Telegram from USSR ambassador to Britain, I.M. Maisky to the People's Commissariat on Internal Affairs of the USSR, dated 31 March 1943

CIPHER TELEGRAM MOST SECRET

ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT

High priority.

1/ Once the issue of Comrade Stalin’s message[[1]](#footnote-1) was settled, I moved on to the question of convoys. I said that I had no instructions from the Soviet government and that I had come to speak with Churchill on my own behalf. Churchill's message to Comrade Stalin dated 30 March, the copy of which I received from Сadogan[[2]](#footnote-2) yesterday, made shocking impression on me. What does it say? First of all, it states with certainty that there will be no northern convoys till September. However, I doubt that the convoys will even be dispatched in September, for the possibility of sending them even this month is contingent upon such “if”s that it makes all of Churchill's promises illusory. It seems to me that the convoys are more likely not to be resumed until complete darkness sets in the Arctic, which is till November-December. In other words, supplies to the USSR along the northern route will cease for at least 8 months – a prospect which we somehow still cannot be reconciled with.

2/ Next: what effect will Churchill and Roosevelt’s decision have on the USSR? A very negative one, both in military and political sense. For the last two years, already. our people and army alone lead a fierce struggle against the entire might of the German military machine. Of course, it’s all very well what the British are doing in Africa, and Comrade Stalin’s message which I passed on today clearly states that we appreciate the British struggle. Nonetheless, Churchill knows how many German divisions are distracted by the African front. What do we expect from the allies this year? A second front. Will it be? Churchill knows better. Judging by what I see and hear here, I have a very unfavorable personal opinion in this respect. The best I can tell is that there is no certainty regarding the second front: it may or may not be. And now on top of that, the convoys will cease, strongly reducing supply. How may our people react to this? In addressing the British and Americans do they not have the right to say: How are you helping us in our common cause? There’s neither a second front, nor supplies … What sort of allies are these? Who do you think may win from such mood among our people and our army?

3/ Churchill was obviously impressed with my words. He stood up from his chair, approached the fireplace, stopped and said in a slightly breaking voice: “Yes, yes, I understand, it’s a hard blow. It’s awful … I am afraid it will strongly impact our relations with you …” Tears came to Churchill’s eyes again. “But what could I do? - He continued - I had no way out”. Then Churchill began to explain to me in detail all the ideas and reasons stated in his message to Comrade Stalin dated 30 March. “Please, understand, - Churchill concluded, - that I cannot and have no right to endanger the whole course of war even for the sake of your supplies. I can’t …”. It was obvious that the idea of the necessity to cancel northern convoys has definitely seized Churchill and that he won’t budge. “And under such circumstances, - Churchill added, - I decided to tell Stalin the truth. One should never mislead an ally. We are soldiers, after all. We should be able to accept courageously even the most unpleasant news”. And then in an absolutely different voice, looking in my eyes attentively, Churchill asked: “But tell me, what do you personally think? Will it cause a break between me and Stalin? Will it?...” I answered that I cannot speak for Comrade Stalin on anything. He will speak for himself. I have no doubts about one thing: the cessation of the convoys will evoke very strong feelings from Comrade Stalin. Churchill continued: “Anything but the break up. I do not want a break up. I want to cooperate with you. I am sure that I can cooperate with Stalin. I am sure that if I live longer, I may be very useful to you in establishing friendly relations with the USA. We – the three great powers - should definitely ensure friendly cooperation after the war … What a pity I had to send yesterday's telegram just when Stalin has sent me this message”. Churchill nodded at Comrade Stalin’s message lying on the table which he received from me half an hour before. “Yes, we, three great powers, - Churchill started talking again, - should be together. It’s the basis of everything. Americans took an offence since in the last radio-speech I have not mentioned China as the fourth partner[[3]](#footnote-3). How could I do it?... Certainly, I like and deeply respect China. Chinese are remarkable people. But is it possible to compare China and the USSR, the USA, the British Empire? No way … It’s almost an insult[[4]](#footnote-4). Imagine for a minute that Chiang-Kai-shek[[5]](#footnote-5) died or disappeared, - what will happen to China? China will turn into chaos. No, I am too old to tell lies for the sake of cheap applause from the gallery”.

4/ When Churchill's rush of emotions subsided, I started talking again and suggested to move on to more practical issues. Since Churchill categorically declared the absolute impossibility of northern convoys, I believe it is necessary to find some ways of compensating us for the damage caused by it. My specific proposals are as follows:

a / Neither cancel, nor unload the March convoy[[6]](#footnote-6), but to send it round Africa to the Persian Gulf (Churchill himself assures that Iran’s traffic carrying capacity increases quickly ) and

b/ With Eden's arrival[[7]](#footnote-7) (he is expected in London early next week) to create under his chairmanship a small but authoritative Commission which would urgently develop a program of practical steps for compensation to us for the loss of northern convoys. Churchill accepted my suggestions with warm sympathy. However, he made two amendments. First: to keep the March convoy, but instead of sending it around Africa immediately (the way to Basra is about 2 1/2 months) to wait for 2-3 weeks. If in this time, as Churchill believes, Tunisia is cleared of the Axis, the convoy will go across the Mediterranean Sea, which will strongly reduce time and expenses. Second: not to wait for Eden's arrival, but to create the commission right now under the chairmanship of Littleton[[8]](#footnote-8). Churchill also suggested that I am to be present at the commission together with our experts whom I consider necessary to take with myself. I did not object, but reminded Churchill once again that I have no instructions yet from Moscow on this issue, and that the Soviet government may make absolutely different decisions. However, I personally see nothing better than this. Probably from the transport point of view, it is better for to us to receive cargoes in Arkhangelsk and Murmansk instead of the Caspian Sea, but today's conversation with Churchill gave me quite a certain impression that now he will definitely not continue the northern convoys... After the first session of the commission, I will report to you about the prospects outlined. Then you’ll be able to make some kind of decisions. If you will have any instructions about the commission session (which is likely to be on 3 April), please let me know.

31.03.1943.

MAISKY

[FPARF, f. 059, inv. 7, fold. 13, file. 6, pp. 257-262]

Keywords: Second front, inter-allied relations

1. Stalin’s message to Churchill on 29 March 1943, in which Stalin welcomed the successful RAF raid on Berlin and successes in Tunisia, and reported his impressions from watching the British documentary *Victory in the Desert*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cadogan, Alexander Montagu George (1884–1968) – British diplomat, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1938–1946). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Part of Churchill's radio speech on 21 March was devoted to post-war issues in Europe. The Prime Minister called for the establishment of a new international organization (Council of Europe). Published in: *Churchill W.S. His Complete Speeches, 1897-1963*. Vol. 7. London, 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Churchill’s attitude towards China is telling of the milieu and era in which Churchill came of age. "To the President [Roosevelt], China means four hundred million people who are going to count in the world of tomorrow, but Winston thinks only of the colour of their skin; it is when he talks of India or China that you remember he is a Victorian”. - wrote his personal doctor, Lord Moran (Moran, *Churchill at War, 1940-45* N.Y., 2002. p. 159). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Chiang Kai-shek (1887 – 1975) – Chinese statesman, Generalissimo, Chairman of the Nationalist Government of China (1928–1931, 1943–1948). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In a letter dated 30 March, Churchill, referring to the concentration of German major naval forces (battleship "Tirpitz", "Scharnhorst" and others.) in Narvik, near the route of the northern convoys, announced the decision taken in conjunction with Roosevelt to cancel the deployment of convoys to the USSR until September 1943 (Pechatnov V.O., Magadeyev I.E. Perepiska. T. 1. p. 409–410). However, based on the information from his own Admiralty, the Prime Minister was aware that most of the mentioned ships had already left Narvik and were heading in the direction of the Alta fjord, in the vicinity of the city of Alta (the Finnmark region) (WM (43) 46th Conclusions, Conf . Annex, 29/03/1943 // TNA, CAB 65/37). This is also confirmed in Zetterling N., Tamelander M. Tirpitz, *The Life and Death of Germany's Last Super Battleship*. Newbury, 2009. p 206). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. During his visit to the United States, 12-30 March 1943, Eden held important talks on current problems and post-war issues with Roosevelt and Hull. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Littleton, Oliver (1893 - 1972) - British statesman, UK Trade Minister (1940-1941), The Minister Resident in Egypt (1941-1942), Middle East (1942), Minister of war production (1942-1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)