British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden’s telegram to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, dated 29 October 1943

MOST IMMEDIATE

DEDIP

MOST SECRET AND PERSONAL

Following personal for the Prime Minister from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. […]

[1]. The Ambassador and Ismay[[1]](#footnote-1) accompanied me to the Kremlin. Molotov was with Stalin[[2]](#footnote-2). I opened the proceedings by handing him the Russian text of Extra 143[[3]](#footnote-3) explaining that you wished him to have without delay an account of the situation in Italy as it appeared to our Commander on the spot[[4]](#footnote-4).

2. Stalin read the telegram aloud to Molotov. When he had finished he showed no trace of disappointment but observed that according to Russian Intelligence there were twelve Anglo-American divisions fighting six German divisions south of Rome and that there were a further six German divisions on the River Po. He admitted however that General Alexander was likely to have the better information[[5]](#footnote-5). I again emphasized your anxiety that Stalin should have the latest account of the situation in Italy and should know not only that you were anxious about it but also that you were insistent that battle in Italy should be nourished and fought out to victory whatever implications on OVERLORD[[6]](#footnote-6). I added that in view of the vitally important decisions now confronting the Allies, it was all the more necessary that the three heads of Governments should meet as soon as possible.

3. Stalin observed with a smile that if there were insufficient divisions a meeting of the heads of Governments could not create them. He then asked point black whether the telegram which he had just read meant a postponement of OVERLORD. I replied that until General Alexander’s telegram had been fully examined by the Combined Chiefs of Staff and decisions taken as to how his position was to be improved it was impossible to say now definitely whether OVERLORD would have to be postponed but the possibility must be faced. I quoted the passage in your telegram to me to the effect that we were determined to “do our very best for OVERLORD” but that it was “no use planning for defeat in the field in order to give temporary political satisfaction”[[7]](#footnote-7). Continuing, I said there were probably two difficulties: firstly, landing craft and secondly, the movement of seven battle-field divisions which were to have been shipped to the United Kingdom the beginning of next month, to be used as a spearhead of OVERLORD assault[[8]](#footnote-8). Perhaps the movement of some or all of these divisions would now have to be postponed but whether or not this would affect the date of OVERLORD and if so to what extent it was impossible for me to say.

4. Stalin then turned to the questions of general strategy. As he saw it there were two courses open to us:

(1) To take up a defensive position north of Rome[[9]](#footnote-9) and use the rest of our forces for OVERLORD or

(2) to push through Italy into Germany.

I said that the first alternative was what we had in mind. There was no intention, so far as I know, to go beyond Pisa-Rimini line. This would give us depth in front of Rome and the necessary air bases for bombing southern Europe.

5. Marshal Stalin clearly thought we were right observing that it would be very difficult to get through the Alps and that it would suit the Germans well to fight us there. After the capture of Rome, British prestige would certainly be high enough to permit us to pass over to the defensive in Italy.

6. He then raised a new point but did not appear to take it seriously himself. Why should not Anglo-American armies move through Spain as had been done in the Peninsular War[[10]](#footnote-10)? Could not Franco[[11]](#footnote-11) be induced to open the door? I said I very much doubted this. Franco was not so friendly as that. I added incidentally that he told our Ambassador[[12]](#footnote-12) that the Blue Division[[13]](#footnote-13) would be removed from the Russian front by 25th October[[14]](#footnote-14). I would therefore be interested to know of any Spanish prisoners taken after that date. Stalin chuckled and said he would be glad to look into this. The Hungarians, he said, also claimed to have no divisions in Russia whereas in point of fact they had ten. […]

14. To a question from M. Stalin, as to whether there were any news from Italy, I said that the Allied armies were advancing slowly but that German demolitions had been very thorough. M. Stalin nodded assent and observed that the Germans were past masters of demolitions. After some further exchanges of little importance the interview ended.

15. To sum up: the whole talk went off surprisingly well. Mr. Stalin seemed in excellent humour and at no point in the evening was there any recrimination of the past or any disposition to ignore real difficulties that face us. This may only have been a first reaction and second thoughts may not be so good. But it is significant that he should have gone out of his way to acknowledge the contribution that we were making by merely pinning 40 German divisions in the West and his sympathetic references to the difficulties of naval operations and to the necessity for landing craft etc. seemed to show that he no longer regards an overseas operation as a simple matter. It is clear however that M. Stalin expects us to make every effort to stage OVERLORD at the earliest possible moment and confidence he is placing in our word is to me most striking.

[Churchill Archive Centre, Chartwell Papers (hereafter – CHAR) 20/122]

Keywords: Italy, Second front

1. Ismay, Hastings Lionel (1887 – 1965) –Lieutenant-General of the British Army, Churchill’s Chief of Staff officer and military adviser (1940 – 1945), Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations (1951 – 1952), Secretary General of NATO (1952 – 1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Incomplete Soviet record of Stalin's conversations with Eden on 27 October. Published in: Moskovskaya konferentsiya. pp.197-205. For the full version of the record, see: RGASPI. F. 558. Op. 11. D. 281. L. 11-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Telegram from General G. Alexander. Published in 'Moskovskaya konferentsiya', pp 205-209. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alexander, Harold (1891 – 1969) – British General (later Field Marshal), Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East Command (1942 – 1943), Commander of the 18th Army Group in Tunisia (1943) and the 15th Army Group in Italy (1943 – 1944), Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean at Allied Forces Headquarters (1944 – 1945), Governor General of Canada (1946 – 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As evinced by Stalin's conversation with Kerr in March 1942. The Soviet leader treated British intelligence reports with respect and interest, requesting from London via Kerr information on a variety of issues (Wehrmacht reserves, Sweden’s position and Turkey). See: RGASPI. F. 558. Op. 11. D. 284. L. 7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Soviet record of conversation suggests that Eden used a softer and more flexible wording (Moskovskaya konferentsiya, pp. 198-199). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Reference to Churchill’s telegram to Eden on 26 October. Published in: Churchill W.S. The Second World War. Vol. V. Boston, 1951. p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This redeployment has been linked, among other things, with the desire of the British to provide an equal number of British and American divisions, at least at the initial stage of "Overlord." Oddly enough, the soldiers having already fought in Italy (the 50th and 51st divisions, among them) were often war weary and, during ‘Overlord’ allegedly conducted themselves worse than the "green" troops. See more: French D. Invading Europe: The British Army and Its Preparations for the Normandy Campaign, 1942-44 // Diplomacy & Statecraft. 2003. Vol. 14. No. 2. p. 271-294. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Based on the presumption of the imminent capture of Rome by Anglo-American forces, - "in the next few weeks", as Roosevelt wrote to Stalin on 4 October (Pechatnov V.O., Magadeyev I.E. Perepiska. T. 1. p. 584). In fact, the liberation of the Italian capital took place on 4 June 1944. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. During the Peninsular War (1807 - 1814) the army of Napoleon I fought the United Kingdom, Spain and Portugal on the Iberian Peninsula. British troops were under the command of the Duke of Wellington. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Franco Francisco (1892 - 1975) - Spanish dictator and military leader, the head of the Spanish State (1939 -. 1975), and leader of the Spanish phalanx (1937 - 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hoare, Samuel (1880 – 1959) – British statesman and diplomat, British Ambassador to Spain (1940 – 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The "Blue Division" - the informal name of the 250th Division of the Wehrmacht, which consisted, according to official government data of Franco's Spain, of Spanish volunteers. It took part in battles on the Soviet-German front between October 1941 and October 1943. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Soviets did not give credence to Franco’s assurances, and ascertained the presence of Spanish troops on the Soviet-German front after the above date (see, for example: Sano T. 2. P. 16-17). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)