Extract from the minutes of the meeting of the Russia Committee, 1 March 1949

[…]

III

1. THE COMMITTEE then turned to Moscow despatch No. 28 (RC/24/49) and Mr. Harrison’s[[1]](#footnote-1) letter No. 222/11/49G (RC/25/49). MR. HAYTER[[2]](#footnote-2) said that the implications in paragraph 6 of the Ambassador’s despatch that the Soviet Union might wish to wage war if it felt it was strong enough to do so, were not generally accepted by the Foreign Office. The Soviet Government, even if they felt military superior to their opponents, would be unlikely to embark upon an aggressive “imperialist” war and did not want war since they felt that their ends could be achieved by an intensification of the measures available to them in the cold war. MR. ROBERTS agreed and added that if the Soviet leaders felt they were growing stronger there would be all the less reason for them to start a war and he pointed out the difference between the Western and Russian concept of a “durable peace”. SIR J. EDELSTEN[[3]](#footnote-3) did not agree with this view and said that the Russians might feel that the cold war was not going in their favour and that developments such as the Atlantic Pact[[4]](#footnote-4) were lending a strength to the West which necessitated their striking before Western cohesion and preparedness could resist them. He said that in the view of the Chiefs-of-Staff the possibility of doing something to disrupt the course of the building up of military potential in the U.S.S.R should be examined. It was quite possible that Russian development of the atom bomb could be seriously retarded if we could persuade Russian scientists to defect and sabotage the work being done. Russian scientists were in an uncomfortable position in the Soviet Union today and we had with us important defectors from among their ranks whose co-operation would be extremely useful in any body set up to consider a policy. Even if nothing could be done inside the Soviet Union the possibility of a campaign by wireless should be examined. MR. ROBERTS pointed out the grave difficulties of any such scheme. It was completely impossible to do anything inside Russia itself and the top-ranking Russian scientists who were equal to any in the world, even though they might not be Communists, were usually Russian patriots, and would not take kindly to propaganda directed towards them from the West. Moreover, they were a pampered and privileged class. But the intelligentsia were nevertheless perhaps the weakest element in the “monolithic” Soviet state.

2. THE CHAIRMAN, summing up, said that a general scheme to encourage defection seemed, at any rate, worthy of examination. It could do no harm but might do much good. He was bound to say, however, that, if his information was correct, high-level Soviet scientists were paid much more than their British equivalents and were therefore perhaps less likely to quarrel with the Soviet Government than would otherwise be the case. With regard to Russian warlike intentions the main problem we had to face was the reconciliation of the expense entailed in military preparedness with the expense entailed in maintaining our present standard of living. With due regard for Mr. Hayter’s view, he himself thought that there was a danger that military unpreparedness in the West, if it was very marked, might encourage Soviet aggression.

3. It was agreed that the new American interpretation of the situation in Russia coincided largely with the views of H.M. Ambassador as given in his despatch. The Americans had moved away from the alarmist position they had adopted last year, possibly as a result of experience gained over the Berlin crisis. Russia had no particular need to accelerate a war and she still had the vast are of Asia and the potentialities of Communist fifth columns in all the countries of the world to exploit.

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6. MR. BERTHOUD informed the Committee that M. Bebler[[5]](#footnote-5) had approached H.M.G. for help in a major scheme of drainage and irrigation in the Scutari marshes which lay on the Yugoslav-Albanian border. This request had wide possibilities but for the moment was being treated as a strictly economic matter and M. Bebler was being put in touch with reliable firms. A successful conclusion of negotiations would mean that British technical personnel would be operating in the frontier area between Yugoslavia and Albania. MR. WALLINGER[[6]](#footnote-6) said that the U.S. State Department had now actually authorised the relaxation of American export controls for Yugoslavia. We had hopes of persuading them, however, not to inform the O.E.E.C.[[7]](#footnote-7) countries about this step as this, we had represented, would lead to the danger of publicity with unfortunate results for Tito. We should prefer arrangements to be on an Anglo-American basis. MR. BERTHOUD added that the position so far as we were concerned was that previous instructions still stood but we were in practice prepared to treat the matter selectively and allow exports of prohibited articles to Yugoslavia in certain cases. THE CHAIRMAN stressed the point that it emerged that Tito stood a very good chance of maintaining his independence of the Soviet Union. MR. ROBERTS thought that it was perhaps premature to lay so much emphasis on Communist anti-Zionism and it could not be said, he felt, that the Kremlin had yet emerged as officially hostile to the members of the Jewish Government. He went on to enquire whether a passage covering the recent Soviet propaganda attacks on India and the troubles between the Indian government and the Communists could be inserted. MR. CUMMING-BRUCE[[8]](#footnote-8) said that the C.R.O.[[9]](#footnote-9) hoped to produce a fortnightly summary dealing with Communist activities in the Commonwealth countries and undertook to supply extracts of interest for inclusion in the Summary of Indications. MR. DENING[[10]](#footnote-10) drew attention to the sudden increase of Communist activity all over India and to the interest being shown by the C.P.I. in Kashmir, where many leaders had just gone. It was likely that the Czech member on the Kashmir Commission would be replaced by a Communist nominated by the Czech Government who would be able to indulge in subversive activities there.

[TNA, FO 371/77623]

Keywords: Post-war order, Yugoslavia, Post-war USSR, India

1. Harrison, Sir Geoffrey W. (1908 - 1990) - British diplomat. Counsellor in the British Embassy in Brussels (1945 - 1947); Minister in the British Embassy in Moscow (1947 - 1949); Head of the Northern Department, Foreign Office (1949 - 1951); Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Western Europe (1951 - 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hayter, William (1906 - 1995) - British Diplomat. Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Defence and Intelligence (1948-1949); Minister in the British Embassy in Paris (1949-1953); Ambassador to USSR (1953-1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Edelsten, Sir John Hereford (1891 - 1966) - British Admiral, Vice Chief of the Naval Staff (1947-1949); Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet (1950-1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For Cabinet discussions on the drawing up of the pact, see the minutes of the meetings of 22 February 1949 (CAB 128/15 CM (49)19) and 5 April 1949 (CAB 128/15, CM (49)25). See also Bevin’s memorandum ‘North Atlantic Pact’, dated 8 March 1949 (CAB 129/33, CP (49)56). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bebler, Aleš (1907 - 1981), Yugoslav diplomat. Deputy foreign minister and Yugoslav delegate to the United Nations (1949 - 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wallinger, Sir Geoffrey A. (1903 - 1979), British diplomat. Counsellor in the British Embassy in Beijing (1943 – 47); Counsellor in the Foreign Office (1947–49); Minister in the British Embassy in Budapest (1949 – 51); Ambassador to Thailand (1951–54). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Organisation for European Economic Cooperation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cumming-Bruce, Francis Hovell-Thurlow, 8th Baron Thurlow (1912–2013) – British diplomat, member of the C.R.O. (see below), High Commissioner to New Zealand (1959–1963), High Commissioner to Nigeria (1963–1966), Governor of The Bahamas (1968–1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Commonwealth Relations Office – Formerly the Colonial Office, after India’s independence in 1947, the Dominion Office merged with the India Office to form the C.R.O. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dening, Sir M. Esler (1897 - 1977) - British diplomat, Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Asia/Far East (1946 - 1950); Political Representative and Ambassador in the British Embassy in Tokyo (1951 - 1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)