation of all those countries who believe in parliamentary government and free institutions, and devise methods which will cope with this quickly moving stream of events.

I have set out in the Annex headed “Considerations” in greater detail than in my earlier paper (C.P. (48) 7) the steps that have been taken by Soviet Russia from the days of the war-time conferences until the present.

There is only one conclusion to draw. After all the efforts that have been made and the appeasement that we followed to try and get a real friendly settlement on a Four-Power basis, not only is the Soviet Government not prepared at the present stage to cooperate in any real sense with any non-Communist or non-Communist controlled Government, but it is actively preparing to extend its hold over the remaining part of continental Europe and, subsequently, over the Middle East and no doubt the bulk of the Far East as well. In other words, physical control of the Eurasian land mass and eventual control of the whole World Island is that what the Politburo is aiming at – no less a thing than that. The immensity of the aim should not betray us into believing in its impracticability. Indeed, unless positive and vigorous steps are shortly taken by those other states who are in a position to take them, it may well be that within the next few months or even weeks the Soviet Union will gain political and strategic advantages which will set the great Communist machine in action, leading either to the establishment of a World Dictatorship or (more probably) to the collapse of organised society over great stretches of the globe.

4. All our evidence indeed points to the probable staging by the Soviet Government of further efforts in this direction during the next few weeks or months. We cannot be sure where exactly this showdown will take place nor even that it will not occur in several places at once. All we know for certain (since the Cominform has proclaimed it openly) is that its object will be the frustration by one means or another of the European Recovery Programme and the consequent development of a situation in which the Communist cause will triumph in many countries largely as a result of a process of economic decay. But this does not mean that the Soviet Government are determined to have their way whatever the outside world may say or do. There is no reason even now to suppose that it could possibly welcome the World War which would undoubtedly result from its overstepping the mark. It is commonly accepted Communist doctrine that no issue should be forced until the moment is ripe and victory almost certain. If, therefore, the upholders of true democracy and opponents of dictatorship can present a really united front, and if the necessary economic means are made available by those who have them, the danger of war is, in my opinion, not imminent. Indeed it is my considered view that the only danger of war arises from the non-fulfilment of these two conditions. Provided they are fulfilled I believe that Communism will be forced on to the defensive and that for many years at any rate we may look forward to a period of relative calm.

5. On these two “ifs”, however, everything depends. As for the second one we can only do our best to assist the passage of the European Recovery Programme through Congress by continuing to warn the Administration of the dangers of delay. The first “if” depends very largely on ourselves. If we here, as a nation, are united on the main issue, then additional strength to resist will be imported to our friends on the continent and, indeed, to our friends all over the world. If, on the contrary, we show evidence of irresolution and divided counsels, there will be a corresponding lack of the will to resist which may have terrible results even if aid should eventually be forthcoming under the European Recovery Programme.

6. Recent events have only brought to a head a fundamental contradiction which has been inherent in European politics at least since the formation of the Third International[[3]](#footnote-3). It is the contradiction between an imposed solution of social difficulties, which in the last analysis can only mean Dictatorship, and a voluntary, reasoned and human solution which is summed up in all that we mean by the word “Democracy”.

Recommendations

(1) We should pursue on as broad a basis as possible in cooperation with our French allies, the conclusion of a treaty or treaties with the Benelux countries. We should aim as a matter of great urgency at negotiating multilateral economic, cultural and defensive pacts between the United Kingdom, France and the Benelux countries, which would be left open for accession by other European democracies. (This will be done on the basis of the Cabinet decision approving the recommendations in my earlier paper (C.P. (48) 6.)

(2) Simultaneously with this, the whole problem of the coordination of efforts for the cultural, social, economic and financial revival and development of the West and for the defence of western civilisation with the support of all friendly western Powers and of course the Commonwealth should be proceeded with at once. Having in mind Soviet treaties from Yalta onwards, we should decide what common arrangements can be made and what consultations should be entered into to prevent Soviet tactics succeeding on an even wider basis than hitherto and to halt any further expansion of Soviet dictatorship. The issue upon which we should consult the like-minded countries is not so much that of Communism as of the establishment of dictatorship as against parliamentary government and liberty. In this connection we cannot limit ourselves to Europe. We must bring in the Commonwealth and the Americas, and eventually every country outside the Soviet group.

(3) This would include at an early stage Italy, which is at present the weakest link in the chain of anti-Communist states, but which – if we are to get a really effective Western Union – must be brought in. But whether steps should be taken in advance of the April elections, or afterwards, is a matter to be determined. In the meantime we should do everything in our power to assist the parliamentary government of Italy.

(4) If my colleagues agree to this as a policy, then I would ask to be authorised to proceed to discussions with the Commonwealth and, through the diplomatic channels and in every way open to me, with other countries sharing our western conception of democracy and liberty in order to build up the organisation necessary to give effect to such a policy. In these discussions it would be essential to decide what is required of each Western country collectively and individually. This would affect, among other things, defence, the budgetary position, the supply of food and the building up of our economics on an entirely new basis. The division between us at the moment is so deep because Communism is playing such a part in the West, interfering with its economic revival and making consolidation so difficult.

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1. For Bevin’s speech, see *Parliamentary Debates,* 5th series, vol. 46, 385-411. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Treaty of Dunkirk was signed on 4 March 1947 as an alliance against German aggression to last 50 years. Young, J.W., *Longman Companion to Cold War and Détente* (London: 1993), p. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Third (Communist) International (Comintern), established on 4 March 1919. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)